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Absolute Space and the Structure of Consciousness in Advaita Vedānta Philosophy

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Abstract: The paper examines the analysis of the fundamental structure of consciousness as developed in Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta philosophy, and compares this highly influential Indian view with a predominant analysis in the Western tradition, *viz.*, the Phenomenological theory of consciousness developed by Brentano and Husserl. According to the Phenomenological account, all mental states are intentional, and hence consciousness must always be *directed toward* some object. In sharp contrast, Śāṅkara holds pure, undirected consciousness to be fundamental, while consciousness *of* a particular object is a secondary mode. In expositing the contrast between these two accounts, I draw on deep structural parallels that characterize the Newtonian versus Leibnizean theories of physical space. Śāṅkara's notion of pure consciousness is highly analogous to the classical Newtonian conception of absolute space, and this conception provides a powerful and illuminating model of the Indian view. In contrast, Husserl's notion of intentional consciousness closely parallels the Leibnizean relational account of physical space.

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most striking difference between the predominant Indian analysis of consciousness and that prevalent in the West concerns whether consciousness, as such, can exist without an object. The highly influential analysis defended by the Vedāntic philosopher Śāṅkara maintains that pure consciousness itself is not dependent on any specific content or thing towards which it is directed. Instead, consciousness is ontologically autonomous, while consciousness *of* an object is a secondary and dependent mode. In sharp contrast, the phenomenological tradition of Western philosophy maintains that all mental states, by their very nature, must be *directed towards* something, and hence *pure*, non-intentional consciousness is ruled out as theoretically impossible.

In the present paper, I explore the Indian notion of autonomous consciousness, and present it as a profound conceptual alternative to the Western phenomenological view. In expositing the contrast between these two accounts, I will draw on striking parallels that characterize another very different, yet highly analogous divergence that occurs purely within the Western theoretical tradition – that between Newton and Leibniz concerning the ultimate nature of physical space. The Newtonian conception of 'absolute' or 'substantial' space is in many ways comparable to Śāṅkara's notion of autonomous consciousness, while the Leibnizean view of 'relational' space closely parallels the

Phenomenological stand on the intentionality of consciousness. So the contrast between these two competing theories of physical space will be used to develop and illuminate the salient contrasting views on the fundamental structure of consciousness.

2. Absolute Consciousness

The first step in the discussion will be an exposition of the Indian stance on pure consciousness. I will take Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta philosophy as providing the 'canonical' expression of this view, but will also appeal to the allied notion of consciousness developed in the Sāṅkhya-Yoga tradition. The history of Indian philosophy has been dynamically shaped by the longstanding controversies within Hinduism between its six rival schools or *darśanas*, and additionally between orthodox Hinduism and the two heterodox schools of Buddhism and Jainism. On the topic of consciousness, one of the traditional issues of controversy revolved around the question of whether or not consciousness, by its essential nature, must be *of* an object. In the conventional terminology of disputation, this is the question of whether it is *saviśayaka* or *nirviśayaka*, i.e. intrinsically intentional or not. In addition the debate concerned the issue: does consciousness belong to someone – does it have a 'place', or is it 'placeless', belonging to no one? In disputational terms, is it *āśraya* or *nirāśraya*?

According to Śaṅkara, consciousness is both *nirviśayaka* and *nirāśraya*, ultimately both non-intentional and belonging to no one. This quite distinctive stand on consciousness is intimately related to his monistic metaphysical view. Put somewhat roughly, Śaṅkara holds that pure consciousness is the fundamental reality. Unconditioned awareness or *cit* is the one basic substance. And if pure consciousness is the fundamental reality, then it is not dependent upon anything else for its existence. On the contrary, everything else that seems to exist is metaphysically dependent upon consciousness. In this sense Śaṅkara's view is akin to various forms of Western idealism, though it would be misleading to attribute to him the view that reality is fundamentally *mental* in nature. For Śaṅkara, the mind itself is not to be identified with pure consciousness or *cit*, and as noted above, he maintains that consciousness is *nirāśraya*, it has no place and belongs to no one. And hence it belongs to no particular mind.

