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The Concept of Consciousness in Shankara Vedanta: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of consciousness (Chaitanya) in Shankara Vedanta. Consciousness is the fundamental principle that makes all experience possible. Inert matter is the object of knowledge, whereas consciousness is the knower. Although philosophers differ regarding the precise nature of the self, the immediate experience expressed through the statement “I am” is beyond doubt. Shankara regards the Self as self-established and consciousness as its essential nature. According to Advaita Vedanta, Brahman alone is ultimately real, while the apparent plurality of the world, the individual self, and God belong to the empirical order and are explained through ignorance (Avidya) and limiting adjuncts (Upadhis). This paper discusses the methods of knowing reality, the nature of Brahman, the individual self, the four states of consciousness, witnessing consciousness, and Ishvara. It argues that diversity in consciousness is merely apparent. Ultimately, consciousness is one, non-dual, and identical with Brahman.

Keywords: Consciousness, Self, Shankara Vedanta, Individual Self, Brahman, Witnessing Consciousness.

1. Introduction

The existence of a conscious principle is a fact acknowledged by philosophers. Inert matter is knowable, whereas consciousness is the knower. It is through the knowing subject that the existence of consciousness becomes evident. No person can deny their own existence. Everyone, from an ordinary person to a scholar, uses expressions such as “I” and "mine." The question is: what is the entity to which the word “I” refers, and what is its true nature? Philosophers have offered different answers, but no one doubts the immediate experience expressed through the statement “I am”. Through sentences such as “I eat”, “I drink," and “I think," we continually affirm our existence.

“What am I?” is one of the fundamental questions of human reflection. A well-known story in the Chandogya Upanishad describes Indra and Virochana approaching Prajapati and asking him to explain the nature of the Self. Prajapati initially asks them to look at their reflections in water and tells them, “That is what you are.” Virochana becomes satisfied with this answer and identifies the reflected physical body as the Self, thereafter devoting himself to bodily comfort. Indra, however, remains dissatisfied. He repeatedly approaches Prajapati for further instruction and eventually discovers the truth through persistent inquiry. This story illustrates that philosophical inquiry into the self must go beyond the physical body and superficial appearances.

Every reflective human being is confronted with the question, “Who am I?” Indian philosophy investigates not only the origin of the world and its fundamental principles but also the existence and nature of the knower

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who knows the world. Conscious and non-conscious principles are both encountered in experience. The distinction between them becomes evident because consciousness experiences pleasure and pain, desires objects that provide pleasure, avoids objects that cause suffering, and makes efforts to obtain favorable things. After examining these experiences, the reflective individual turns towards the inquiry into the nature of the self. In Advaita Vedanta, two approaches are employed in the inquiry into reality: the object-centered approach and the subject-centered approach.

According to the object-centered approach, the cause of the world of effects is investigated. It seeks to know the ultimate reality (Sat) by examining the causal principle underlying the manifold world. Statements such as "All this is Brahman" (Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma) indicate this approach. Similarly, the Brahma Sutra statement "That from which the origin, sustenance, and dissolution of this universe proceed" (Janmadyasya Yatah) supports this method. The subject-centered approach begins with the knowing subject and investigates the nature of the Self. In Western philosophy, the object-centered method is evident in the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza and Bradley, whereas Descartes gives prominence to the subject-centred method. Descartes considers his philosophy to be centered on the self. Through the method of doubt, he establishes the self as an indubitable truth and makes it the starting point for establishing the existence of the world and other realities.

Advaita Vedanta employs both approaches to understand ultimate reality. Acharya Shankara regards the Self as self-established (Svatah-Siddha). No one has the experience that "I do not exist"; therefore, the true nature of the Self must be investigated. The self itself is reality. Through the subject-centered approach, truth is realized by examining the Upanishadic declarations and demonstrating that plurality is ultimately false. When the world, understood as an effect, is recognized as Mithya, Brahman, the causal reality, alone remains as ultimate truth. That Brahman is the Self. Thus, the two approaches ultimately lead to the knowledge of the same reality.

