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Idealist Theory of Consciousness: a Fragment of Saksin Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

Much of the Indian philosophy is cognitive in the sense that it is a direct inquiry into the elevation of phenomenal consciousness (cit) to higher and higher levels of cognitive activity. This paper examines the description of Consciousness as Saksin in Advaita Philosophy. The Advaita theory of consciousness is not restricted to the analysis of epistemological crises, it also analyses metaphysical issues. Consciousness is one and homogeneous, indivisible and eternal. It is also referred to as self or atman. In Advaita, we can find a phenomenology of levels of consciousness. Consciousness is simply a witness to its own operation and divergent modes. It is eternal, non-dual and remains unchanged. Significant feature of Advaita phenomenology of consciousness is that consciousness at a certain level, simply a witness to its own operation and divergent modes. This idea or level of consciousness is witness consciousness. In the absence of such a consciousness, experience or knowledge would not be possible.

KEYWORDS Saksin, Visva, Taijasa, Prajna

Introduction

The classical Indian theories of consciousness generally involved within a stereological context in which the ultimate goal was same transcendental spiritual state. The goal is liberation for the self from the flawed condition of material world. Indian philosophy is the magnificent effort to probe the inmost being of man and nature. Much of the Indian philosophy is cognitive in the sense that it is a direct inquiry into the elevation of phenomenal consciousness (cit) to higher and higher levels of cognitive activity. This paper examines the description of Consciousness as Saksin in Advaita Philosophy. The self or consciousness is behind the functioning of all senses through the internal organ. It remains the same being untouched and unaffected by the activities of the mind and the senses. It is said to be the witnesses (Saksin) of all the activities of the cognitive instruments. In Vedantic view, there are four states of consciousness.[1] They are waking, dreaming, deep sleep and turiya. In the fourth stage, one realises that the whole world of objects in real, it is not ultimate reality. The ultimate reality, Brahman is both immanent and transcendent and the cause of all phenomena. Conscious mind is an epiphenomenon, because the individual self who is pure consciousness is not conscious.

The Advaita theory of consciousness is not restricted to the analysis of epistemological crises, it also analyses metaphysical issues.[2] Consciousness is one and homogeneous, indivisible and eternal. It is also referred to as self or atman. In every human being, there is the self or consciousness in addition to the mind, senses and the body. Everything other than consciousness is an object. Advaita begins its epistemology and metaphysics on the basis of the dichotomy between consciousness and what-is-other-than-consciousness, between self and non-self. The five external senses can function only when they get support from the mind and the mind can do its function only when it is supported by consciousness. Samkara says: Seeing is of two kinds, ordinary and real. Ordinary seeing is the function of the mind as connected with the visual sense: it is an act, and as such it has a beginning and end. But the seeing that belongs to the self is like the heat and light of fire: being the very essence of the witness (self), it has neither beginning nor end. The ordinary seeing however is related to the objects seen through the eye, and of course has a beginning. The eternal seeing of the self is metaphorically spoken of as the witness and although eternally seeing, is spoken of as sometimes seeing and sometimes not seeing. What is true of visual sense is equally true of the other senses. The self or consciousness is behind the functioning of all senses through the internal organ. It remains the same being untouched and unaffected by the activities of the mind and the senses. It is said to be the witnesses (Saksin) of all the activities of the cognitive instruments. The objects of the external world and the operations of the mind are transcendent to consciousness. They are not in consciousness, but outside it. Consciousness is not merely object-less, but also mind-less.

The Elucidation of Saksin in Advaita

In Advaita, the concept of Saksin is the single most important postulate of the principle of revelation operative in experience-cognitive and non-cognitive alike. This principle is a necessary ingredient in any epistemological process. In Advaita, we can find a phenomenology of levels of consciousness. Consciousness is simply a witness to its own operation and divergent modes. It is eternal, non-dual and remains unchanged.

It is wrong to speak of Saksin as knowable, for it is the element of awareness in all knowing, and to assume that it is knowable would be to imply another knowing element - a process that leads to the fallacy of infinite regress. But the Saksin does not therefore remain unrealised, for being self-luminous, by its very nature; it does not require to be made known at all. Its presence is necessarily equivalent to its revelation and it is therefore never missed the pure element of awareness in all knowing.