In this regard it is worth comparing Śaṅkara's notion of consciousness with a closely related view developed in the Sāṅkhya-Yoga tradition of orthodox Hinduism. Both positions share a conception of absolute consciousness, though in contrast to *Advaita* (i.e. non-dualistic) Vedānta, the Sāṅkhya-Yoga school advocates a dualistic metaphysics. According to this tradition, there are two basic substances in the metaphysical firmament, pure consciousness, or *puruṣa* (in Sāṅkhya terminology) and *prakṛti* or matter. Thus Sāṅkhya-Yoga thought advocates a basic duality between consciousness and material substance, and unlike the monistic Advaita Vedānta, it holds matter to be ontologically autonomous and distinct from *puruṣa*.

And just as Śaṅkara's consciousness monism is crucially distinct from Western idealistic views, so too is the dualistic Sāṅkhya-Yoga position conceptually removed from the classical Cartesian dualism between mind and matter. Unlike the Cartesian model that has so deeply pervaded and influenced contemporary Western thought, the Sāṅkhya-Yoga school does not advocate a schism between mind and *matter*, since it places mind on the

material side of the ontological divide. Instead, a dualism between mind and *consciousness* is embraced. So in common with Śāṅkara, and in contrast with both Berkeley's idealism and Descartes' dualism, the Sāṅkhya-Yoga view detaches consciousness from mind, and places the metaphysical emphasis on the former rather than the latter.

As with Śāṅkara's notion of pure consciousness or *cit*, according to the Sāṅkhya-Yoga view, *puruṣa* is characterized as absolute and unconditioned awareness, and it is held to be immutable and inactive, to be formless and without limiting characteristics. Movement and form are attributes of matter, and they are also attributes of thought, which is a manifestation of matter. In stark contrast, pure consciousness is intrinsically formless and unchanging. The cognitive processes that characterize the mind are governed by the unconscious and mechanical forces of the material realm, and to this extent mental phenomena are viewed in purely naturalistic terms. The unfolding of thought forms is an integral part of the evolution of *prakṛti*, and mental processes are simply the result of appropriate transformations of unconscious material substance.

It is perhaps worth noting at this point that the Sāṅkhya-Yoga view thereby avoids one of the most serious pitfalls of Cartesian dualism, since on the Indian account, mental causation does not violate any physical conservation laws. By including mind in the realm of matter, mental events are granted causal efficacy, and are thereby able to directly initiate bodily motions. And, conversely, material objects are able to have genuine *mental* effects, as required by normal accounts of, say, the flow of information involved in perceptual awareness of the environment. The representational content of sensory experiences, such as those which attend perceiving the blueness of the sky or the pungent flavor of espresso, can now be treated as straightforward consequences of the physical environment's causal impingements upon the mind. This is because, in contrast to standard Western dualism, there is no longer a causal/ontological gulf separating mind from matter.¹

But what then is the relationship between consciousness and matter, and in particular, between consciousness and *mind* – how are conscious mental events made possible? On the Sāṅkhya-Yoga model, thought processes and mental events are conscious only to the extent that they receive external 'illumination' from *puruṣa*. Pure consciousness is standardly compared to a light, which illuminates the particular material configurations or 'shapes' assumed by the mind. The term '*manas*' is often translated directly as 'mind', although it is more accurate to observe that it is the combination of both *manas* and *buddhi* which roughly corresponds to the objective or impersonal mental faculties in Western philosophical discourse, and, as will be explicated below, it is *buddhi* which is centrally involved in the occurrence of conscious experience.

