

## ATTRIBUTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AND INTENTIONALITY: AN ANALYSIS FROM RĀMĀNUJA'S PERSPECTIVE\*

MUNMUN CHAKRABORTY

Philosophers who associate the notion of intentionality with the names of German philosophers Edmund Husserl and his master Franz Brentano are hardly aware about the classical Indian philosopher Rāmānuja whose view genuinely contributes to the thesis of intentionality more than any other existing thinker in the realm of Indian philosophical tradition. Rāmānuja does not aim to develop any systematic thesis on intentionality like Husserl nor he uses any terminology similar to the modern notion of intentionality yet his understanding of the nature of consciousness seems convincing to a scholar like J.N. Mohanty, who strongly advocates for an intentional nature of consciousness following Husserl. It must be mentioned here that while all most all schools including orthodox and heterodox sets have explored and examined the nature of consciousness, each of them contribute distinctly and among which Rāmānuja is exceptional. Hence, Monism though seems very prominent is not the only voice that signifies Vedānta. Since philosophy in India is multifarious. For that reason, it is better not to go for any hasty generalization which often some popular thinkers commit.

However, the question here is: how does Rāmānuja argue for an object-directed nature of consciousness being a Vedāntin? Indeed, it would not be a mistake to call him a non-dualist. Of course, it is known to us that like Śāṅkara, he does not consider reality as unqualified and indescribable rather characterizes it with essential qualities. Needless to say, Rāmānuja's view about the object-directed nature of consciousness is a logical outcome of his notion of 'Qualified Monism'. The present paper would like to bring out this aspect of Rāmānuja's understanding which has affinity with Husserlian phenomenology. It is his critique of unqualified, non-cognizable and eternal notion of consciousness that brings him close to the Husserlian tradition. And quite explicitly he is found to propagate the thesis of intentionality as the intrinsic nature of consciousness. Therefore, in the following pages, the aim is to analyse his view about transient, qualified, self-luminous and cognizable nature of

---

\* This contribution is a subsection in my PhD dissertation for which I am thankful to my supervisor Prof. A. Nataraju.

consciousness that substantiates his claim for object-directed or intentional nature of consciousness.

Rāmānuja is foremost to bring out thorough transformation in the sphere of the Vedāntic tradition by qualifying consciousness with attributes. The philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita as espoused by Rāmānuja in his commentary on triple text yields theism where Brahman is a symbol of adoration and love and not a mere rigid construction of the intellectuals. Reality is considered to be non-dual but is endowed with infinite spirits and matter. Thus, Rāmānuja's philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita goes on to challenge the Absolute Monism of Śāṅkara. By denying the notion of indescribable Brahman he ascribes to Him all positive qualities on the evidence of experience which can never provide us an object without any quality. All our knowledge is qualified, thereby all objects are. An object without qualities is a nonbeing. Even if we try to prove a qualityless object, that very attempt will prove its quality by differentiating the object from others. Likewise, to describe something through negation is also an indirect way to attribute quality to that thing. Hence, the Advaitins' method to describe Brahman through '*netinēti*' distinguishes the nature of Brahman from the objects of the world. This, in other way makes the Brahman qualified. Thus, by stressing that Reality is not finite, they characterize it as infinite. By claiming that consciousness is not factual, they denote it as eternal and so on. For, qualities like infinite, eternal, all-pervading etc. can never subsist without any substratum and that is the all-embracing Brahman.

### **Critique of Unqualified Consciousness**

Before considering the notion of consciousness or knowledge as formulated by Rāmānuja it is imperative to state at the very outset that the Rāmānuja's philosophical approach is altogether influenced by his realistic conviction. Rāmānuja, like the Advaitins, does not condemn the ontological or ultimate existence of the object. Instead, he has placed both object and subject on the same order of reality denying any priority of the latter over the former. The epistemological position of Rāmānuja about the nature of consciousness and its relation to the object is influenced by this metaphysical adherence, which will reflect in our subsequent discussion.

