

Consciousness Theories in the Six *Āstikadarśanas*

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Consciousness or how we have the double experience of subjectivity and objectivity in any knowledge episode is as enigmatic today as it was at the time of the ancient Vedic sages. Thinkers from various disciplines have tried to unravel the 'phenomenon of consciousness' using their own methodologies to uncover this mystery. As Chalmers explains: "The problem of consciousness lies uneasily at the border of science and philosophy"¹ and thus the methods used to understand this unique experience have also been multifarious, differing not only between science and philosophy but also between scientists of differing disciplines as, for instance, the life sciences and the physical sciences.

In recent years, there have been numerous studies examining the phenomenon of consciousness and we find a good collection of recent papers, dealing with this question, in the volume on *Consciousness* edited by Frank Jackson.² While many theories are advanced by different scholars in this collection, there is no final answer as to what this mystery of 'Consciousness' is. According to Bruce Mangan,³ for instance, "...consciousness... is itself a particular physical medium in the brain". On the other hand, Colin McGinn⁴ favours a "naturalistic but not constructive" solution to this question. He believes that the brain is responsible for consciousness and that it is inherently miraculous. He also adds that "conscious states are simply not potential objects of perception: they depend upon the brain but they cannot be observed by directing the senses onto the brain".⁵ Thus there is a cognitive closure, as far as the phenomenon of consciousness is concerned, according to McGinn.

Whether consciousness is an illusion, whether it can be explained in terms of a physical or natural law, or whether it belongs to a realm outside of science or philosophy, is something we are unable to answer at this stage of our development.⁶

In India, the first inquiry into this phenomenon can be traced to the *Upaniṣads* which belong to what is nowadays known as the 'Inner Sciences' (*adhyātmavidyā*). Their search for the 'consciousness phenomenon' follows the path that is in conformity with their own method of inquiry and combines both epistemology and ontology to explain this phenomenon. It is, thus, one more approach to understand this unique phenomenon of consciousness.

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*⁷, which is also very much concerned with the phenomenon of consciousness, Yājñavalkya declares after a long discussion that the nature of consciousness is that which is the witness of vision, the hearer of the hearing, the thinker of the thinking, the knower of the knowing and so on. The distinction is here fundamental. In all these statements there is careful avoidance of any action involved. Thus, for instance, in the hearer of hearing or in the knower of knowing, the importance is to draw attention to the insufficiency of each of these senses to fulfill its function independently. Moreover, no one can see the eye seeing, or the ear hearing, or the mind (knower) knowing. And yet one is intuitively aware of these functions of the senses. Added to it is the continuity of experience felt in memory and in the act of recognition of something seen before. So there must be something other than the senses for one to have the said conscious experience. Seeking an ontological explanation for an epistemological event, the *Upaniṣads* attribute this experience to the presence of an abiding entity in all living beings, having the nature of existence, consciousness and bliss (*sat, cit* and *ānanda*), which can then account for the conscious experiences. However, they refrain from philosophically adducing arguments as to how one can know this subtle abiding entity in all experience. In other words, how can one know the underlying witness of all experience?

In the *Br.Up.* Yājñavalkya, in response to Maitreyi's question about the ultimate reality, says "Through what may one know (*viṅānīyāt*) That, owing to which all this is known-through what, O Maitreyi, should one know the knower?"⁸ The *Br.Up.* in Yājñavalkya's words, can be construed as declaring one of two possibilities:

(1) the impossibility of knowing that which is the knower, or (2) the possibility of knowing that knower intuitively or otherwise. We will see how in the later philosophical and commentarial literature this problem will exercise our thinkers and how they will come up with ingenious solutions to this very difficult epistemic enigma.

It is in the six schools of Hindu Thought that this topic of knowing

the knower and knowledge as well, has received special attention, and in keeping with its respective ontology and epistemology, each school will take a position on the matter. It is in these six schools that we find a wide divergence as to the intrinsic nature of *ātman* and in the analysis of the phenomenon of 'knowing knowledge' as well. While all the six schools accept *ātman* as permanent/eternal, not all of them subscribe to the view that consciousness is an intrinsic property of the *ātman*. For instance, Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika and Pūrvaṃmīmāṃsā (PM), consider *jñāna* or knowledge as only a quality of *ātman*. So these schools differ from Sāṅkhya, Yoga and Uttaramīmāṃsā (Vedānta), wherein *ātman*, also known as *puruṣa* in Sāṅkhya/Yoga, is of the very nature of consciousness. For the purposes of this paper, I am only addressing myself to the Advaita school amongst the different Vedānta systems of thought.