Manas is viewed essentially as an organ, the special organ of cognition, just as the eyes are the special organs of sight. Indeed, *manas* is held to be intimately connected with perception, since the raw data supplied by the senses must be ordered and categorized with respect to a conceptual/linguistic scheme before various objects can be perceived *as* members of their respective categories, and as inhabiting a world characterized by the systematic and distinguishable attributes with which sense experience is normally imbued. This imposition of conceptual/linguistic structure on the field of raw sensation is one of the basal activities of *manas*, and forms the distinction between brute sensation

(*nirvikalpaka*) as opposed to differentiated perception (*savikalpaka*). In addition to its perceptual activities, *manas* is held to be responsible for the cognitive functions of analysis, deliberation and decision. It is closely allied to *buddhi*, which is somewhat roughly translated as the faculty of ‘intellect’ or ‘reason’. *Buddhi* is a subtler and more powerful faculty than *manas*, and is responsible for higher level intellectual functions, which require intuition, insight and reflection. The Indian *buddhi* is in some ways comparable to the Greek *noûs*, while *manas* is responsible for lower level discursive thought and analysis. But *buddhi* is still regarded as a manifestation of *prakṛti*, albeit the most subtle and refined form which material substance can assume.

Now, to return to the interplay of consciousness and matter, resulting in apparently conscious mental events. It is the subtle ‘thought forms’ of the *buddhi* which allow mental events to appear conscious, because the refined *buddhi* substance is held to be ‘transparent’ to the light of consciousness. Thus conscious thoughts and perceptual experiences take place when *buddhi* receives representational forms, both perceptual and conceptual, from *manas*, the ‘organ of cognition’. So *buddhi* receives cognitive structures from *manas*, and conscious ‘light’ from *puruṣa*, and in this manner specific mental structures are illuminated by an external source and thereby appear conscious.²

To fully exploit the optical analogy, the conscious representational structures involved in, say, visual perception, can be compared to transparent photographic slides. The photographic image stored in the film is composed of matter, but it is both representational and translucent. Therefore, when the film is held up to an external light source, such as the sun, the illuminated representation is analogous to the structures of perceptual experience which glow with the sentience of *puruṣa*. Only the subtle thought-forms of *buddhi* are translucent with the light of *puruṣa*, while other configurations of matter are opaque to this radiance. And this is why minds appear to be the loci of sentience in the physical world, while stones and tables cannot assume conscious guise.³

Though non-dualistic, Śāṅkara's Advaita philosophy shares many of the same ideas as the Sāṅkhya-Yoga model just described. Śāṅkara accepts a similar interaction between *manas* and *buddhi*, and likewise views the mind as a material configuration ultimately devoid of consciousness. It merely appears conscious because of the external source of illumination. The main difference is that the physical world is not held to be metaphysically independent by Śāṅkara, but rather to be ultimately an ‘illusion’ sustained by *māyā*. Yet, regardless of their disagreement about the fundamental status of matter, Sāṅkhya-Yoga dualism and Advaita monism both share a similar conception of *absolute consciousness* as an autonomous substance, essentially separable from the vicissitudes and limitations of the particular minds to which it appears to belong. For both Śāṅkara and Sāṅkhya-Yoga, pure consciousness is immutable and inactive, formless and without limiting characteristics.

Pure consciousness illuminates the material thought-forms of the *buddhi*, thereby yielding the appearance of sentient states that are directed towards particular objects and cognitive contents. But from the perspective of pure consciousness this directedness is merely an appearance. Consciousness as such is not directed towards these objects, it has no intention to illuminate the limited material structures in question, and it is completely independent of the mental phenomena upon which its light happens to fall. As explicated by Karl Potter,

... whereas ordinary awareness not only has an object but also requires it as the occasion for that specific piece of awareness or judgment, pure consciousness has no more relation to its objects than does the sun that shines on everything without being in the least affected by or dependent on things. (1981, p. 93).

