
METAPHYSICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN ŚAMKARA'S ADVAITA

SURYA KANTA MAHARANA

Introduction

Indian philosophy stands as one of the foremost Eastern traditions of abstract metaphysical enquiry. Metaphysics, as understood in Western sense, constitutes the most important part of doing philosophy in India. The metaphysical quest is a search for 'ontos', or 'Being', a study of reality, which plays a pivotal role in Śamkara's *Advaita Vedānta*. Śamkara defines reality as "that the ascertained nature of which does not undergo any change."¹ At another place he says, "that object which necessarily remains what it is, is truly real."² The most distinguishing feature of Śamkara's Advaita is the concept 'reality' which is none other than the Unqualified *Brahman* (*Nirgunā Brahman*). *Brahman* is one and the only reality and is admitted as devoid of all determinations (*Nirviśesa*). Plotinus' transcendent and ineffable One or God is in itself beyond all qualifications of thought and is in this sense similar to Śamkara's *Brahman*.³ Hence the philosophy of *Advaita* is often named as *Nirviśesa Brahman-vāda* (doctrine of Unqualified *Brahman*). The *Nirviśesa Brahman-vāda*, however, has its root in the *Upanisads*.

Nature of Consciousness

The goal of philosophy for *Advaita Vedānta* of Śamkara is similar to the one expressed by Socrates and others, it is self-knowledge. It is a discovery of man and his essence as a complicated passionate being or a being whose nature is centered in a divine reality. This quest for self-knowledge is pervasive in Indian thought and is given a preeminent place in the *Vedānta*. For in the *Upanisads*, which are the main source of systematic *Vedānta*, it is held that a knowledge of the self is a "saving" knowledge; that he who knows himself knows reality and overcomes all pain, misery, ignorance, and bondage (e.g., *Mundaka Upanisad*, III, 2, 9). The 'Self' in *Advaita Vedānta* is pure, undifferentiated self-shining consciousness, which is beyond time and space, is beyond thought which is not-different from *Brahman* which underlies and supports the individual human person. *Ātman* is pure, undifferentiated, self-shining consciousness, a supreme power of awareness, transcendent to ordinary sense-mental consciousness, aware only of the oneness of being. *Ātman* is the name for that state of conscious being wherein the division of subject and object, which characterizes ordinary consciousness, is overcome. Nothing can condition this transcendental state of consciousness. *Ātman* is thus void of

¹ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Eight Upanisads with the Commentary of Śamkarācārya*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. (*Yadrupenā yanniscitam tadrupam nā vyabhicāratī tatsatyam*, II.1)

² Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya of Sri Śamkarācārya*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. (Eka- rupenā hyavastho' rthah sa paramārthah, III.11.)

³ Stall, J.F. (1961) *Advaita and Neo-Platonism : A Critical Study in Comparative Philosophy* University of Madras, Madras, p.180.

difference, but it is not for *Advaita* simply a void; it is the infinite richness of spiritual being, the real.

Vedic Speculations about Consciousness

In order to understand the true nature of consciousness in the metaphysics of *Advaita*, we should trace its source in the earlier tradition. If we take a review of the philosophical reflections of the time from the *R̥g Veda* to the *Upanis̥ads*, we arrive at the following successive findings regarding consciousness.

At first there is recognition of the oneness of the principle of the universe. This principle is both transcendental and immanent in it. A complete transformation of this principle from the region of the outer to the inner is in man. The absolute identification of the outer macrocosm with the inner microcosm is also in man. The recognition of the nature of this principle as absolute consciousness is all-pervading, immutable and eternally present. Insistence on the transcendental nature of this consciousness which is entirely unlike any other known object of the empirical world, and providing solid bedrock to the later transcendental theories of consciousness in the *Sāṃkhya-Yoga*, and the *Advaita Vedānta*.