All knowledge pertains to some means, but there is no means of knowledge that can find out an attributeless, non-differentiated entity. All the major *pramāṇas*,

says Rāmānuja, are capable of establishing only qualified objects. Scripture, as a valid source of knowledge, consists of sentences and words that represent different meanings to us. And, these meanings denote different qualities of objects. Similarly, perception also provides us with objects of different qualities. Perception, either determinate or indeterminate, manifests an object with its essential features. Though, in case of indeterminate cognition all qualities are not apprehended, yet it is not an unqualified cognition. Again, inference as based on perception of invariable relation between *sadhya* and *hetu* testifies only objects with essential features. Thus, none of the three major *pramāṇas* can apprehend any attributeless entity. Likewise, there is no question of thinking of an unqualified consciousness. Even if the Advaitins are denying attributing any positive quality to consciousness, they cannot abstain from ascribing the negative qualities which differentiate it from other objects. Indeed, Rāmānuja holds that consciousness has the positive qualities of self-luminosity, intentionality, manifesting object and so on. For, if consciousness exists, it must have attributes to prove its being. And, thus he is emphatic to remark on *Brahma Sūtra*, “*Samvit siddhyati vā na vā, siddhyati cet saddharmatā syāt, na cet tucātā gagana-kusumādivat*”<sup>1</sup> Translation: If pure consciousness is proved to be real, it follows that it has attributes; if it is not, then it is non-existent, like a sky flower<sup>2</sup>.

### **Dependence of Consciousness**

Going against Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja sternly challenges the self-evident nature of consciousness as for him consciousness depends on the object to disclose itself as well as to prove itself. Consciousness is very much like other ordinary things depends on the means of knowledge for its manifestation and is thereby considered to be an object of cognition. When two people are talking about a particular subject the one cannot understand anything unless he is conscious of the fact that the other is talking about. Here, conscious state of the former becomes an object of cognition to the latter; the same occurs in case of inference and other processes of cognition. This

---

<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 635

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.635

consequently shows that consciousness is neither always self-luminous nor self-proved<sup>1</sup> rather depends on the cognitive means to manifest as well as to prove itself.

### **Critique of Eternal Consciousness**

The consequence of bringing consciousness down to the level of object is the direct refutation of the eternal and immovable nature of it. Eternalness consists in the persistent being of something which according to Rāmānuja cannot be conferred to consciousness. If consciousness were eternal and unlimited by time, all its objects that are revealed to different persons at different times would also be everlasting, ‘for objects conform to their respective states of consciousness’.<sup>2</sup> Our ordinary experience makes it certain that an awareness that reveals the existence of ‘pot’ at present moment does not reveal it at all times to everyone. It follows that the revelation of consciousness is limited in time and space.

Furthermore, it cannot be claimed that just because the previous non-existence of consciousness is not established by Advaitins, it is eternal. Since, the non-existence of consciousness is proved by consciousness itself. Just as the way consciousness reveals the object of the past and future existence besides its present existence, consciousness reveals its own previous non-existence that does not require any co-existence of the two. Though, in case of direct perception the co-existence between consciousness and object is required but it is not required in case of other means of knowledge. This absence of consciousness cannot be proved by direct perception nor can it be known by inference. Even the scripture cannot give us any knowledge of its absence. The only valid source says Rāmānuja that proves this non-existence is *anupalabdhi* or non-perception. Explaining his point Rāmānuja writes,

“according to this means of knowledge which is accepted as valid by the Advaitins, if an object capable of being apprehended is not so apprehended when all the conditions necessary for such a cognition are present, it is a proof that it does not exist.”

Thus, *anupalabdhi* which is regarded as a valid means of cognition by Advaita approves the non-existence of consciousness.

### **Revelation of Consciousness via Revelation of Object**

---

<sup>1</sup> Rāmānuja, (Translated by Swami Viresswarananda and Swami Adidevananda), *Brahman-Sūtras: Śrī-Bhāṣya*, Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2012, 1.1.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.1.1.

It is the upshot of this characterization that Rāmānuja conceives object-directedness as inevitable for consciousness. If the being of consciousness is pervaded by the being of object then it must be correlated with the latter in all cases of its revelation. In other words, consciousness being dependent and related to its object must be conditional or intentional in nature. It follows thereby that regarding the reflexivity of consciousness Rāmānuja's view is unique and contrary to Śaṅkara. Since, according to him, self-luminosity follows solely from the revelation of object that consciousness seeks to embrace. Consciousness therefore even after being qualified by self-luminosity, it is not essential to consciousness rather it is an apparent quality of it. It is not apparent in the sense that it is mere illusory or unreal but it is apparent in the sense that it is not the absolute and fundamental nature. Rāmānuja's contention seems obvious from his remark in *Śrī Bhāṣya*,