Potter thus appeals to *sunlight* as a suitable model of the non-intentional nature of pure consciousness. But an even more fitting analogy is introduced in the following passage from Śaṅkara (from the verse section of his work *Upadeśasāhasrī*, chapter 10, 'On the Nature of Consciousness'), which begins with the use of light and progresses to a comparison with *space*:

Pure and changeless consciousness I am by nature, devoid of objects to illumine...
Beginningless and devoid of attributes, I have neither actions nor their results...
Though in a body, I do not get attached on account of my subtleness, like space which, though all pervading, does not get tainted.

Indeed, space provides an extremely apt analogy when trying to address the conceptual question of 'how is pure consciousness itself to be understood – what would provide an appropriate *structural model* for such a phenomenon?' And the highly abstract notion of physical space supplies a fascinating answer. To the ancient Greek classification of the world as consisting of the four ultimate components of earth, water, fire and air, the Indians added a fifth and all pervasive element: *ākāśa*, which is more or less equivalent to classical 'ether' or 'space'. As a basic metaphysical substance, pure consciousness is held to possess several essential features in common with this most subtle, and in some respects most fundamental, of the physical elements.

Consciousness, like space, is ontologically independent of the objects that may happen to fill or occupy it. Thus consciousness *of* an object is a secondary, non-fundamental mode, analogous to space that is occupied. In normal circumstances, we are mostly concerned with and cognizant of space with things in it, and this can hide the fact that space itself is not ontologically dependent on its occupants. Similarly, in normal circumstances we are mostly concerned with the field of *consciousness* only insofar as it is directed towards particular things and contents, insofar as it has an intentional object. And, according to the Indian view, this can obscure the fact that pure consciousness itself does not depend on the things that we happen to be conscious of.

Another related aspect in which consciousness is held to resemble space is that, in addition to being ontologically self-sustaining, space cannot, even in principle, be *affected* by the objects which fill it. Space itself remains detached and unalterable, even when there are things 'taking it up'. Space is totally inert – it cannot be displaced or disturbed, and it does not react in any way with its contents. This is very much in contrast to *air*, for example. Objects occupying a place in the atmosphere must *displace* the fluid that would otherwise occupy the same spatial location. And objects moving through a gaseous medium cause turbulence and friction, propagate sound waves and generate heat. The atmosphere will chemically interact with the surface of these objects, resulting in corrosion and weathering, etc.

In contrast space is absolutely detached, passive and inert. Space *cannot* be touched or altered by the things that fill it. And conversely, space cannot affect its

occupants. So it is significant that this highly abstract notion of *ākāśa* or space, rather than air, is used as the structural metaphor for consciousness. Clearly, the Indian notion of *ākāśa* is in many ways comparable to the Newtonian conception of *absolute space*, and hence on this view, consciousness itself is structurally analogous to Newton's classical conception of space as an independently real, objective and fundamentally detached manifold.

3. Newtonian versus Leibnizean Conceptions of Space

As the next stage in the discussion, I will now give a brief exposition of the notion of absolute space in physical theory, and explore some of the close structural parallels with the foregoing notion of absolute consciousness.⁴ As is well known, Newton and his followers advocated a 'substantialist' line on physical space, where space itself is postulated as a kind of substance, with an independent reality and structure. In particular, the reality and structure of space are held to be independent of the existence or non-existence of the more mundane physical objects that might occupy it. Even if there were no matter in the universe at all, there would still be space with its standard three-dimensional Euclidean metric.

On the Newtonian view, space is infinite in extension, and it persists infinitely through time. And, unlike other material substances, its persistence through time is characterized by the fact that it is totally unchanging. Regardless of bodies located in space, undergoing accelerations, and other physical events and interactions taking place in the spatial 'arena', the elusive substance itself is completely unaffected. Objects are located 'in' space, but this occupation leaves no trace and makes no difference, even while it is taking place. The relation between material objects and substantial space is often couched in terms of this 'containment' metaphor, resulting in the view that objects are 'in' space like furniture is in a room. But this simplistic container model is fairly limited, since space is not defined by encompassing boundaries as rooms are. More precisely, an ordinary extended object can be thought of as 'in' space in the sense that it is *coincident* with a relevant set of points of the substantive manifold.