Accordingly, the seed of this non-dual consciousness could be traced in the *Vedic* source though it is in the *Upanis̥ads* that consciousness is conceived and propounded as an independent and eternal reality without any distinctions whatever, in it, as completely inactive, capable of existing as pure 'jñā', pure light without content, untainted by experience and yet, strangely foundational of all experience. This theory of the foundational nature of consciousness is the legacy of the *Upanis̥ads*. The subsequent systems have sometimes deduced from it quite contradictory doctrines about the nature and function of consciousness. Kanāda and Gautama, for instance, have relapsed into the reality of the empirical and the conditional consciousness only, as against the transcendental and the Absolute consciousness which marked the last stages of the *Upanis̥ads*.⁴ Historically, it is for the first time perhaps, that in the *Aitareya Āraṇ̥yaka* we find a determined effort to reflect systematically on the different stages of the development of consciousness in the universe. Here a beginning is made in the successive gradation of reality on the basis of degrees of sensibility and intelligence discovered in plants, beasts and men. The *Āraṇ̥yaka* says, "There are herbs and trees and all that is animal, and he knows the *Ātman* is gradually developing in them. For in herbs and trees, sap only is seen but 'citta' is seen in animated beings. Among animated beings, again, the *Ātman* develops gradually; and in man, again, the *Ātman* develops gradually for he is most endowed with 'prāṇ̥a'. He says what he has known, he sees what he has known, he knows what is to happen tomorrow, he knows the visible and the invisible world, and by means of the mortal he desires the immortal. Thus is he endowed? With regard to other animals, hunger and thirst are a kind of understanding, but they do not say what

⁴ Saxena, S.K. (1971) *Nature of Consciousness in Hindu Philosophy*, Motilal Banarasi Dass, Delhi. p.32

they have known, they do not know what is to happen tomorrow, etc. They go so far and no further.”⁵

Consciousness in the *Upanisads*

In the *Chāndogya Upanisad*, Prajapati unfolds successively the nature of the Self in the dialogue between Indra and Virochana.²⁸ *Ātman* is progressive and step by step identified with the body consciousness, the dream consciousness, and the deep sleep unconsciousness till finally it is declared to be the one which persists unaffected through all these conditions of the empirical existence. A similar physico-psychological method is adopted in the *Taittiriya*,²⁹ and here too, the successive unfolding of the essence of the *Ātman* finally ends in its characterization as *Ānandamaya*. In the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad*, the *Ātman* as pure consciousness has been described as the fundamental and the basic reality. Pure ‘*Cit*’ exists independently and by its own light. Even if no phenomenal reality of the sun, moon, the sense-organs, and the ‘*mānasa*’ is manifest, absolute consciousness always exists. It eternally exists as the ‘*svayam-jyotiḥ*’, through the light of which all else shines.³⁰ This eternal consciousness thus shines unconditionally. Like a lump of salt which consists through and through of savour, the *Ātman* is through and through conscious.³¹

The keynote of this Absolute and unconditional consciousness is that, though it has no consciousness of particular objects, as it is not characterized by the distinction of subject and the object, yet it is not unconscious. It is non-dual and unitary consciousness without the consciousness of differentiation like the consciousness of a man embraced by his wife. This eternal and unconditional consciousness which at times appears to be non-existent, as in deep sleep, does not disappear even for a while. It has no specific cognition, not because it ceases to be conscious, but because there are no objects separate from it which it can see.³² If the *Ātman* were not unceasingly and unconditionally conscious, and if consciousness actually became extinct, whence could it come back later on? ³³ It, therefore, appears not to see, because when the unity of the *Ātman* with the ‘all’ (*sarvam*) has been realized, and when there is nothing left beside itself, who shall see whom? The characterization of the Ultimate Reality which reaches its climax in the Absolute consciousness of Yajñavalkya’s *vijñānaghana*, and which is beyond the categories of time, space and causation, is yet not the last one. The true nature of the

⁵ *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, 2.3.2., quoted in Saxena, S.K. op. cit., p.23.

²⁸ Jha, Ganganatha. (1942) (tr.) *Chāndogyopanisad* 8.7.1 ff. *A Treatise on Vedānta Philosophy* Translated into English with the Commentary of Śamkara, Oriental Book Agency, Poona.

²⁹ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Eight Upanisads with the Commentary of Śamkarācārya*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. (*Annam brahmetivyajanāt, prāṇo, mano, vijñānam, ānando brahmatī vyajanāt*, 3.2 – 6)

³⁰ Madhavananda, Swami. (1975) (tr.) *Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad* (4.3.1. ff.) with the commentary of Śamkarācārya (5th Ed.), Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.5.13.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.3.23.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.3.11- 15.