Advaita Vedanta may therefore be regarded as a philosophy centered on the Self. In embodied existence, the Self appears to experience pleasure and pain. However, from the perspective of a discerning individual, worldly pleasure is also associated with suffering. Pleasure and pain remain intermingled: pain follows pleasure, and pleasure follows pain. The scriptures describe the Self as being of the nature of supreme bliss, yet this supreme bliss is not ordinarily experienced in worldly existence. According to enlightened thinkers, ignorance is the reason for this condition. Because the self is enveloped by ignorance, it experiences worldly pleasure and pain. Advaita teachers therefore consider ignorance to be the cause of bondage. Bondage gives rise to suffering, and liberation from suffering requires freedom from bondage. To become free from bondage, ignorance, or Avidya must be removed. For the removal of ignorance, knowledge of the true nature of the Self is essential. The entire teaching of Vedanta is directed towards this knowledge.

Although the opening aphorism of the Brahma Sutra, "Now, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman" (Athato Brahma Jijnasa), speaks of inquiry into Brahman, Acharya Shankara begins his philosophical analysis with an inquiry into the nature of the Self. This is because, according to Advaita Vedanta, the Self itself is Brahman. We possess a general awareness of the Self, but we do not necessarily understand its specific nature. By knowing the true nature of the Self, we can understand the nature of Brahman. Until the identity of the Self and Brahman is realized, even a general understanding of Brahman remains incomplete. Shankara therefore begins his philosophical investigation by examining the nature of the Self. Shankara establishes the existence of the individual self as distinct from the physical body through several arguments. The existence of the self does not depend upon the existence of the body. Inference and other means of knowledge are not required to establish the self because it is self-established through immediate experience.

Everyone experiences pleasure, pain, and other mental states. No experience is possible without consciousness. If both the known object and the knower were inert, how could knowledge arise? Without the conscious principle, the entire universe would be comparable to darkness. The very relationship among the knower, the means of knowledge, and the known object points towards the existence of the Self. The self cannot be negated. It is not an incidental object whose existence must be established through another means of knowledge. Rather, it is the very foundation upon which all means of knowledge operate. It is established even before these means of knowledge begin to function. An external object may be negated, but the one who performs the negation cannot negate their own essential nature. The Self is the very nature of the one who performs the negation. Just as fire cannot negate its own heat, the Self cannot deny its own existence.

Brahman as the Fundamental Principle of Consciousness

According to Shankara Vedanta, Brahman, the conscious principle, is the fundamental cause of the entire universe. The whole creation originates from Brahman and ultimately dissolves into Brahman. Whatever manifold forms appear in the universe have Brahman as their original cause. Brahman is the source of creation, preservation, and dissolution. A distinctive order and systematic arrangement are visible throughout the universe. This order is governed by Brahman, which is consciousness and knowledge itself. Brahman is of the nature of existence (Sat), consciousness (Chit), and bliss (Ananda).

This Brahman principle is present within our bodies as the Self. In the waking state, we experience numerous phenomena shaped by Maya. The ego identifies itself with every experience and claims, “I am doing this” or “I am experiencing pleasure and pain.” However, during deep sleep, the relationship between the self, the physical body, and the external material world is interrupted. In this state, we experience a partial indication of the pure bliss associated with Brahman. Although living beings appear in different forms through Maya, the existence, consciousness, and bliss present within them point towards the ultimate reality of Brahman. Shankara Vedanta maintains the non-difference of Brahman and the individual self. Brahman conditioned by ignorance appears as the individual self. When ignorance is removed, the individual realizes its actual nature as Brahman.