In opposition to the Newtonian camp, Leibniz and his followers put forward an alternative and rather deflationary account. They deny that space, as such, has any independent reality. The only things that properly exist are material entities and physical events. All spatial assertions should be interpreted not as attributing features to space *itself*, but rather as attributing spatial *relations* between material existents. So objects 'occupy' space only to the extent that they bear the salient geometrical relations to other bodies and to subparts of themselves as extended objects. To posit an independent structure of space, over and above the spatial relations that obtain between idealized point material objects, is to indulge in unnecessary metaphysical reification. Idealized point objects can bear spatial relations to one another without there being an extraneous entity, 'absolute space' that objectifies these relationships. According to Leibniz (1716),

I hold space to be something merely relative, as time is; that is, I hold it to be an order of coexistences, as time is an order of successions. For space denotes, in terms of possibility, an order of things which exist at the same time, considered as existing together, without inquiring into their manner of existing.

Leibniz speaks of space as a family of relations considered ‘in terms of possibility’ in order to make sense of the ordinary notion of unoccupied space. This notion represents a potential problem for the relationist, since in the case of empty space, there are no objects to be related. One solution would be to deny the basic possibility of unoccupied positions, which is the source of a rather misplaced scepticism in the history of science, concerning the possibility of a genuine vacuum. Leibniz’s more subtle alternative is to endorse possible but nonactual spatial relations, where talk of empty space is interpreted in the subjunctive mode. So to make assertions about empty space in a container is to make claims about what spatial relations point material objects *would* have, if they *were* located inside the container.

In turn, it has been objected by substantialists that this introduction of subjunctive discourse is ungrounded, without appeal to an underlying *nonsubjunctive* theory of ‘real’ space. How can one invoke possible but non-actual spatial relations, unless this is based on a tacit appeal to some underlying matter of fact concerning the objective structure of space? For example, the dispositional property of being soluble can be expressed subjunctively as ‘would dissolve *if it were* immersed in water’, but this subjunctive claim is based on appeal to facts about the *actual* microstructural properties involved – it is not a ‘bottom level’ claim of the theory.

In terms of the structural symmetry between theories of consciousness and theories of space, the phenomenologist is not normally faced with a similar difficulty, since there is not a generally felt need to explain pure undirected awareness – indeed, such states would typically be denied as impossible, in much the same way that the possibility of a genuine vacuum was denied by some proponents of the relational view. And a polemical analogy also occurs with respect to the foregoing substantialist’s objection to Leibniz’s more subtle move. If it is held that subjunctive claims about unoccupied space must be grounded on an underlying theory of the objective nature of real space, then it follows that the substantialist must hold that the actual structure of space is a necessary precondition for an adequate account of space that *is* occupied. And as will be seen in a subsequent section, this closely parallels the Indian claim that absolute consciousness is a necessary precondition for normal conscious states that are directed towards particular contents or objects.

5. The Phenomenological View of Consciousness

As noted before, according to the Phenomenological account, consciousness is essentially *intentional* – conscious states are always *of* or *about* something (although this ‘something’ may well be a non-existent object, such as Pegasus or Meinong’s ‘Golden Mountain’). And this is closely analogous to the Leibnizean spatial doctrine outlined above. As in the Leibnizean notion of relational space, there is no provision for a substantive or real structure, over and above conscious states that are *directed*, i.e., that are determined by the *relation* of subject to object. Husserl’s analysis stems from his modification and development of the notion of intentionality as revived by his teacher Franz Brentano, who adopted the notion as a basic criterion for distinguishing properly

mental from purely physical phenomena. And for Brentano as well, consciousness is viewed as essentially intentional, so that the very notion of consciousness without an object is seen as self-contradictory.

