

Philosophy of Mind: An Advaita Vedānta Perspective

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Philosophy of mind and the philosophical issues arising in the allied domain of cognitive sciences constitute a fast developing territory in the world of philosophical enquiry. The origin of the philosophy of mind can be traced back to the Greek period. Anaxagoras (of Athens; perhaps in 500-428 BC) taught that all things come from the mixing of innumerable tiny particles of all kinds of substance, shaped by a separate, immaterial, creating principle, *Nous* ('Mind'). *Nous* is not explicitly called divine, but has the qualities of a creating god; *Nous* does not create matter, but rather creates the forms that matter assumes. However, in the Western philosophical tradition, one can hardly find a cleavage between mind and consciousness. On the contrary, it is quite fascinating to discover that there is a hard and fast cleavage between mind and consciousness in the classical Indian philosophical tradition, especially in the tradition of Advaita Vedānta. In this direction, the paper is an attempt to discover the unique structure of mind and to distinguish it from consciousness in the light of the champion of Advaita Vedānta, *Adi Śaṅkarācārya*.

To begin with, in the Western tradition, the terms 'mind', 'self' and 'consciousness' are often used synonymously. The renowned philosopher, *Rene Descartes*, makes a sharp and radical division between mind and body.¹ The two are regarded as separate and independent substances and it is thought that the interaction between them is impossible except through some inexplicable or mysterious intervention or connection. The facts of the connection between body and mind are so compelling that *Descartes* was obliged to assume the connection between the two through the pineal gland. But the pineal gland is, after all, physical, and thus, in effect, the original assumption of the possibility of the interaction between body and mind is contradicted. In the East, '*Śaṅkara Vedānta Darśana*'² groups together both, mind and body, where both are considered to be the

results of Māyā or Prakṛti, which is fundamentally a material principle. Both mind and body are physical and unconscious (*jada*). The former is subtle matter, while the later is gross. The phenomenon of consciousness is explained by supposing an independent principle, 'Purusa' whose very nature is that of conscious luminosity and inactivity. Here we have a trenchant opposition between consciousness and the products of the physical principles. But nevertheless, we find that the Advaita Vedānta assumes a connection between them which is of crucial significance.

It is fascinating to note that in the Indian Philosophical systems (Darśanas), the concept of mind does not possess the same status. In Carvaka system, mind is none other than the Self (*Atmān*) which is of material origin. The Buddhistic system does not accept 'mind' as a substance. For the Mimāṃsikas, the Sankhyas and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas, mind is an internal organ of perception (*antarindriya*), while some Vedāntins consider mind, as an organ (*indriya*) and some others not. However, all the systems unanimously regard mind as not something conscious (*cetanā*). Consciousness is something ascribed to the self. Mind somehow becomes conscious and functions as an instrument (*kāraṇa*) for the possibility of knowledge (*Jñāna*).

According to Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara, the unconscious (*jada*) mind becomes fully dependent upon *Atmān*, which is of the nature of pure consciousness, to acquire consciousness (*cetanā*). Hence mind is being enlightened by the pure light of the *Atmān*. This enlightened mind is further considered by Śaṅkara to be nothing but subtle matter³, on the basis of the classical distinction between gross (*sthūla*) and subtle (*sūkṣma*). Generally speaking, mental state is said to be subjective while bodily or physical state is objective. But for Śaṅkara both, the mental and the bodily or physical phenomena, are objective as well⁴. Thus, the *antahkaraṇa*, the *jñānendriyas* and *karmendriyas* are non-subjective. All these components are ascribed to *jīva*, the empirical individual.