According to Acharya Shankara, the fundamental principle of consciousness is one. The entire universe is pervaded by this single consciousness. The undivided, unlimited, unconditioned, and changeless conscious reality is called Brahman. Consciousness is not merely an attribute of Brahman; it is its essential nature. The central doctrine of Shankara Vedanta is the unity of Brahman as ultimate reality and the apparent or non-ultimate nature of the manifold world. Shankara accepts Brahman as the highest and attributeless truth. The following declarations express the essence of his non-dual philosophy:

- Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma: All this is indeed Brahman.
- Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya: Brahman is real; the world is Mithya.
- Jivo Brahmaiva Na Aparah: The individual self is none other than Brahman.
- Ekam Eva Advitiyam: The One without a second.

According to Shankara, Brahman is formless, changeless, without particular characteristics, attributeless, imperishable, beginningless, conscious, and blissful. It is independent, pure, and beyond sensory experience. It transcends speech and mind, cause and effect, and spatial and temporal relations. Brahman cannot be established through inference alone. The scriptures, particularly the Upanishads, are the authoritative means for understanding its nature. Its existence does not require separate proof because the existence of the Self itself points towards Brahman. The Upanishads are regarded by Advaita Vedantins as the highest authority

for understanding the nature of Brahman. Shankara explains two forms of Brahman: Para Brahman, or Nirguna Brahman, and Apara Brahman, or Saguna Brahman.

Para Brahman or Nirguna Brahman

In the Vivekachudamani, Shankaracharya describes supreme Brahman as existence, non-dual, pure, a mass of consciousness, stainless, and peaceful. It is beyond beginning and end, inactive and eternally blissful. It is free from all distinctions produced by Maya. It is eternal, blissful, beyond time and beyond the objects of the means of knowledge. It is formless, unmanifest, nameless, and imperishable. It is self-luminous and beyond the triad of knower, knowledge, and known. It is infinite, indivisible, and pure consciousness alone. It is beyond mind and speech, immeasurable and complete. It cannot be grasped or rejected as an object.

Shankara also refers to Nirguna Brahman as Sat, Paramartha Satya, Paramartha Tattva, and Bhuma. It is actionless, peaceful, and free from defects. It is unborn, immortal, and fearless. It is eternal and unchanging, one alone, always of the same nature and free from difference. It is complete in itself and unaffected by transformation. It is imperishable, invisible, unknowable, ungraspable, and beyond qualities. It is neither good nor bad, neither small nor large. Space and time cannot be applied to it. The past, present, and future do not enter into its essential nature. It is neither inside nor outside, neither cause nor effect. Free from all qualities, particularities, forms, and limiting adjuncts, it is beyond description.

Apara Brahman or Saguna Brahman

When Brahman is considered in association with limiting adjuncts, it is described as Apara Brahman. Whenever the scriptures attribute qualities, forms, or particular characteristics to Brahman, the term generally refers to Saguna Brahman.

In Shankara's philosophy, Apara Brahman is conditioned and is therefore not ultimate reality in the strictest sense. Nevertheless, its conceptual and philosophical necessity cannot be denied. Since unmanifest Para Brahman cannot, by itself, provide an accessible explanation of the manifest universe, the conception of Apara Brahman becomes necessary. It also has practical importance. Worship of Saguna Brahman assists in purifying the mind and helps the spiritual aspirant move from the perception of difference towards non-difference. Shankara accepts worship of Saguna Brahman as part of the spiritual journey, although Advaita ultimately regards Brahman as Nirguna and without distinctions.

Ishvara is the object of devotion, whereas absolute and attributeless Brahman is not an object in the same way. Shankara describes Saguna Brahman, or Ishvara, as the lord of the entire universe and the giver of the fruits of actions. Ishvara is omniscient and omnipotent and is responsible for creation, preservation, and dissolution. His knowledge is free from all limitations and obstacles. He does not require sense organs to know or a physical body to act. Knowledge is his eternal nature, just as light is the natural nature of the sun.