“Consciousness is not self-luminous always and to everybody, but it is self-luminous only when it reveals objects and not at other times, and it is so only to a particular knower and not to everyone....”<sup>1</sup>

The above quote shows Ramanuja's inclination towards intentionality of consciousness. Reflexivity or self-luminosity thus seems to be a conditional nature of consciousness in the sense that consciousness seems to be luminous only when it is intended towards an object. In fact, it is this object-directed nature of consciousness which is meant by him as the cause of self-luminosity. A reflection of same understanding is found in Prof. Mohanty's argument as he said, ‘consciousness is intentional, that is, directed towards an object (which however need not be an external, real thing in the world)’<sup>2</sup>. Again, writes Husserl,

“Intentionality is what characterizes consciousness in the pregnant sense and which, at the same time, justifies designating the whole stream of mental processes as the stream of consciousness and as the unity of one consciousness....Under intentionality we understand the own peculiarity of mental processes ‘to be the consciousness of something.’”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 1.1.1

<sup>2</sup> Mohanty, J.N. *Lectures on Consciousness and Interpretation*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978p.33

<sup>3</sup>Husserl, E. (Translated by F. Kersten), *Ideas Pertaining to A Pure Phenomenology And To A Phenomenological Philosophy*, , USA: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1983, pp.199-200

It is surprising that even if Rāmānuja has never used the term intentionality while delineating the nature of consciousness, yet his account of consciousness can be counted as a masterly exposition of intentionality. Here, Rāmānuja to make his point more explicit has referred the experience of sleep state. As the state of deep sleep does not support the presence of any object, consciousness as well abstains from being luminous. In fact, in the absence of object, consciousness in deep sleep is also found to be absent. In other words, there is not a single state where consciousness seems to be luminous without any internal or external object. Reflexivity therefore, cannot be regarded as the fundamental nature of consciousness rather it is a partial nature of consciousness correlating it to a particular object and subject. Moreover, Rāmānuja goes on to add that besides the state of deep sleep, there are numerous states of consciousness, which are not reflexive. Otherwise, all objects would have been revealed to all people. Experience shows that my awareness of an object does not reveal the object to other at the same time, nor my own past experience of the object reveal it to me at this moment. If, for instance, I have past experience of a wild cow, I would state that ‘I perceived it before’, instead of saying ‘I perceive it now’. Here, my past conscious state is an object of my present conscious state. Similarly, the conscious state of one person can be an object of consciousness to other. Or else, any meaningful engagement would not be possible. Thus, it is not sound to hold that only an unconscious entity is liable to be an object of consciousness. An object differs from consciousness due to its constitutional variation and not because it is apprehended by the latter. He writes, ‘to be an object of consciousness is not necessarily to be a non-conscious thing’<sup>1</sup>. This objective account of consciousness as viewed by Rāmānuja undoubtedly refutes any claim about its inexplicability. It equally challenges any such attempt that delineates consciousness as non-cognizable. Since, according to him, consciousness being an object of immediate knowledge, it cannot be non-cognizable. And if it is strictly non-cognizable, it cannot be immediate too. It is thus absurd to hold that consciousness is immediate yet non-cognizable.

It is to be referred here that the account of intentionality and reflexivity Rāmānuja sought to maintain throughout his epistemological discourse is based on

---

<sup>1</sup> Rāmānuja, (Translated by Swami Viresswarananda and Swami Adidevananda), *Brahman-Sūtras: Śrī-Bhāṣya*, Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2012, 1.1.1.

his understanding of consciousness that is quite distinct, indeed, opposed to the Advaitic interpretation. Consciousness to Rāmānuja is not pure, eternal, self-evident and absolute existence rather like an object it is qualified, fleeting, other-dependent and relative to the object. Consciousness discloses itself by going towards an object and by manifesting at the same time. The only peculiarity that makes it different from an object is its ability to be conscious of other object and oneself.

### **Absurdity of Pure Consciousness**

While proving the impermanency and limitedness of consciousness, Rāmānuja was very much aware about the dichotomy that Advaita has made between phenomenal consciousness and transcendental or pure consciousness. But being a realist, Rāmānuja denies any such gulf between these two; as for him, experience allows us to confront only with experiences which are always delimited by time and related to some object. Experience is never experienced as devoid of any object or what Advaitins term as pure consciousness. Since consciousness is always realised in manifesting an object which in other way ensures its luminosity. Making his intention more clear Rāmānuja affirms in the tone of Husserl,

“So in the absence of objects, consciousness would turn out to be a pure myth or imagination, for consciousness, according to the Advaitins, is not an object of any other act of knowledge and, there being no objects revealing which it can manifest itself also, there will be no proof of its existence as pure consciousness”<sup>1</sup>.