Thus the Phenomenological stance on the intentionality of consciousness is in opposition to the Indian analysis on two major points. First, the latter claims that the mind and the processes by which it is directed to external objects are essentially *physical* in nature, while Brentano uses directedness as the key feature distinguishing minds from mere physical systems. Second, Śāṅkara holds that, far from being self-contradictory, consciousness without an object is indeed fundamental, while directed states of awareness comprise a secondary and dependent mode. In contrast, Husserl maintains that there is an indissoluble link between consciousness and ‘meaning’, where this meaning encompasses both the semantical directedness of Frege’s *Sinn*, which does the essential work of linguistic reference, as well as a perceptual form of directedness to account for conscious experiences of, for example, the-tree-as-perceived, i.e. as seen from a particular perspective on a particular occasion. In phenomenological terminology, it is the noema which comprises this structured mode of presentation inherent in all episodes of consciousness.

Husserl’s position is notoriously intricate and complex, and in the following discussion I will rely heavily on Aron Gurwitsch’s (1982) elucidation. Regarding Husserl’s stance on the intentionality of consciousness, Gurwitsch states that

It pertains to the essential nature of acts of consciousness to be related and correspond to noemata... *consciousness must be defined as a noetic-noematic correlation*, that is to say, a correlation between items pertaining to two heterogeneous planes: on the one hand the plane of temporal psychological events, and on the other hand that of... ideal entities that are the noemata, or meanings understood in the broader sense [his italics] (p. 65).

Indeed, according to Gurwitsch, consciousness is then to be characterized by an intrinsic duality between psychological events and the correlated ideal objects, where this duality takes the place of Descartes’ schism between thinking substance and extended substance.

Of course, the Indian theory of consciousness must also make provision for the directedness of ordinary mental states, and as will be seen below, it does this in a very literal fashion. However, the Indian view diverges from the Phenomenological analysis with respect to the fundamental status of these ordinary states. It argues that the more basic absolute consciousness is a necessary precondition for these directed states, *if* they are to appear conscious. Conversely, if these directed states are taken on their own, they remain both unconscious and purely material. But, as the following section will maintain, in spite of their extreme differences, there is still far wider scope for agreement between the two frameworks than might first be suspected.

6. The Vedāntic/Sāṅkhya-Yoga Theory of Intentional States

According to Śāṅkara, pure unconditioned awareness, as such, must be distinguished from the particular ‘states of consciousness’ associated with individual agents at specific times. Though the underlying story is quite different, these states of consciousness are

meant to capture the same basic set of phenomena as that which Gurwitsch calls ‘acts of consciousness’, *viz.*, particular instances of directed conscious experience.

In marked contrast to the contemporary Western stance, Vedāntic philosophy takes an extremely non-metaphorical approach to intentionality. The paradigmatic case is sense perception, where the mind is said to literally ‘go out’ (*prāpya-kārī*, Indich 1980, p. 71) through the sense organs into the world and ‘assume the form’ of the objects of perception and knowledge. Thus intentional directedness is founded on a veritable ‘noetic ray’ (normally described as ‘of the nature of light’, or *tejas*), which itself makes actual contact with the external objects on which the mind is focussed. When the mind thus assimilates the form of its external object, this results in an appropriate modification of *manas*, the organ of cognition. This modification of *manas*, this structural reflection or mental likeness, then becomes manifest in the *buddhi* substance and is illuminated by pure consciousness, thus resulting in a particular directed conscious state.

So a conscious state of an individual agent, directed towards a specific object, is treated as a metaphysical hybrid. The properly *intentional* aspect of this hybrid is seen as an alteration of the ‘inner instrument’, *viz.* a modification of *manas* effected by its literal contact with its respective object, which cognitive modification is then transferred to the vitreous *buddhi* substrate. And this component of the hybrid state is purely mechanical or ‘naturalistic’, a direct consequence of the causal transformations governing the physical domain. In more contemporary raiment, this could be seen as a physically implemented formal representation or form of information processing. Then this structural modification of the mental substrate, a kind of essentialist representation, is passively illuminated by pure consciousness, resulting in a ‘directed’ configuration of matter that appears to be sentient.