Ātman is ‘*Saccidānanda*’. The concept of ‘*Cit*’ and ‘*Ānanda*’ though arrived at by different methods, are later on identified as ultimate qualities. Pure and absolute consciousness cannot be differentiated from ‘*Ānanda*’, while ‘*Ānanda*’ is the same as ‘*Bhūmān*’.³⁴ This highest *Ātman* is ‘*Ānanda*’, because in it there is not want, no second, no more tension or limitation. The *Brahman* is ‘*Ānanda*’ as the last super-conscious stage and as absolutely different from empirical consciousness.

The *Upanisads* teach a principle of consciousness which differs so entirely from a state of consciousness which will be able to enjoy or feel *Ānanda* or bliss as not to be indicated by that name at all. This bliss is of a being which has no consciousness or feeling of any kind, and which is better designated as ‘Silence rather than as ‘*Ānanda*’, as in ‘I teach you indeed, but you understand not, Silence is the *Ātman*’.³⁵ It is clear that such an Absolute consciousness cannot be regarded as ‘*Ānanda*’ in any empirical sense of the term. The term ‘*Ānanda*’ is only to indicate that the nature of Reality is positive, and no negative. Reality is ‘*Saccidānanda*’. It is ‘*Sat*’ as unchanging, ‘*Cit*’ as it is not ‘*acit*’ (unconscious) or ‘*Jada*’ and ‘*Ānanda*’ (bliss) as it cannot be of the nature of pain or discord, for all negation must have a basis in something positive. Even this description of *Brahman* as ‘*Saccidānanda*’ can only express the reality in the best way possible.³⁶ In Śamkara *Bhāṣya* of the *Brahma Sutra* (1.4.22) and the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad Bhāṣya*, (2.4.12) Śamkara says that ‘no more particular consciousness there is’, and not that there is total loss of it.

Ultimately, the reality is ‘*jñā*’ or ‘*cinmātra*’, for as repeated so frequently,³⁷ this is the very meaning of ‘eternal witness’ or the ‘*dr̥ast̥ā*’, or ‘*dr̥s̥mātra*’ that it is eternally conscious, ‘*kutastha sākṣin, nitya caitanya svarupa*’ which is a compact mass of intelligence ‘*vijñānaghana*’.³⁸ Though the Absolute consciousness is logically and empirically uncharacterisable, it is yet not unknown, and its nature is ‘*jñā*’ or pure intelligence as opposed to unintelligence. Its nature is not that of the variable moulds of intelligence of which we have an experience in our daily life of mediated consciousness, but its nature is of the constant, unchanging and basic consciousness, which is the presupposition of all distinctions and manifoldness. According to Śamkara, the ‘real’ is that whose negation is not possible. And the only thing that satisfies this criterion is consciousness, because denial of consciousness presupposes that very consciousness which denies its own status. It is conceivable that any object is not existent, but the absence of consciousness is not conceivable. If difference cannot be predicated of it, then consciousness is the only reality and anything different from it would be unreal. If the other three kinds of absence are not predicable of it, then consciousness should be beginningless, without end, and ubiquitous. Consequently, it would be without change. Furthermore, consciousness is self-intimating; all objects depend upon consciousness for their manifestation. There are not many consciousnesses; the plurality of many centers of

³⁴ Jha, Ganganatha. op.cit, 7.23.1., 7.24.1.

³⁵ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Brahma-Sutra-Bhāṣya of Sri Śamkarācārya* Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. (*Brūmāh̄ khalutvam tu nā vijānasi upasānto ‘yam ātmā*, 3.2.17).

³⁶ Saxena, S.K., op.cit, p. 31

³⁷ Madhavananda, Swami. (1975) (tr.) *Brhadāraṇyaka Upanisad* (4.3.11, 4.3.30, and 4.3.23) with the commentary of Śamkarācārya (5th Ed.), Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 4.5.13.

consciousness should be viewed as an appearance. There is no reality other than consciousness. It does not admit any internal parts. This ever present consciousness should not be confused with determinate and objectified consciousness because the very grammatical form of the language in which we have to express our thoughts have encouraged the conception that it is something like the table or the chair. But consciousness cannot be so defined in as much as it is the ultimate presupposition of all knowable objects. Once it is admitted that consciousness is *sui-generis*, it must also be admitted that it cannot be defined in the ordinary way. Pure consciousness cannot be defined because it is something entirely different '*anyad-eva*'. From this we must not conclude that it is unknown.