He creates the universe without undergoing destruction or alteration in his essential nature and is therefore described as imperishable. The heavenly and earthly worlds exist under his governance. As the inner controller, Ishvara dwells within all beings. Omniscience, eternality, all-pervasiveness, omnipotence, and the nature of the Self of all are attributed to him because he is the fundamental source of the entire universe. Shankara accepts Para Brahman alone as ultimate reality. Apara Brahman is understood through Maya, ignorance, and limiting adjuncts. Its essential reality is not different from Para Brahman.

Yet the conception of Saguna Brahman is necessary because, without it, the universe cannot be adequately explained and the practical conception of liberation cannot be developed. Thus, from the ultimate standpoint, Shankara accepts only Para Brahman, while from the empirical standpoint, he recognizes Apara

Brahman. The pure, undifferentiated, and attributeless principle is Brahman. Due to ignorance, it appears qualified and endowed with attributes. This is Ishvara, the cause of the origin, continuance, and dissolution of the universe. The individual self is described in relation to Brahman and ignorance. Its consciousness belongs to Brahman, while its individuality is due to ignorance. Ishvara is also described in relation to Brahman and Maya, but the distinction is that the individual is under the influence of ignorance, whereas ignorance is under the control of Ishvara. In liberation, knowledge destroys ignorance, and witnessing consciousness, which is identical with the Self and Brahman, shines in its eternal light.

The Individual Self (Jivatman)

Although Shankara Vedanta accepts the existence of only one non-dual Brahman, of the nature of existence, consciousness, and bliss, it also recognizes Ishvara and the individual self for explaining the empirical world of duality and the relationship between worshipper and worshipped. The aim of Vedanta is to lead the human self, through philosophical analysis, towards the realization of the one absolute Brahman. Shankara therefore does not accept any ultimate or metaphysical difference between the individual self and Brahman. The individual self is the conscious master of the body and the bearer of the vital forces. At the ultimate level, there is no difference between the individual self and Brahman, although a distinction is made at the empirical level. Shankara compares the appearance of one consciousness in different minds to the reflection of the sun in different vessels of water. In the same way, Brahman, whose nature is pure consciousness, appears as an individual self when reflected in the internal organ.

Names and forms are imagined through ignorance and are therefore Mithya from the ultimate standpoint. The individual self is not ultimately real as an independent entity but is empirically valid as a combination of Brahman and ignorance. Its consciousness belongs to Brahman, while its individuality is due to ignorance. The individual self is the knower, agent, and experiencer. It performs meritorious and sinful actions and experiences their fruits. It undergoes transmigration and is the subject of bondage and liberation. Although the Self is immortal because it is of the nature of consciousness and bliss, the individual appears to assume another body to experience the results of actions performed under the influence of desire. It is purified through meritorious actions and tainted through sinful actions, receiving results according to karma. According to Shankara, the Self is never entirely devoid of consciousness.

Vedanta describes four states of consciousness:

2. Waking State (Jagrata Avastha)

In this state, we experience the empirical world. The internal organ, operating through the external sense organs, reaches towards objects and assumes their forms. These mental modifications are called Vrittis. Through these modifications, the individual self acquires knowledge of external objects. The gross body functions in this state. The self-identified with the gross body is called Vishva and possesses knowledge of external objects such as pots and cloth. In this state, the Self is associated with the food sheath (Annamaya Kosha). According to Sureshvaracharya, not only the internal organ but also the sense organs and organs of action function through the grace of their presiding deities, while the gross body remains active. Both direct and indirect knowledge are present in the waking state because the knower, the means of knowledge, and the objects of knowledge are distinctly experienced.

3. Dream State (Svapna Avastha)

As in the waking state, objects are experienced in the dream state. However, the dream world is not merely a revival of past impressions; it is a new creation in which objects of apparent reality are experienced. Here, the internal organ functions independently, without the assistance of the external sense organs. The gross body does not function; only the subtle body operates. The individual self experiences subtle objects and is associated with the vital, mental, and intellectual sheaths (Pranamaya, Manomaya, and Vijnanamaya Koshas). In his commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Shankara explains that the dream state differs from the waking state and that the Self is self-luminous in it. In waking life, the light of the Self operates together with the senses, intellect, mind, and external illumination. In dreams, the senses and their supporting sources of light are absent, and the Self alone remains luminous.