According to Samkara, the Atman or self is one, pure, self-luminous, self-established, undifferentiated, non-intentional, eternal and timeless consciousness. In his view, one is aware of atman within oneself.[3] It is real present in human experience. It is known directly and immediately. It manifests in every human being as self-awareness or self-consciousness. It is the witness consciousness of all events, physical as well as psychical. Atman is pure consciousness and it persists in empirical experience and is known as the agent and the enjoyer of activities.

We can draw five different characterisations of Saksin provided by Samkara.[4]

1. Saksin as the witness of intellect.
2. Saksin as the non-dual, propertyless Brahman.
3. Saksin as identical to atman.
4. Saksin as the witness of all three states, and
5. Saksin as the same as Isvara.

For Samkara, Saksin is a passive observer as opposed to the doer. It is both the basis of and different from the inner sense.[5] It is self-luminous like the self. It is the eternal, unchanging self that fulfils a specific role, as though the self were wearing a different hat. It is an observer and revealer of mental cognition as well as the physical objects. According to Samkara's conception, Saksin has two basic usages, one is that Saksin as simply atman and the other is that Saksin as atman limited by the inner sense. Samkara makes a distinction between two kinds of knowledge in his commentary on Kena Upanishad. They are knowledge of Brahman and knowledge gained through the mind and senses. The former is the highest knowledge, knowledge of reality or pure consciousness. It is beyond the subject-object dichotomy and is self-luminous and non-relational. The latter is modified consciousness. It is a reflection of pure consciousness through a mode of the inner sense. Thus, it is relational knowledge. In his view each and every empirical cognition is the modification of pure consciousness.[6]

Advaita uses consciousness and the ego by two different terms and there is no mixing up of these two terms. The term used for consciousness is Cit or Caitanya. Self, Atman or Cit signifies one and the same entity. The other, ego referred as internal organ (antah-karana). The internal organ is designated in four different ways as mind, intellect, ego and memory stuff depending upon the function it does. Internal organ, different from consciousness, is material. Consciousness becomes intentional only because of its presence and functioning. When it functions giving rise to doubtful cognition of an object, then it is called mind. If it produces definite knowledge of an object, then it is called intellect. When there arise the sense of 'I', it is called ego.

In Samkara's words:[7]

"That the self (i.e. the witness consciousness) is distinct from the three states (witnessed by it) and that it is one, pure, and unrelated, are proved by the fact of its existence in the three states in successions. Further, the evidence of memory in the form, 'I am that', shows its oneness (in all the three states). Sruti[8] also confirms this by the example of the great fish, etc."

Description of Consciousness in Advaita

Advaita holds that self and consciousness refer to one and the same entity. In Advaita view, all the pramanas such as perception is able to function as sources of knowledge by the support of consciousness. Samkara holds that the self is the light inside the body, which is different from the lights like sun and other luminaries. During dreams the mind projects some of the impression stored in it. When the self illuminates them, they are perceived as objects. The dream objects are modifications of the mind. As in the waking state, in dream also the self or consciousness is not the agent of any action. The objects, which appear during waking-consciousness, disappear in dream consciousness. The objects, which appear in dream-consciousness, disappear in waking consciousness. The self is really non-relational. Its intentionality is not necessary, but it is only contingent.