For Śamkara, consciousness is awareness, intelligence or knowledge that can be viewed from two perspectives, namely, absolute or transcendental (*Paramārthika*) perspective and relative or phenomenal (*Vyavahārika*) perspective. From the transcendental perspective, consciousness as *Brahman* exists eternally and is identical with reality itself which is conceived as pure knowledge, "a solid mass of knowledge only."³⁹ From the phenomenal perspective, consciousness also persists in all phenomenal experience as well where it is called an enjoyer (*bhoktr*).⁴⁰ The *Upanisads* say that the absolute consciousness or consciousness *per se* cannot be "known as an object of mediate knowledge, yet it is known as involved in every act of knowledge."⁴¹ Consciousness, Śamkara urges, has to be something different '*vyatireka*' from the material elements and it being essentially knowledge in its nature '*upalabdhisvarupa*', cannot be the same as the physical body. Firstly, because whatever is presented to consciousness cannot be identified with it, it must be entirely different from matter. Secondly, the object of consciousness cannot be a precedent factor in the genesis of consciousness. As it would be absurd on the part of a physiologist to explain the vital processes of the body with reference to the movement of the muscles etc., for it is the vital process itself that render the movement possible not vice-verse. Similarly it is absurd on the part of a materialist to explain the conscious process with reference to the movement of the material elements. Consciousness therefore has none of the characteristics that belong to any or all of the collection of knowable objects. It is peculiarly itself and '*sui-generis*'.⁴² Furthermore, all objects of knowledge have temporal determinations, such as past, present or future, but that for which these temporal determinations have meaning cannot itself be in time. It is an eternal presence, '*Sarvadā vartamānasvabhāvah*'.⁴³

However, these two perspectives or orders of consciousness do not lead to an ultimate duality between these two orders. Instead, the higher order consciousness persists as the underlying, unifying and intelligent ground of all phenomenal states of

³⁹ Vijñānaghana eva, *Ibid.*, 2.4.12.

⁴⁰ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Eight Upanisads with the Commentary of Śamkarācārya*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. (*Katha Upanisad*, 3.4.)

⁴¹ *Ibid* 1.4.

⁴² Saxena, S.K. op.cit.p.49

⁴³ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya of Sri Śamkarācārya* (2.3.7.), Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta; also see Works of Śamkarācārya in Original Sanskrit, Vol.11. *Bhagavadgita with Śamkara Bhasya* (2.18.), Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1978.

consciousness. “Reality is consciousness”⁴⁴ and consciousness is “like a thread, that course through and holds together a collection of pearls”⁴⁵ but which is never identical with them. Perhaps the most complete statement of the hierarchical persistence of pure consciousness in phenomenal states of experience is found in the *Māndukya Upaniṣad*. Here, as we have seen in the first chapter, the waking, dream and deep sleep states, along with the “fourth” (*Tūriya*) state, or freedom itself, are identified as the four quarters of the Self (*Ātman*). Consciousness is said to be the witness who underlies the first three states and remains unaffected as it moves through them. For *Advaita Vedānta*, it was by means of these analyses of the levels of consciousness that an Advaitic student could “develop in himself the ability to discriminate the real from the non-real.”⁴⁶

Consciousness – Self – Reality Equation

All Vedantins agree that the essence of *Vedic* wisdom can be summarized by four great sayings (*mahāvākya*)⁴⁷, each of which expresses the fundamental identification (*tādātmya*) of individual consciousness with pure consciousness and with reality. The four statements are:

- a) *Brahman* is consciousness (*prajñānam Brahma*)
- b) I am *Brahman* (*aham Brahmasmi*)
- c) Thou Art That (*tat tvam asi*)
- d) This *Ātman* is *Brahman* (*ayam Ātmā Brahma*).