4. Deep-Sleep State (Sushupti Avastha)

After experiencing gross objects in the waking state and impressions in dreams, the living being rests in a condition in which the activities of the gross body cease. In deep sleep, the mind does not recall its latent impressions, and the distinct division among the knower, the means of knowledge, and the known object is not manifest. The knower, the senses, and the objects of knowledge remain in an unmanifest causal condition. The individual self is associated with the bliss sheath (Anandamaya Kosha). Shankara describes this as the state of tranquillity, or Prasada. In waking life, the Self experiences affliction arising from relations with the body and senses. In dreaming, it becomes somewhat free from these relations. In deep sleep, there is complete repose. Since the natural light of the Self is not destroyed, and no distinction between seer and seen is manifest, this state is described as non-dual. The self-identified with deep sleep is called Prajna.

5. The Fourth State (Turiya Avastha)

Turiya is the fourth state of consciousness and may be described as the state of liberation. In this state, identification with every kind of body is absent. Ignorance functions neither as concealment nor as projection. In the absence of ignorance, this is the state of complete liberation and bliss. Although the three preceding states are states in which consciousness appears as individual experience, Turiya remains unaffected by them and is the foundation of all three. In his commentary on the Mandukya Upanishad, Shankara explains that Turiya is higher than the other three states. When waking, dream and deep sleep are sublated through discriminative inquiry; only Turiya remains. It is beyond the five sheaths and non-different from Brahman. This consciousness is auspicious, peaceful, and free from phenomenal multiplicity and non-dual.

Witnessing Consciousness (Sakshi)

The word "Sakshi" means "seer" or "witness." It witnesses all objects and experiences, but no separate witness can observe it as an object. It is the continuous witness of all knowledge and can never itself be known objectively. It is self-luminous and knows itself through its own consciousness. In Shankara Vedanta, witnessing consciousness is understood as that which appears between the individual self and Ishvara. On one side, it is inactive and unattached like pure consciousness; on the other, it remains associated with the individual self and continuously witnesses every act, intention, and activity. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad and its commentary describe the witness as the one, universal and non-dual luminous principle hidden in all beings. It is all-pervasive, the inner Self of all living beings, and the overseer of their diverse actions. It remains distinct from the activities it witnesses without becoming involved in them.

In the Shariraka commentary, the inner Self is described as the witness of all modifications of the internal organ. Merit and sin, bondage and liberation, belong to the individual self, not to the witness. The witness is pure consciousness associated with the limiting adjunct of the internal organ, yet it remains unaffected and is, in truth, always free. The internal organ functions as its instrument, and, with its assistance, objects of knowledge are illuminated. The witness is merely the seer; therefore, it remains detached even while illuminating experience. It belongs neither to the category of the individual self nor to that of Ishvara. Pure consciousness, inseparable from the individual, becomes the foundation of both the gross and subtle bodies and is therefore called the witness.

Ishvara: The Upanishads, which are the foundational texts of Advaita Vedanta, declare that whatever is seen in the universe is pervaded and enveloped by Ishvara. He is the controller of the past, present, and future and the lord of all. According to Shankara's Upanishadic commentaries, Ishvara gives all beings the fruits of their actions in accordance with their karma. He is the lord of the three worlds, ruler of all and the principle that governs the individual. Associated with Maya, he governs all worlds through his powers. Shankara regards Ishvara as omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator, sustainer, and dissolver of the entire universe. His knowledge is free from all limitations. He does not need sense organs to know or a physical body to act. Knowledge is his inherent and eternal nature.