In this brief paper, I will examine the way in which each of the six schools is or is not faithful to Yājñavalkya's initial statement of one not being able to know the knower, and discuss the possibility of knowing the knower and also knowing knowledge as objects, in any knowledge event. Even though PM does not particularly care for the *jñāna kāṇḍa* of the *Upaniṣads*, since it also believes in the eternal nature of *ātman* and of knowledge being only its property, we can include it in this discussion. In order to appreciate why there are these differing views on the knowability of knowledge, it is important to remember that some of these schools like Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika and PM are realist philosophical systems while others like Sāṅkhya/Yoga and Advaita are mainly idealist schools of thought. Thus, while *ātman* is eternal (*nitya*) and also many in these realist schools, the quality of knowledge is an adventitious one and can only arise in *ātman* in an act of knowing something.

Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika

Knowledge arises in Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika when there is contact with *ātman* through the mind (*manas*), sense-organ (*indriya*) and object. In the case of internal feelings like pleasure and pain, the *manas* serves the purpose of both *indriya* and object. As a realist school, whatever is 'is knowable' in Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika and therefore *ātman* (the knower) and knowledge (consciousness) can also be known. First, the object is known and in a subsequent *anuvyavasāya* (reflection upon experience), both the *ātman* (subject) and *jñāna* (consciousness) are known. It, therefore, falls back on an intuitive experiencing of both the *ātman* and knowledge in an after-

knowledge-state. This has logically led to rival schools questioning whether there is a second *anuvyavasāya* for the first *anuvyavasāya* and a third for the second *anuvyavasāya* and so on *ad infinitum*. But as one has to end somewhere, in the interest of brevity, the first *anuvyavasāya* has come to stay in Nyāya epistemology.

By not subscribing to the premise that *jñāna* is the intrinsic nature of *ātman*, the Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika school(s) was able to also allow knowledge to be sometimes true and sometimes false, depending on external factors. This also led to the additional theory that knowledge, though known in *anuvyavasāya*, cannot also prove its validity or invalidity. For that we have to go outside of knowledge to see if it is validated by fruitful activity (*saṃvādi-pravṛtti*).⁴⁷ One other consequence of not accepting *jñāna* as the intrinsic nature of *ātman* is the possibility of error in knowledge, which in turn, is due to the two stage theory of perception that Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika accepts. Normal perception or knowledge of an object, let us say, a cow, involves the judgment as 'an object possessing the property of cowness'; it is thus a complex perception. This is called determinate perception or *savikalpaka*. It is contrasted with a pre-determinate perception (*nirvikalpaka*), where the object cow is presented without any characteristic. This is derived inferentially, in keeping with its theory of complex things being constituted of simples. It is *savikalpaka* that is the subject of the after-thought (*anuvyavasāya*), and which is known as self-consciousness. If the *ātman* were to be admitted to have *jñāna* as its intrinsic nature, Nyāya could not have sub-divided it into two stages, as it would falsify the nature of the *ātman* it admitted. But this device enables it to valorize *nirvikalpaka jñāna* as being without error while allowing worldly knowledge or *savikalpaka* to be sometimes subject to error. Thus, if the complex *savikalpaka* knowledge has a correspondence with truth outside (*saṃvādi pravṛtti*) it is true, otherwise it is false. Different strategies are adopted to explain different kinds of error, for them to be consistent with this postulate.

To summarize, Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika believes in the permanence of *ātman*, but considers consciousness as only its adventitious quality. This enables it to argue for two stages of cognition, a possibility of error in ordinary perception, and also to the verification of validity through outside means. And lastly, such a theory of consciousness without its linkage intrinsically with *ātman*, denies any state of consciousness in liberation or *apavarga*, as it is called in the system. For liberation to come about, Nyāya requires the self to direct the

mind to itself as an object, having realized through proper discrimination that its nature is different from the psychophysical complex with which it identifies in the unliberated state. Nyāya stresses on the cessation of pain/suffering as the main description of liberation.⁹ But once this state comes into being “the self is able to cast off all its...qualities. Accordingly, the self then...ceases to be the subject of experience in all its forms”¹⁰, as cognition is but a quality of *ātman* and has to be also cast off.