Śamkara accepts the relation of ‘*tādātmya*’ or Identity between ‘*Ātman*’ and ‘*Cit*’. He argues that the relation between intelligence and Self must be either of difference or of identity, or of both identity and difference. If the two are absolutely different, there cannot be any relation of substance and attribute link between them. They cannot be related by the external relation of ‘*samyoga*’ also, for they are not corporeal objects, nor can the internal relation of ‘*samavāya*’ holds between them for fear of infinite regress. Thus the two cannot be different. To say that they are both different and identical would be to make contradictory statements; and if the two are identical, there is no meaning in saying that one is the attribute of the other. Hence intelligence and Self are identical “*Ātmā-chaitanya*’or *abhedah*”.⁴⁸ Consciousness or intelligence and self are, therefore, one. A distinction between the two is, however, allowed for practical convenience, in so far as the term consciousness is used to denote the self in relation to objects.

⁴⁴ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Eight Upanisads With the Commentary of Śamkarācārya*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. (*Prajñānam Brahma, Aitareya Upanisad*, 3.3.)

⁴⁵ Mahadevan, T.M.P. (1969) (ed. & tr.) *The Pancadasi of Bharatitirtha-Vidyaranya* University of Madras, p. 9

⁴⁶ Mahadevan, T.M.P., *op cit.*, p. xxii.

⁴⁷ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Eight Upanisads with the Commentary of Śamkarācārya*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. (*Aitareya Upaniṣad* 3.5.3); Madhavananda, Swami. (1975) *Op. Cit.*, *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.10 and 2.5.19; Jha, Ganganatha. (1942) (tr.) *Op. Cit.*, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 6.8.7 ff.

⁴⁸ Saxena, S.K. , *op. cit.*, pp. 55-56

This identification is portrayed throughout the *Vedic* literature. For example, the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* mentions that the transcendental, infinite and limitless *Brahman* is “a solid mass of knowledge (*vijñānaghana-eva*), that is, a mass of homogeneous, pure intelligence or consciousness.⁴⁹ Further, it identifies *Brahman* with *Ātman*, the innermost essence of all forms that transforms itself in accordance with the likeness of all forms.⁵⁰ Thus *Brahman*, the utterly distinctionless and transcendental reality, is identical with the immanent essence of all things. In this sense the *Upaniṣadic* doctrine of absolute consciousness establishes at once the transcendence and immanence of consciousness with respect to the world. Advaitins thus use the term *Ātman* to refer to reality or consciousness immanent in the world, and the term *Brahman* to refer to consciousness in its purely transcendental state, which is conceived as the utter perfection of non-duality, free from limitations (*ūpādhi*) of *Brahman* that bring about creation and dissolve in the highest realisation. With his preference for the purely transcendental view of consciousness, Śamkara concludes in his commentary on the second of the verses quoted above from the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, “Obviously, in a passage like this, the differences are mentioned only for the purpose of canceling them.”⁵¹ Making the same point in a different context, Śamkara asks why the Lord came in so many forms. He answers: Were name and form not manifested, the transcendent nature of this Self as Pure Intelligence would not be known.”⁵² Thus, the realization of the identity of the Self with transcendental consciousness is the highest goal of human life from the Advaitic perspective.

Neti... Neti...., the Negative Formula

Śamkara says that pure consciousness “has no distinguishing mark such as name, or form, or action, or heterogeneity, or species, or qualities.”⁵³ The only way to describe the true nature of reality is “to describe it as ‘not this, not this’, by eliminating all possible specifications of it that one may know of.”⁵⁴

Self-revelation of Consciousness

Because consciousness transcends the duality between the knower and the objects of knowledge which characterizes cognitive activity, the essential nature of consciousness is itself self-revelation.⁵⁵ Consciousness is essentially self-revealing that its nature can be directly and immediately known (but not indirectly cognized) to be identity of existence (*satyam*), knowledge (*jñānam*) and infinity (*anantam*) (*Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma*).⁵⁶ It is “undecaying, immortal, beyond fear, pure, homogeneous”⁵⁷ and fully in and by itself. It is eternally self-luminous, that is, aware of

⁴⁹ Madhavananda, Swami. (1975) Op. Cit., *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.4.12.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 2.5.19.

⁵¹ Date, V.H. (1954) (tr.) *Brahma Sutra Samkara Bhāṣya*, 3.2.21, *Vedanta Explained, Samkara's Commentary on the Brahma Sutras*. 2 Vols. Bombay, Bookseller's Publishing Company.