The central doctrine of Advaita is that Brahman-Atman is the sole reality, and the entire manifest world has only empirical reality, has originated from and finally absorbed in Brahman-Atman. So Brahman-Atman and the world are related as cause and effect. Advaita recognises three kinds of Vrttis-Mayavrtti, Antahkaranavrtti and Avidyavrtti. It holds that any kind of experience in the form of knowing or feeling requires some kind of Vrttis. The first kind of Vrtti functions is the case of Isvara and the remaining two are required for the explanations of Jiva. Isvara is a complete entity consisting of consciousness and Maya. The jiva is a complex entity consisting of consciousness and avidya. In both cases the element of consciousness is the same, eternal and self-luminous. When these Vrttis are illuminated by consciousness, we have experience of various kinds-cognitive, affective and conative. According to Advaita, the immediate knowledge of Brahman-Atman generated by Sruti text through the medium of a special kind of the Vrttis called Antahkaranavrtti. Even memory and recognition are due to the Vrtti of the internal organ, which is inspired by consciousness. The three factors- the knower, the known, and the knowledge, which are involved in mental operation, are revealed by the witness-consciousness (saksin) during self-reflection. "If the saksin were not known, then the knowledge of the triple factors cannot arise from the saksin. So, it has to be accepted that, wherever there is knowledge of the triple factor, there is knowledge of the saksin, because the saksin is self-luminous".[9]

Turiya is different from Visva, Taijasa and Prajna and it is bare consciousness. Mandukya Upanisad explains Turiya as "It is unseen, incapable of being spoken of, ungraspable, uninfereble, unthinkable, unnameable, the essence of the knowledge of the one self, that into which the world is resolved, the peaceful, and the non-dual-that is the Fourth, the self, which is to be known."[10] On the Advaita view, when the individual person is on to the state of dreamless sleep, the entire cognitive apparatus of the self, including the mind and the sense organs get dissolved in avidya. Though the self is qualified by avidya during this state, the witness consciousness has the ability to reveal its own intrinsic nature and anything super-imposed on it by the relation of identity. Witness-consciousness is the pure consciousness, which is present in the creator and the created selves. It reveals only itself, its own blissful nature and avidya. It never depends on a transformation of the mind in order to reveal an object that is super imposed upon it. It can reveal an internal state without depending upon a transformation of the mind. Vedantins hold that an individual cannot experience any pleasure or pain during the dreamless sleep state, because experience of pleasure and pain always go hand in hand with objective awareness. Consciousness, which transcends the subject-object duality, is beyond the object-oriented phenomenology. It is not an object of knowledge. Every object is known through a pramana that is perception or inference, or something else. The functioning of Pramana presupposes consciousness. Advaita views that any kind of experience requires some kind of Vrtti. That is our knowing; Vrtti Jnana comprehends feeling and willing. There are two special features in the phenomenological inquiry into consciousness. Firstly, it is an inward inquiry towards a transcendent object. Secondly it is negative; it pursues the path of denial. The three states of experience give us the picture of consciousness as conditioned by Upadhi. Turiya as bare consciousness is different from Visva, Taijasa and Prajna. Taijasa and Visva are bound by both cause and effect. But Turiya transcends the three states and free from both cause and effect.

Visva is the watching self and in this state, the self-cognizer of external objects. Only in this state, the self is consciousness of external objects. It is the first state of Brahman. Taijasa, the dreaming self is the second state. In this state the mind enjoys impressions, imprinted upon the mind during the waking experience. In this state, the self is internally conscious. The third state is Prajna is dreamless sleep state. In this state, there is a cessation of consciousness. In this state, the subject-object distinction does not exist. There is a sense of bliss because there is a temporary union between the absolute and the embodied self. In deep sleep, all mental activities are ceased and the consciousness of individuality is absent. This state is different from Turiya, the state if release. This is the underlying substitution of the three states of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep.

Conclusion

Significant feature of Advaita phenomenology of consciousness is that consciousness at a certain level, simply a witness to its own operation and divergent modes. This idea or level of consciousness is witness consciousness. In the absence of such a consciousness, experience or knowledge would not be possible. There is always a level of consciousness within each one of us where we stand apart at a certain distance and simply observe our experience without getting involved in these experiences. In the absence of this observation there could be

no cognition. Phenomenological analysis used to uncover reality or pure consciousness. They also make use of the idea of ignorance. There is a consciousness that witnesses this ignorance. When ignorance is removed, the consciousness and the object became non-different.

The Vedantic method is phenomenological because its focus is as experience instead of objects. Consciousness is the light that illumines the objects. In Advaita, the transcendental, pure consciousness is a necessary condition of all phenomena. Saksin is the witness to the object. The Saksin is the presupposition of all knowing; it illuminates all that is known and making knowledge possible.

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