In the same way, it would be a mistake to contend that pure consciousness is experienced in the state of dreamless sleep where the ‘I’ and the object are absent. For, after waking up from deep sleep, no one remembers anything except the knowledge that he or she had a sound sleep. Indeed, what persists in deep sleep is the ‘I’ alone and neither the object nor the self-revealing consciousness. As consciousness in order to exist needs to be pervaded by the existence of object which cannot be present logically in dreamless sleep where both the mind and the sense organs stop functioning. Thus, there is not a single state where the Advaitic notion of pure consciousness can be established. All we realize are the different successive

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 1.1.1.

states of consciousness invariably related to the objects which are non-eternal in nature. This in other way confirms the object-directed nature of consciousness.

### **Contingency of Consciousness**

From the foregoing discussion one could easily make out that Rāmānuja is hostile to admit any such notion of absolute consciousness. To believe that consciousness or awareness does not undergo any modification because it is beginningless seems unconvincing to him. For anything that has existence is bound to endure changes; thus, cannot be claimed to be absolute. The concept of *avidyā* or Nescience, for instance, which is conceived as beginningless by the Advaitins is also subject to modification and has a definite end after the achievement of right knowledge. In the similar way, consciousness which is regarded as beginningless and endless by the Advaitins, suffers changes due to its close proximity with the material body which is different from it. In other words, it is this association with material entity that confirms the contingency of consciousness. More importantly, consciousness being essentially qualified by contraction and expansion is condemned to be contingent; which, consequently, entails that Advaitic notion of pure consciousness is a myth.

### **Polarity among Self, Consciousness and Object**

So far, we have examined Rāmānuja's position, it is clear that he is ardent to maintain a distinction between self and consciousness. It is surprising that Rāmānuja though is not ready to hold any ontological distinction between consciousness and object (of course, he does not admit any identity between the two) he is quite rigorous in keeping an important epistemological and metaphysical distinction between self and consciousness. Indeed, it must be noted that his adherence to the object-directed nature of consciousness to a large extent results from this mysterious distinction he maintains between self and consciousness.

In his view the nature of consciousness is such that it is associated at the same time to both the subject and the object. Since knowledge itself cannot be the proof for its own existence nor it can be known by an unconscious object; it thus needs a witness to be apprehended. The witness to which knowledge reveals itself to be known is the knowing self or *ātman*. Since, there cannot be an experience of pain

or an experience of happiness or an experience of pot without any experiencer or a subject who undergoes all experiences. It is the self who lives through all these experiences. This experience or *anubhūti* is the attribute of the self. For instance, when one states “I know this is a wild cow”, it implies that the subject “I” has knowledge of a wild cow; and not that the subject itself is the knowledge of a wild cow. Again, this knowledge of the wild cow is not similar to the object ‘cow’. Likewise, consciousness being the knowledge differs from both the self and the object. Indeed, consciousness is more like a connecting knot between the knower and the object of knowledge. Expounding this mysterious nature of consciousness, Rāmānuja states in his commentary on *Brahma-sūtra*,

“*Anubhūtitvaṁ nāma vartamānadaśāyāṁ svasattayaiva svāśrayam*

*pratiprakāśamānatvaṁ svasattayaiva svaviśayasādhanatvaṁ vā*”<sup>1</sup> Translation: the essential nature of consciousness consists in its manifesting itself at the present moment through its own being to its substrate (self), or in being instrumental in proving its own object by its own being<sup>2</sup>.