Hence on this account the mind is held to be in motion, and actively extends into space, rather than remaining passive in its cognitive container, merely the recipient of causal impingements from the outside world. The Vedāntic/Sāṅkhya-Yoga view does not posit an ontological gulf separating mind from matter, and thus the mind can actively ‘pervade’ objects and modify itself in response to the structures it contacts. But obviously the mechanical literalness of this traditional Indian theory of intentionality retains a serious problem – no such physical force ‘going forth’ from the mind has ever been detected. So perhaps the story can be altered slightly, to put it more in line with contemporary views of internal representations that are produced by external causal forces. On such a view, the mind is impacted by various forms of external stimuli, which give rise to internal structures that mirror various key aspects of the external world. These internal structures are instantiated as modifications of the material *manas*, which in turn represent salient aspects of the environment. This more contemporary variation of the ancient Indian picture possess a significant advantage over Cartesian dualism, because the mind is still *material* and hence can receive physical stimuli from the outside world, and undergo appropriate internal modifications, without invoking troublesome interactions between disparate substances.

As noted earlier in the paper, one of the most serious pitfalls of the Cartesian framework resides in the fact that outside impingements from the environment, such as sound waves and electromagnetic radiation, can have no real affect on *res cogitans*, and the ideas entertained by thinking substance are hence ontologically and causally detached

from their corresponding objects in *res extensa*. The Vedāntic/Sāṅkhya-Yoga framework at least overcomes this huge stumbling block for mental representations, and isolates the real problem of consciousness at a more exact and focussed level. Rather than letting the problem of consciousness infect the entire mental domain, the representations and structural transformations that characterize mental contents and processes are now part of the normal time-evolution of the physical universe. Some of these happen to be illuminated by an outside, non-physical source of consciousness, which itself does no work and does not alter the physical realm in any way. Hence the ancient Indian model seemingly endorses a version of epiphenomenal qualia, in striking similarity to contemporary positions expressed, for example, by Frank Jackson (1982).

In any case, Phenomenological views in particular, and western views in general, tend to be highly metaphorical about intentional ‘powers’. The mind is said to be ‘directed towards’ objects, it has an intentional ‘aim’, etc., but these locutions tend to lack explicit force. To be sure, on Husserl’s view, the noema serve as the vehicle by which the mind is directed. It is thus the correlation with the salient noema which gives the mind intentional access to an external realm. According to Gurwitsch, “... the perceptual noema must not be mistaken for an Idea in the Cartesian sense – that is to say, the substitute for, or representative of, a reality only mediately accessible” (p. 68). And again, “... because of the intentionality of consciousness, we are in direct contact with the world” (p. 66). Thus for Husserl, there is a strong attempt to repudiate the Cartesian heritage which preconditions so much of western philosophical thought about the mind.

According to Gurwitsch, “The temporal events called ‘acts of consciousness’ have the peculiarity of being actualizations or apprehensions of meanings, the terms ‘apprehension’ and ‘meaning’ being understood in a very general sense beyond the special case of symbolic expressions” (p. 65). It is certainly worth noting that these ‘actualizations or apprehensions of meanings’ are highly analogous to the Vedantic ‘modifications of *manas*’, where both types of structured event are meant to characterize the internal or subjective/mental reality of perceiving and understanding.

Indeed, Gurwitsch’s talk of ‘consciousness’ as a correlation between items from different planes, the psychological and the noematic, looks more like the characterization of particular, content-laden mental states, rather than a characterization of *consciousness* simpliciter. Apparently both of these correlated items, when taken separately, remain unconscious. In this manner, ‘apprehensions of meaning’ and ‘modifications of *manas*’ are reasonably compatible, except that on the Indian model there is only one plane (the material) involved. But in terms of intentional structure, and the unconscious status of the elements invoked, there is a fair degree of resemblance between the two analyses of directed mental states.