His omnipotence is evident in his being the cause of all effects. He is of infallible resolve because he possesses unobstructed power over the origination, preservation, and dissolution of the universe. In creating the world, he is compared to a potter. He does not make himself the material cause in the manner of clay but creates and governs the world through the exercise of his own power. Although, from the empirical standpoint, distinctions are drawn among the witness, the individual self, Ishvara, and Brahman; in their essential nature, they are the same pure consciousness, designated as Brahman.

Shankara accepts one fundamental principle of consciousness, by which the entire universe is pervaded. This consciousness is real, unchanging, self-established, and self-explanatory. Even when the one pure reality appears in manifold forms, it remains formless. Even when it appears in limited objects, it remains infinite. Even when it seems divided into different parts, it is in truth partless. Shankara calls this undifferentiated reality Brahman. Shankara considers Brahman from two standpoints: the ultimate (Paramarthika) and the empirical (Vyavaharika). The description of Brahman from the empirical standpoint is called its incidental characteristic (Tatastha Lakshana). From this standpoint, qualities are attributed to Brahman, and it is described as the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the universe. In this form, it is Saguna, qualified, and Apara Brahman.

The description of Brahman from the ultimate standpoint is its essential characteristic (Svarupa Lakshana). From this standpoint, Brahman is formless, without qualities or modifications, immutable and changeless.

Shankara's philosophy is often summarized through three declarations:

1. Brahma Satyam: Brahman is real.
2. Jagan Mithya: The world is Mithya.
3. Jivo Brahmaiva Na Aparah: The individual self is none other than Brahman.

Between Brahman, whose nature is truth, and the individual self, whose true nature is Brahman, there appears an imagined projection and concealment in the form of superimposition (Adhyasa) and ignorance (Avidya).

Consciousness reflected in this ignorance appears as the individual self. Because consciousness conditioned by ignorance and limiting adjuncts forgets its true nature, the world of conceptual distinctions and alternatives arises and surrounds it. The individual's notions and constructions, from waking experience to the possibility of liberation, form the world in which it becomes entangled. Thus, the consciousness that appears to be lost among its own imaginings is the individual self. The individual self is a combination of Brahman and ignorance: its consciousness belongs to Brahman, while its individuality belongs to ignorance.

Although the individual self is one, it appears many because of limiting adjuncts. It is the knower, agent, and experiencer. It performs meritorious and sinful actions and experiences their results. It undergoes transmigration. Yet this individuality and condition are valid only at the empirical level. At the ultimate level, the entire world of distinctions is Mithya, and the true nature of the individual is the Self alone. At the empirical level, alongside experiencing consciousness, there is witnessing consciousness within us. This witness knows every experience of the experiencer without attachment and is aware of the individual's experiences and apparent absence of experience in waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.

Its knowledge is always free from attachment. Shankara's philosophy, therefore, recognizes four states of consciousness. This raises a natural question: how can unity be established among these four states, and how can their apparent diversity be described as Mithya? Why, despite such diversity, is the fundamental consciousness non-dual?

To address these problems, Shankara classifies all forms of existence into three levels:

1. Paramarthika: The ultimate level.
2. Vyavaharika: The empirical level.
3. Pratibhasika: The apparent level.

From the ultimate standpoint, Brahman alone is real, while the world, phenomenal multiplicity, and plurality are Mithya.

The existence of Ishvara, the individual self, and the witness belongs to the empirical level. Ultimately, all are resolved into Brahman.

Conclusion: Thus, in Shankara's philosophy, Brahman alone is the fundamental principle of consciousness. Through the limiting adjunct of Maya, it appears in many forms. The empirical world is a manifestation or appearance (Vivarta). When the concealment produced by ignorance is removed, the apparent plurality is recognized as Mithya, and the one non-dual reality is realized.

In Shankara Vedanta, therefore, diversity in consciousness is only apparent and belongs to the empirical order. Consciousness is one and cannot properly be divided.

Even when apparent differences are experienced, unity undergoes no modification. The unchanging consciousness that remains after all differences have been examined is Brahman according to Shankara.

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