Consciousness, thus, in the philosophy of Rāmānuja, plays a dual role of being both the substance and the attribute. It is an attribute of the self though it is not indistinguishable from the self. Self is conscious and not consciousness; self has the power to manifest itself alone but cannot reveal the object. Consciousness, on the other hand, reveals itself as well as the object of it, yet it is unable to know any of them. It is the self who recognises the object and consciousness through its attribute of consciousness. It is to be noted that the distinction Rāmānuja has maintained between self and consciousness is based on his illusive understanding of self-luminosity and self-consciousness. While consciousness is regarded by him to be self-luminous it is not self-conscious; since it has only the power of manifesting itself and other. Whereas, the self is both a self-luminous substance and self-conscious subject; it is self-luminous as it is independent in manifesting itself without the aid of any other knowledge, yet the self is the substratum where consciousness inheres. It is also a subject, as it is simply not manifesting itself like knowledge rather it is the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rāmānuja, (Translated by Swami Viresswarananda and Swami Adidevananda), *Brahman-Sūtras: Śrī-Bhāṣya*, Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2012, 1. 1. 1

<sup>2</sup> Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*, (with an introduction by J.N. Mohanty), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, Vol. II., 2011, p. 637

knower who cognizes the object. To be precise, self alone, for Rāmānuja, is the cognizing being, the knowing subject who comprehends the object only when the object is revealed by its attribute of consciousness.

The relation between self and consciousness is explained best by Rāmānuja with an illustration of lamp and light. As light being an attribute of flame illuminates the lamp and the objects around it. Similarly, consciousness being an attribute of the self illuminates itself and the objects around it to the self. As light is inseparable from flame, consciousness is inseparable from self. However, the light is also qualified by rays that are subject to contraction and expansion. Just as the way knowledge is qualified by its unique attributes of contraction and expansion. In terms of its relation to the self, consciousness is an attribute of the self, whereas, in terms of its relation to the qualities, like contraction and expansion, consciousness is the substance.

The peculiarity of this relation is that it is the consciousness which is the essence of self since self is intrinsically self-conscious; yet consciousness is called to be an attribute of the self as it is always found to be present in self and depends on it<sup>1</sup>. However, consciousness is not to be considered an ordinary attribute of self like the ‘redness’ of pot, rather an essential attribute of the self as it is always akin to the self just as the way ‘brightness’ is akin to sun. Indeed, consciousness is that permanent attribute of the self that belongs to it even in the state of liberation. As Rāmānuja writes, “*Jñānasvarūpasyaiva tasya jñānāshrayatvam maṇidyumaṇipradīpādivat*”<sup>2</sup>

Translation: consciousness (knowledge) is a unique adjunct of the self and is eternally associated with it<sup>3</sup>. According to Rāmānuja, consciousness as the attribute of the self is known as *dharmabhūtajñāna*; whereas consciousness as the essence of the self is called *svarūpajñāna* or existential consciousness that is the ātman or knower. Certainly, the notion *dharmabhūtajñāna* has immense significance in the philosophy of Rāmānuja as it is this *dharmabhūtajñāna* through which the subject recognizes everything and that in reality upholds the relation between the subject and the object.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rāmānuja, (Translated by Swami Viresswarananda and Swami Adidevananda), *Brahman-Sūtras: Śrī-Bhāṣya*, Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2012, 1.1.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 61

<sup>3</sup> Sharma, C. D. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1963, p. 344

By way of conclusion, it can be argued that the notion of consciousness as *dharmabhūtajñāna* is pertinent to the understanding of intentionality thesis as found in phenomenology. Going beyond the longstanding idealistic account of knowledge that ultimately rules out any such pragmatic or epistemic interpretation of knowledge, the philosophy of Rāmānuja aims to theorize consciousness to formulate a constructive account of it. Drawing a distinction between self and consciousness, he intends to reduce the so called gulf between consciousness and object. The essence of consciousness is admitted in its association with the object that it manifests before its own manifestation and not in holding any isolation from the object. Consciousness is no longer opposed to the object since the being of the object is the precondition for the revelation of consciousness. In brief, being an advocate of substantialist theory of self, he denies any independent existence of consciousness apart from the self where does it subsist. Thus, the worth of Rāmānuja's account of consciousness as J. N. Mohanty claims is his attempt to circumvent the conflict Advaita is facing between reflexivity and intentionality. He has shown us a more appealing way to endorse the compatibility between self-luminosity and object-directed nature of consciousness. Moreover, Rāmānuja's intention to make intentionality or object-directedness prior to reflexivity shows the close resemblance of his thought with Mohanty and other phenomenologists. It would not be wrong to claim here that Rāmānuja has anticipated all the great phenomenologists including Mohanty of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The thesis of intentionality was meticulously formulated by Rāmānuja around 12<sup>th</sup> century which is today associated with the names of Brentano, Husserl and other western phenomenologists.