Antahkarana, the Advaitic Theory of Mind

Sankaracharya does not seem to advocate a theory of mind in detail. It's only in his commentaries on the triple canons of Vedānta, viz., Brahma Sutras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gīta, that one comes across some indications about his viewpoints on 'mind'. Advaitins divide inner mental functions (*antahkaraṇa*) into four aspects, namely, sense-mind (*mānas*), reason-intellect (*buddhi*); I-sense (*ahamkāra*);

and recollection-memory (*citta*). The sense-mind, as its name indicates, is the means by which the mind 'assimilates and synthesizes sense impressions and thus enables the self to make contact with external objects'.⁵ This aspect of mind is associated with the mental condition of doubt or indecision, since it provides the knower with percepts but is incapable of discriminating among them. The decisiveness or certitude which accompanies our perception of objects is thus due to the discriminating aspect of mental functions, *buddhi*. It is by means of reason that we discern, judge and understand the data of experience. But through the processes of sense assimilation and reasoning, we begin to develop a point of self-reference which manifests in terms of the I-sense, that is, in terms of self-consciousness and the pride of egotism. In this context, it is important to note that Advaitins dismiss Self-consciousness, if it is defined as the attempt to know the pure Self as an object, as a pseudo-problem.⁶ They do, however, admit the validity of the more conventional type of self-consciousness in terms of the I-sense, although the analysis of this ultimately illusory dimension of experience is perhaps somewhat cursory. Finally, the fourth aspect of mind distinguished by Advaitic thinkers is recollection. In addition to accounting for the actual experience of memory, recollection also serves to explain the manner in which the effects of past experience, in the form of behavioural, perceptual and intellectual habits or tendencies (*samskara*), make their influence felt in present mental activity. The Advaitin thus concludes that mind is nothing apart from its various functions, which in turn are merely forms or modes of the modification of consciousness resulting from the association of the Self with ignorance. The Bṛhadaraṇyaka Upaniṣad thus declares, 'Desire, resolve, doubt, faith, want of faith, steadiness, unsteadiness, shame, intelligence and fear – all these are but the mind'.⁷

P.T. Raju, however, tries to explicate the nature and function of the *antahkaraṇa* according to the followers of Śaṅkara (which is not very clear in Śaṅkara himself). For P.T. Raju, perception, according to Advaita, is a function (*Vṛtti*) of the inner sense (instrument) which consists of four parts or levels—mind (*mānas*), ego (*aḥamkāra*), reason (*buddhi*), and apperception (*Citta*). The function of mind is analysis and synthesis of whatever is perceived by the senses. When I see an apple, my mind first gets all the impressions of colour, shape, taste, etc., synthesises them and separates the total unified object thus built up from other objects. The function of the ego then is to appropriate the object as its object

is in 'I see an apple'. Reason then makes the object an existing object in the form, 'That is an apple'. Until reason does its work, the object is an object of my experience, not an object of the common world. The function of reason is to make it an object of the objective world through an assertion or decision. 'That is an apple' is the result (*phala*, *Ergebnis*) of the decision of reason. But the inner instrument goes further in its work. In turning the sensations into a unified object, the inner instrument brings in past experiences also into the unity, relates the apple to the tree, to my eating, its price and so forth. This relating is the function of apperception (*citta*, that which gathers or collects), which collects different ideas about the object and relates them.⁸

To quote P.T. Raju, 'To the above analysis, the Advaitins add another factor from their doctrine of the "unconscious" (*Avidyā*). Before the perceptual cognition of the apple arises, I am ignorant, unconscious of its existence. The darkness of this unconscious has to be lighted up for the cognition to arise. It is lighted up by the consciousness present in the senses and mind coming into contact with the object. When the light in my consciousness, reflected in mind and senses, lights up the area, the objects of that area are disclosed. This discloser is affected by my mind, which acts through the senses and takes the form of the object. The object has its own reality, its own place in the cosmos. But my mind also has the power to take on exactly the same form, and then abstract the mental form later, if necessary, for instance, when it remembers the object.'⁹ P.T. Raju maintains that the Advaitins insist upon in the case of perception that it reveals, along with the forms, 'being' (*satta*) that is common to every existence and without which the forms cannot be real and cannot have objective status. In 'That is a cow' and 'that is a horse', along with the forms of the cow and the horse, 'being' also is revealed through 'is' whether or not we express our cognition in words.¹⁰