Both perspectives could still agree that particular mental states with specific content or form must, by their very nature, be intentional. To deny this would seem to be committing a kind of self contradiction. And Śāṅkara could potentially agree with the phenomenologist insofar as the Vedāntin’s pure, autonomous consciousness is not properly a *mental state*. In this regard, all conscious *mental states* are intentional for Śāṅkara as well, because pure consciousness is said to illuminate the ‘directed’ modifications of matter intrinsic to such states.

So the critical differences obviously emerge with respect to the status and role of pure consciousness. The distinctively phenomenological claim that pure, undirected consciousness *itself* is theoretically impossible seems much less compelling than the weaker assertion just delineated, *viz.*, that all conscious *mental states* must be intentional. What are the underlying grounds for this additional claim, and what is the force of the ‘impossibility’? Indeed, actuality is generally accepted as a proof of possibility, and in the final section I will examine some traditional claims regarding the experiential reality of pure consciousness.

7. Mystical Experience

While consciousness has only recently become a serious and reputable topic of discussion in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, it has been one of *the* primary themes of investigation in Indian philosophy for several thousand years. And, in sharp contrast to the Western approach of detached analysis and rational speculation, the Indian tradition in the investigation of mind and consciousness has always attempted to wed theory and practice, so that abstract conceptual accounts evolved in tandem with extremely advanced ‘internal technologies’ of meditation, consciousness manipulation and related psycho-physical disciplines. Hence it can reasonably be argued that the Indian tradition has had a much richer variety of data with which to work, and a more sustained and versatile acquaintance with the phenomenon under investigation.

So it is pertinent to note that numerous individuals, particularly in the historical past, have reported entering into states of pure, objectless awareness, especially as the result of prolonged practice of salient meditational and psycho-physical techniques. And indeed, it is these experiences that were used to motivate the philosophical account – they constituted crucial facts that needed to be accommodated by an adequate theoretical grasp of consciousness. The real nature of consciousness was *not* thought to follow from mere conceptual analysis or rational speculation. Within the conventional framework, absolute consciousness cannot be established by mere rational argument alone. Rather it is essentially a state of realization, something disclosed only through direct experience.

Although this type of experience is admittedly not a datum contained in the average personal repertoire of subjectively accessible inner states, the Indian analysis of mundane, everyday perceptual consciousness points to a vital similarity. Even in normal, unreflective perception, there is a strong non-dualism between the knower and the known. In normal consciousness we are not usually aware of ourselves, over and above and separate from the objects perceived. There is a deep immediacy in perceptual awareness which tends to collapse the apparent separation between subject and object. Indeed, Husserl would take this immediacy as indicating that the locus of consciousness is in the relation between subject and object. But the Advaitins would take it a step further and say that the relation itself actually disappears, and that this is a foreshadowing of the real experience of non-duality which is absolute, objectless awareness.

Notes:

1. This would explain only the properly *representational* aspects of experience, i.e. information about the environment that can be extracted from the field of consciousness.

It would still not cross the ‘gap’ and elucidate the uniquely *conscious* aspect of experience, since this is not deemed to be a material phenomenon.

2. But alas, the optical analogy breaks down in the end, since the electromagnetic radiation of visible light belongs to the same causal/ontological realm as the matter out of which the photographic slide is composed, and this is why the two phenomena can interact to produce a luminous image. As usual, the nature of the interaction between disparate substances constitutes the Achilles heel of dualistic theories.

3. It is interesting to note in passing that a potential version of panpsychism is thereby ruled out. Additionally, in the absence of *puruṣa* it would be theoretically possible to have a ‘philosophical zombie’ i.e. an exact *physical* replica of a human body and mind that was completely devoid of consciousness. The physical replica would nonetheless function exactly like a normal human being. For a more detailed discussion of the Sankhya-Yoga view see Schweizer (1993).

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