Pūrvamīmāṃsā

Pūrvamīmāṃsā (PM) which is out and out a realistic school of philosophy, also recognizes that the *ātman* is eternal and considers *jñāna* as a mode and not a quality of the *ātman*, as in Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika. This modal change brings the *ātman* in contact with the object to be known, and in the act of knowing, both the subject (*ātman*) and the object are affected. PM does not talk of *jñāna* as if it can be directly known as in Nyāya, but it is to be inferred as rising in the *ātman* for every knowledge event of an object. Thus, while *jñāna* is only associated with the *ātman*, it cannot be known and confirms Yājñavalkya’s description of it in the *Br.Up.* But PM does not acknowledge the Upaniṣadic section of the Vedas and we have to conclude that it developed its own theory of consciousness in keeping with its own Vedic texts, but also due to the context in which it developed.

How does one know the subject *ātman* and how does one know that one has knowledge in PM? The mind and the senses, in contact with objects, give rise to knowledge in two stages. First there is a vague perception called *ālocana* (though not the same as *nirvikalpaka* of Nyāya), which gains clarity later. One is indeterminate (*nirvikalpaka*) and the other is determinate (*savikalpaka*). Since knowledge arises only in *ātman*, PM deals with the problem of knowing the subject in an interesting way. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and Prabhākara, the two great commentators on Śabara’s commentary of Jaimini’s PM *sūtras*, have different explanations as to how one knows the subject *ātman*. First we will deal with Kumārila’s explanation.

Basing his understanding on such statements as ‘I know myself’, Kumārila understands that the *ātman* can be both the knower and known. All states of knowledge or consciousness have two elements: (1) the self that knows and (2) the self comprehending itself. For Kumārila, all self-awareness is “crucially delimited by the body”.

So Kumārila's position in Chakravārthi's words is "there is a unified self and it is distinct from the body: but it requires embodiment for consciousness of itself as an identifiable self".¹¹ And this is explained by some as the *ātman* being the object of the 'I notion'.¹² Thus the *ātman* has self-consciousness (I notion, *ahamvṛtti*), through the delimited body; it has conscious states (feelings of pleasure and pain) and external perception of objects as their subject. It also mistakes the body as itself.¹³

As for Prabhākara, the *ātman* can never be an object, as the subject and the object can never be the same. Since the *ātman* is not self luminous in PM, in other words, since consciousness is only something contingent and not intrinsic to *ātman*, it requires something else like *jñāna* to reveal itself. So whenever *jñāna* (*saṃvit*), which is self luminous arises, it reveals both the subject i.e. *ātman* and the object simultaneously. Along with revealing both *ātman* and object, it also reveals itself; thus it is called *tripuṭi-jñāna* or knowledge having three folds. PM, true to its indifference to the Upaniṣadic utterances, is perhaps closest to Yājñavalkya's statement of 'one not being able to know the knower'.

Even though PM does not admit consciousness as an intrinsic property of *ātman*, it upholds that it is self valid, both when it rises and when it is known. In other words, knowledge is always true. In cases of error, it is the means that are faulted. Thus, if a person sees a rope in the dark and mistakes it for a snake, it is insufficient light that accounts for it. Thus the self validity of knowledge is maintained. This is known as *svataḥ-prāmāṇya* (intrinsic validity) as opposed to *parataḥ-prāmāṇya* (extrinsic validity), which we witnessed in the case of the Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika school.

And, lastly, *mokṣa* in PM resembles Nyāya/Vaiśeṣika, as in both, *ātman* is divested of knowledge and *mokṣa* is an escape from *saṃsāra*. But even that fact will not be known to *ātman*, as there is no consciousness as an intrinsic property of *ātman* in *mokṣa*. This ideal of *mokṣa* is arid precisely because PM has the concept of *mokṣa* thrust upon it in the period, because commentators like Prabhākara and Kumārila (particularly Kumārila), wanted to reconcile it with the highest value of *mokṣa* that was fashionable at the time. The early ideal for PM was the attainment of *svarga* or another world by the correct observance of *dharma* or otherwise, respectively. By abandoning its original stand and adopting the new value PM did not elevate its status at all. As it had always valued *saṃsāra* as the theatre for performance of *dharma* and had also granted a permanent

state of existence to the world for all time, the new ideal does not in any way make sense. As consciousness of *ātman* in PM was also defined by the limitation of the body, it was doubly handicapped. We can conclude by saying that PM, true to its fidelity to the ritual portions of the Vedic corpus, is least interested in the phenomenon of consciousness as a transcendent principle of consciousness. It comes out as a realistic school and its chief concern is only the knowability of *ātman*, which is the subject in any knowledge event. It does not soar above the empirical level and knowledge/consciousness is also bound to *saṃsāra* as defined in the body in which it is encased.