Śaṅkara makes the self, the absolute consciousness responsible for all manifestation in experience. All appearances hang round the light of consciousness. The *Ātmān*, however, does not reveal the whole world directly. In the graded series of objects which are subtle and internal, *buddhi* occupies the very first position being the subtlest and the most internal of all things. Hence, it is the first to receive the light of consciousness. Next comes *mānas* which is in contact with *buddhi*; then the senses which are in contact with the *mānas*; then the body which is in contact with the senses, and then the rest of the world bound with the law of cause and effect.¹¹ Nevertheless, what

is implied by this is that the objective world is experienced only when illumined by the light of the *Vṛttijñana* or the *buddhi*-consciousness. The pure *cit* is known as *viññanamāya* when conditioned by, without being distinguished from, this *buddhi*-consciousness. Just as the *rāhu* is observed only when it is in contact with the moon and the sun, similarly *Ātmān* is caught in experience only when it is associated with the internal organ and its modes. The *Ātmān* wrongly identifies itself with the *buddhi* and its modes, the result being its move in both the worlds.

The agentship which is the result of this wrong identification belongs not to pure consciousness, *cit*, but to consciousness conditioned or determined by the internal organ. We have also seen that there can be no perceptual or direct knowledge of an object unless it is presented before consciousness in the form of a *Vṛtti* or mode of the internal organ. The *Vṛtti* being a mode of the *antahkaraṇa*, it is obvious that in perceptual experience there is a fusion of the subject and the object into one. As a later writer puts it, there is direct or immediate knowledge of the object because the latter becomes a part of the knower's self. To Advaita Vedānta, the ultimate truth is to be the nature of direct experience. Mediate knowledge cannot eradicate nescience which is directly felt. In one place the Vivaraṇa School remarks that what mediate knowledge grasps is merely the existence of the causal object. No wise man can be satisfied merely with such mediate or inferential knowledge of an object.

Śaṅkara observes that all knowledge with which we are concerned, which dispels ignorance, which admits of the distinctions of direct and indirect, true and false knowledge, which, in short, must constitute the starting-point in all epistemological enquiries, is the so-called *Vṛttijñana*, knowledge which consists in the modes or modifications of the internal organ illumined by the pure *cit*. There is no doubt about the fact that the modes of the internal organ, the *antahkaraṇa*, have illumination, or that knowledge in the sense of *Vṛttijñana* reveals objects. As we have seen, Śaṅkara, nowhere in his writings, gave a detailed systematic analysis of perception, although it has been scattered throughout his writings. A theory of perception was expounded by the author of the Vivaraṇa School of Vedānta. This theory was further elaborated and perfected by Dharmaraja in his celebrated piece *Vedāntaparibhaṣa*. The theory of perception as expounded by these later writers, since it is the very opposite of modern scientific views on the subject, has been the object of much

unfavourable criticism in recent times.¹² Dr. D.M. Datta has tried to give a scientific defence of the theory on the basis of certain tenets of the Gestalt School of psychology coupled with some other common-sense considerations.¹³

Out of the two elements in the neo-Vedantic theory of perception, namely, (1) the going out of the *antahkaraṇa* to the object and (2) the *antahkaraṇa* assuming the form of the object, neither is included in Śaṅkara's discussion on perception. In contradistinction to the Vedāntic view, modern science believes that in perception, objects send out stimuli which are received in the brain, where they somehow result in the perception of the object. Śaṅkara, it seems, would have no objection to this analysis of perception provided it were granted that the stimuli running from the object through the sense-organs along the nerve-paths needed the light of the self, the pure consciousness (*cit*) to be enlivened into perceptual experience. It must further be granted that the form of the object somehow travels along with the stimuli. One thing which comes out clearly even from the modern description of the perceptual process is that the light of consciousness does not directly fall upon or illumine the object of experience. The form of the object has first to be assimilated by what Śaṅkara calls the internal organ¹⁴ and what modern psychology generally identifies with nervous processes. Thus, Sankara is interested in showing that besides the changing modes of the internal organ which constitute experience, a pure *cit* or awareness, an ever-shining light, of which those modes are objects, must be admitted, without which memory, recognition, etc., would be impossible.¹⁵