⁵² Madhavananda, Swami. (1975) Op. Cit., 2.5.19.

⁵³ Ibid, 2.3.6.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Date, V.H. (1954) Op. Cit, 2.3.7

⁵⁶ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Eight Upanisads with the Commentary of Śamkarācārya*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. (*Taittiriya Upanisad*, 2.1.)

⁵⁷ Date, V.H. (1954) Op. Cit, 2.4.12; Cf. 4.4.25; 3.2.21.

its own essential existence and perfection, and that it is the unmanifest (to thought), omnipotent witness of all that is apprehended.⁵⁸ No argument can be offered to prove the reality of this self-revealing experience itself. Firstly, Śamkara argues by the *Svabhāva* principle that reality would not exist at all if it were not identical with its own unchanging and eternally existing, original self-cause (*svabhāva*). If reality “were to be only an effect, then in the absence of an original cause, the effects will not be what they are, and there will be nothing but the theory of void.”⁵⁹ This argument is based on applying the Advaitic analysis of the nature of phenomenal causality (*satkāryavāda*) to absolute consciousness. The phenomenal analysis offers a variety of a substantialist causal model which maintains that an effect is nothing more than, and is ontologically not different from, its material cause (*upādāna kāraṇa*).⁶⁰ Secondly, to Śamkara, “none can doubt its existence; for it is involved even in doubting. Fire cannot cancel its own heat; even so self-consciousness can never doubt itself.”⁶¹ This argument however seems to be similar to Descartes’ *cogito* argument.

What follows from the aforementioned premises is that consciousness is eternal, transcendental, unchanging, uncaused and homogeneous. It is *sui generis*, ‘*svayambhūh*’, a reality in itself, unlike any other object, sharing no other quality with any other object excepting existence or Reality, and absolutely uncharacterisable in terms of either a quality, an action, or even a substance. It exists as ‘*cinmātra*’ and as the source of all ‘*Citta*’. It is a contentless consciousness in which there is no consciousness of either ‘I’ or ‘this’, ‘*Aham*’ or ‘*Idam*’.⁶² It is eternal, pure, unobjectified and distinctionless infinite-reality, a transcendental and a foundational consciousness with no distinction of ego and non-ego.⁶³ “All this is guided by intelligence is based on intelligence. The world is guided by intelligence. The basis is intelligence. *Brahman* is intelligence.”⁶⁴ “There is nothing but Intelligence at the time of the origin, continuance and dissolution of the universe.”⁶⁵ The three states of experience in the *Māndukya Upaniṣad* portray that intelligence or knowledge is the essential nature of the substance which persists through and witnesses these different states.⁶⁶ Śamkara further argues that existence and intelligence, as essences of absolute consciousness, are identical not only with each other but with: “existence is intelligence and intelligence is existence.”⁶⁷ Knowledge as the essence of consciousness is neither a product nor an activity. Further, infinity (*anantam*)

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.2.22 ff.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.3.7.

⁶⁰ Deutsch, Eliot. (1969) *Advaita Vedanta: a Philosophical Reconstruction*, University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, pp.35-37.

⁶¹ Date, V.H. (1954) *Op. Cit.*, 2,3,7; Cf. Mahadevan, T.M.P. (1969) (ed.& tr.) *The Pancadasi of Bharatitirtha-Vidyaranya*. University of Madras, Madras. (*Pancadasi*, 3.23 – 4.)

⁶² Saxena, S.K. *op. cit.*, p.44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.45.

⁶⁴ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) *Aitareya Upanisad*, 3.5.3; Cf. Sharma, Baldev Raj, (1972) *The Concept of Atman in the Principal Upaniṣads*, Dinesh Publications, New Delhi, pp. 7-8. (For discussion of the debate regarding the date of this *Upaniṣad*)

⁶⁵ Madhavananda, Swami. (1975) *Op. Cit.*, 2.4.11.

⁶⁶ Nikhilananda, Swami. (1955) (Tr.) *Mandukya Upanisad with Gaudapada’s Karika & Samkara’s Commentary*, Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore, p.1.6.