Sāṅkhya/Yoga

The conception of *puruṣa/ātman* in Sāṅkhya/Yoga is close to the Upaniṣadic view. Thus, *puruṣa* is viewed as of the nature of pure consciousness. But for knowledge to happen, *puruṣa* needs the help of *buddhi/mahat*, which reflects its modification of the form of the object in *puruṣa/consciousness* that results in the experience 'I know that'. While all worldly experience will take the form of *puruṣa* being the subject of an objectivist knowledge, it does not rule out the possibility of having a state of pure consciousness/*puruṣa*, when *buddhi* is totally devoid of any object modification and reflects itself, like a clean mirror in *puruṣa*, when the reflection will have *puruṣa* alone as its reflection. Since this does not cover worldly knowledge, it has to be relegated to the metaphysical realm. But allowing such a state while living in the world (*jīvanmukti*), brings the *puruṣa* within the realm of knowledge, i.e. the *puruṣa* can be aware of itself as pure consciousness.

Is this what Yājñavalkya had in mind when he spoke to Maitreyi in the *Br.Up.* regarding that which is the witness of vision etc? In other words, did Yajnavalkya somehow intuit that one can know (be aware) of the knower in some state, while living in the world? The *Br.Up.* does not elaborate on this and we will not know the answer to it.

Such a view of knowledge which makes it dependent on a material substance like *buddhi*, makes Sāṅkhya/Yoga free to attribute truth (validity) or falsehood (invalidity) to knowledge, the only condition being that they cannot be both at the same time. Since the *buddhi* is also the seat of the innumerable past latent impressions, it also enables Sāṅkhya/Yoga to view knowledge as affecting different individuals in different ways. Thus the same object affects different individuals

differently. The same woman, for instance, will be looked upon with love by her husband, with indifference by an ascetic and hatred by someone who is her enemy. So there is no real theory of error in knowledge to be explained in this view. As *buddhi* by itself nor *puruṣa* by itself can know, and it is the combined entity of *puruṣa* and *buddhi* that knows, all knowledge is based on an error of lack of insight of two factors involved in every knowledge event. Thus the 'I' or 'knowing', and 'that' in 'I know that', are not the *puruṣa* or the *buddhi* by itself, but a combination and can be called a metaphysical error.¹⁴ Thus, in Sankhya/Yoga, it is only in the state of *jīvanmukti* that the *puruṣa* can become aware of its own self. But even at this stage, it cannot know itself as either the subject of being aware of itself or even as an object being known reflexively, as in the after knowledge of Nyāya. Only a modification of the *buddhi* reflected in *puruṣa* can serve as an object in the system. So, the most we can understand in this state of *jīvanmukti* is that, *puruṣa* is aware of itself as different from *buddhi*, as there is no more modification at this time due to the pure *sattva* nature of the *buddhi*.

Yoga adds one more state called *asaṃprajñāta samādhi*, wherein the *jīvanmukti* stage is also transcended. According to Sāṅkhya, *kaivalya* is achieved in the *jīvanmukti* stage, whereas in Yoga it seems to come into being only in the last stage of *asaṃprajñāta*. *Kaivalya*, as the word denotes, means that *puruṣa* is now all alone characterized only as pure consciousness and is eternally free. It will no more get entangled with *prakṛti* through non-discrimination. It will be obvious from the above that Sāṅkhya/Yoga is an idealist school of philosophy.

Advaita Vedānta

Advaita Vedānta is probably the closest to what Yājñavalkya told Maitreyi i.e. "Who may know the knower who knows?". This school, though expounded initially by Gauḍapāda, was systematized by Śaṅkarācārya in the eighth century of the Common Era and is an idealist school par excellence. There is only one Reality according to Advaita and everything else is only an appearance of Reality. The individual *jīvas* which we all are, are also the same Reality called *Brahman*. Because of embodied existence in a body, the kind of body being determined by one's *karma*, the *jīva* does not realize its identity with *Brahman*. While the former is called *jīvātman* (individual *ātman*), the latter is the *Paramātman* (absolute *Ātman*). This *Ātman* is eternal and has the intrinsic properties of existence (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*).

Advaita Vedānta is close to Sāṅkhya/Yoga, though not identical in the way that knowledge takes place. The *jīvātman*, with the help of the mind (*antaḥkaraṇa*), which is a material entity as in Sāṅkhya/Yoga, (though eventually going back to *Brahman* itself unlike in Sāṅkhya/Yoga where it is traced back to *prakṛti*), is the one that partakes in the knowledge event. The *jīvātman* is the empirical self that has experience and it is conceived of as having a purely witnessing observer status called *sākṣī* (which is the same as *Brahman*), along with the mental apparatus called the *antaḥkaraṇa*.

The *sākṣī* (witness), like the *puruṣa* in Sāṅkhya/Yoga, illumines the modification (*vṛtti*) of the mind, which is called knowledge (*jñāna*). But one has to remember that *sākṣī* is here characterized as pure consciousness and so is considered to be self-luminous as well. In ordinary day to day worldly knowledge called *vṛttijñāna* (knowledge of modification), there is the *sākṣī* that illumines the *vṛttijñāna* which is caused by interaction of subject and object. All knowledge is to be traced to the 'modal transformations' or modifications of the *antaḥkaraṇa*, which are then illumined by the witness consciousness.¹⁵ For an object to be known, it has to fulfill three conditions i.e. it must be such as can be directly known; it must be existent at the time; and there must be a unique relation between the subject and object to be known. If these conditions are fulfilled, *vṛtti* (modification) takes place and knowledge results. Even though the modal change is described as taking place in the *antaḥkaraṇa*, since the subject (*jīva*) is conceived as *sākṣī* and *antaḥkaraṇa* combined, in truth, the modal transformation is in effect the "coincidence of the *jīva* and the object". It is because of this dual nature that it can be called both the subject and object in a knowledge event. Thus, in every knowledge, the subject is also acting upon itself in a reflexive manner and knows itself. "That to which it has reflexive access is that which it calls 'itself'; and the unique, singularly accessible but typically available name for this identifiable itself' is 'I'".¹⁶

This situation is different from the other schools we have already examined. Whereas in the other systems, consciousness is either a quality of the *ātman*, or consciousness by reflection in the mental mode brings knowledge into being, in Advaita, the *ātman* is consciousness and with the mental mode as a unity 'knows knowledge'. So in every *jñāna*, the self (consciousness) reflexively knows itself as the subject and also knows the object. That is why Śaṅkara, in his introduction to the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* makes the

insightful observation that the existence of the self can never be denied because what denies is itself the self.¹⁷

So the question of the subject, in this case *jñāna*, itself becoming known has been answered by Advaita through this ingenious device; "...an analysis of consciousness [in Advaita] concludes that its unique, intrinsic reflexivity takes it out of the subject-object relationship of all epistemic operations".¹⁸ In the unliberated state the self expresses itself as egoity in the form 'I know this'. Advaita also extends the argument of the perpetual presence of consciousness in states like dreaming and deep sleep. It is also important to note that, though consciousness of individuals is distinguished phenomenologically, because of their conditioned existences, they are ontologically identical. And liberation in the system is to realize the true nature of consciousness or become *Brahman*. This is achieved by removing the ignorance that conceals the true nature of *ātman*/consciousness from us. This is illustrated through the device of *adhyāsa* or superimposition. Thus when one sees a rope as a snake, due to some defect like insufficient light, for instance, it is called superimposing the false idea of snake on the ground of the rope. Similarly, due to ignorance there is the false imposition of the limited phenomenological consciousness on to the ultimate *Brahman*-consciousness. When that is removed, through correct knowledge, there will no more be the individuated consciousness, but it will be the One Reality which it always was. This is likened to an immediate intuitive experience of identity.

It seems that Yājñavalkya's statement, with which we began this paper, i.e. that the nature of consciousness is that which is the witness of vision, the hearer of the hearing, etc., reaches its culmination in the way that Advaita posits *ātman*/*Brahman* as the only Reality behind all phenomena of seeing, hearing, thinking, etc.

Starting with the Upaniṣadic postulates of the permanence of *ātman* and the phenomenon of consciousness as an enduring presence in every knowledge event, each of the six systems of Hindu thought comes up with insightful explanations of the knower, known and the act of knowing, depending on its own metaphysical structures. What is interesting is that, as early as the Upaniṣadic times and in the early centuries of the Common Era, the ancient philosophers in India were engaging themselves with the problematic of the phenomenon of knowledge.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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