Though the phenomenal consciousness is a modified product, it is not different from absolute consciousness, although it appears to be different. This leads to the question of the place of *Māyā* or *Avidyā* in Śaṅkara's theory of knowledge. Rejecting the Mīmāṃsā doctrine of Kumarila and Prabhākara, Śaṅkara expresses his position regarding the nature of the objects of illusion which is similar to the one that we find in the Mādhyamīkās. The object of illusion is neither real nor un-real, nor both, nor neither. It is *anirvācāniya*. But Śaṅkara differs from the Mādhyamīkās for whom the basis of the illusory object is void (*śūnya*), the inexplicable. This cuts at the very root of truth-falsity dichotomy as both are inexplicable. Śaṅkara rejects the Vijñānavāda position that the real basis of illusion is pure consciousness, that it is void which makes pure consciousness or void, the gland of both truth and falsity. Although for Śaṅkara too, both are based on Brāhman and Māyā, he still can ask the question,

'how and where do we get ideas of truth and falsity?' For him, we get them in empirical reality, an empirically true object forms the basis of true and false objects. The illusory snake is thus a self-contradicting 'percept' in Advaita Vedānta, it is not a self-contradictory 'concept'. Beyond this state of truth and falsity there is their substratum, 'Sat', the deeper dimension of reality which is non-conceptual, indeterminate Being. It is Being itself in which Being and consciousness are identical. Being is posited by epistemological consciousness (*jñāna*). Accordingly, as there are levels of reality (*satta*), Being or *satta* is not imaginary as the 'snake' in the rope is not imaginary. This would allow the Advaitin to say that what is inexplicable is not actually the non-existent; it contains within itself the elements of self-contradictoriness. Thus, the snake in the rope is not a self-contradictory concept but a self-contradictory percept that contains its own contradictoriness and is inexplicable (*anirvācaniya*). At this juncture, the Advaitins use much of destructive dialectic found in Western thought and also in Buddhism to show that none of the categories of thought like space, time, causality, etc., are self-consistent as they are all *anirvācaniya*.

However, the Advaitins maintain two levels of truth or knowledge, a higher and lower. The pragmatic criterion enables us to distinguish what is empirically true or what is empirically false, which is not what higher knowledge (*paramārthika jñāna*) is. That higher knowledge is uncontradicted (*abādhitā*) and uncontradictable (*abādhyā*), is absolutely true. All other knowledge, including Vedic knowledge, is lower, not direct intuition of *Brāhman*. In the Māhāyāna Buddhism there is the level of worldly truth (*samvṛti satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramartha satya*), but unlike in Advaita Vedānta, it does not lead to Being or *Brahman*. For Māhāyāna, Being belongs to the world of becoming, a combination of both being and non-being. But according to Vedānta, Being can exist apart from non-Being, though the latter cannot exist without the former. So far *Brāhman* is concerned, which in a sense is identified with 'Being' (Sat), *Brāhman* is independent of and is not dependent on the world or on *Māyā*.

This *Brāhman* is the eternal self-revelation of existence, intelligence and bliss. The unique epistemological status of this ultimate level of consciousness, which is also called the *sakṣi caitanya*, the eternal witness, is *svaprakāśa*, self-luminous. It is that level of consciousness which illumines everything including itself, transcends intentional functioning or modified consciousness and

the distinction between subject and object. This is neither a subject or an object. It is completely self-caused, eternally known, and indubitable. Thus, the epistemic framework in the Vedānta is through a gradual negation (*neti neti*) of the lower realm of being as self-contradictory, ultimately poetically describing the undifferentiated higher state of Being as the light of the sun that illumines itself as well as others.

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14. *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, 3.8.20.
15. *Ibid.* 4.3.7; *Brāhma Sūtras Śankara Bhasya*, 2.2.28.