⁶⁷ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya of Sri Śamkarācārya* (2.1.14), Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta.

and bliss (*Ānanda*) are synonymous for Advaitins because consciousness is revealed to be full (*purnā*), perfect and beyond all determination and qualifications, and because the realisation of perfection is the source of ultimate value in the universe. “There is nothing else which could be desired in addition to the absolute unity of *Brahman*,”⁶⁸ because “this Self is dearer than the son, dearer than wealth, dearer than everything else, and is innermost.”⁶⁹

A Few Metaphors for Consciousness

The theater metaphor for consciousness has attained a certain prominence in Western thought as a result of Hume’s analysis of experience. Hume, like the British Empiricists before him, emphasized the priority of individual experience in the formation and content of fundamentally passive consciousness. In carrying basic empiricist premises to their logical conclusion, Hume rejected the simple mental substance of Locke and Berkeley and offered an analysis of mind in terms of a “bundle or collection of different perceptions.” Reflecting his belief that consciousness is passive and changing in response to the variety of human experience, Hume says: “The mind is a kind of theater, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations... The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind, nor have we the most distinct notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed.”⁷⁰

Reflecting upon this, it can be argued in favour of Śamkara that the theater metaphor, describing Hume’s empirical theory of consciousness, leaves us with a very limited vision of the scope and potential of intellectual and spiritual experience. For Śamkara, consciousness has the radically transformative power to throw light on darkness and to unify the knower with the known. In comparison with Advaitic transcendental consciousness Hume’s passive theater fails to consider, let alone explain, this revolution at all. Consciousness has also been described as a stream. The most influential theory of consciousness as stream in the Western thought is the radical empiricism of William James. James was particularly opposed to the classical Empiricist model of a passive consciousness receiving simple sensations. He tried to counter this with a more active, process-oriented analysis. Trying to account for the “warmth and intimacy” with which the self greets its own past thoughts and feelings, James emphasized the continuity experienced by mind. He says: “Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as “chain” or “train” do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A “river” or “stream” are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described.”⁷¹ For James, the stream of consciousness was neither a substance nor an entity but a continuous, active process which was selective in dealing with objects independent of itself. Against this thesis, Śamkara may observe that the continuity of consciousness experience emphasized by the stream metaphor fails to

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Madhavananda, Swami. (1975) *Op. Cit.*, 1.4.8.

⁷⁰ Selby-Bigge, L.A. (1888) Hume, David (ed.) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford :. Bk.I, sect. VI.

⁷¹ James, William. (1950) *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols., Dover, New York, p. 239.

allow for the radical discontinuity which characterizes the distinction between empirical and transcendental consciousness, and thus fails to convey the panoramic, illuminating and witnessing dimension of consciousness.

Secondly, the storehouse metaphor for consciousness has been dealt with the Buddhistic *Vijñānavāda* theory of the existence of a plurality of individual series of “streams” of consciousness. Unlike James’ stream of consciousness, which orders objects independent of itself, the Vijñānavādins denied that there were any objects independent of consciousness. Thus in order to account for the coherence of experience, the Vijñānavādins claimed that the stream of consciousness has a storehouse (*ālayavijñāna*) of past impressions (*saṃskāra*) buried within it, and that these impressions rise to the surface of the consciousness in the form of an appropriate cognition at the proper moment.⁷² Against this thesis it can be argued in favour of Śamkara that a momentary, continuously changing series cannot consistently be a substratum of impressions at the same time.⁷³

To conclude, Śamkara’s vision of consciousness submits that the absolute consciousness is identical with the essence of subjective and objective reality and that it is pure, homogeneous, autonomous, self-revealing and self-validating. While *Advaita* has insisted that consciousness is ultimately beyond determination and qualification in terms of the categories of thought, and have criticized various attempts to classify consciousness according to conventional philosophical categories, they have nevertheless tried to indicate what consciousness is not, that is, it is not ignorant, not unreal and not painful. Finally, in more poetic terms, *Advaita* has likened consciousness to the undifferentiated light of the sun, which illuminates itself while witnessing and giving birth to all creation. And it may well be the case, after all, that the most effective way to convey a sense of transcendental consciousness is through the use of just such a metaphor.



⁷² Chatterjee, S. & Datta, D.M. (1984) *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, pp. 148- 150.

⁷³ Gambhirananda, Swami. (1977) (tr.) *Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya of Sri Śamkarācārya* (2.3.31), Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta.