

Ramesh Chandra Pradhan

Metaphysics of Consciousness

The Indian Vedantic Perspective

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ISBN 978-981-15-8063-5 ISBN 978-981-15-8064-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-8064-2>

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*Dedicated to
My Parents
And
Parents-in-Law
Who Inspire Me Always*

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla for nominating me as a National Fellow to work on the present manuscript. I am especially thankful to the Chairman, Professor Kapil Kapoor and the Director, Professor Makarand R. Paranjape for inspiring me to undertake the present work. The Institute has provided the best environment for academic work and for that I express my thanks to the Secretary, Col. (Dr.) Vijay Tiwari and the members of the staff for their help and cooperation. The library of the Institute has been greatly helpful in providing all the necessary books and other materials for research. The Librarian, Mr. Prem Chand and the library staff deserve my special thanks.

I am thankful to all Fellows at the IAS for their academic cooperation and personal friendship. I am especially thankful to Professor Sharad Deshpande, former Tagore Fellow and Professor Medha Deshpande, National Fellow for their personal encouragement and inspiration during my stay at the Institute. I am thankful to Professor D. R. Purohit, National Fellow for his friendly help and inspiration.

I am thankful to Springer for agreeing to publish this work in collaboration with the IAS, Shimla. I am especially thankful to Ms. Priya Vyas for initiating the arrangements for publication on behalf of Springer. I am very much thankful to the reviewers for their constructive suggestions and criticisms.

My wife, Jhansi, has helped me immensely by encouraging me to work on this project in spite of the personal hardship she faced during my absence from home. I owe her lifelong gratitude for this. I am thankful to my sons, Nachiketa and Sabyasachi and their families for providing me the necessary emotional and spiritual support.

Prologue

The present essay is on an exploration of the metaphysics of consciousness from a transcendental and evolutionary perspective. It intends to study consciousness from a non-naturalist and non-materialist point of view that can claim to situate consciousness within the world yet without reducing it to a natural phenomenon. Much has been said about the so-called natural origin of consciousness in the brain in the contemporary philosophy of mind. But there is much that is unsaid on the real nature of consciousness which is individual and personal from the first-person point of view and is yet cosmic and universal in nature. Consciousness as a unified field of intersubjective and cosmic phenomena is so unique that no particular science, be it psychology or neurophysiology or cognitive science in general can unravel the mystery of consciousness. There is needed a comprehensive metaphysics of consciousness that can account for its personal, as well as cosmic dimensions within one unified theory.

The contemporary theories of mind have not been successful in unfolding the true of consciousness because of their naturalist and physicalist or materialist commitments. These theories have denied to the mind and consciousness all that are intrinsic to the latter, for example, their autonomy and creativity and their propensity to evolve into higher mind and consciousness. Consciousness has been projected by and large as a static and fixed phenomenon in the naturalist theories of consciousness owing their origin to the new discoveries in the neurophysiology and other natural sciences. Though consciousness has not been altogether denied in many of these theories, yet there is a prevalent ambivalence towards its ontological legitimacy. Because of the lack of understanding of the ontological nature of consciousness, there has been a general agreement on the idea that consciousness is an accidental feature of the universe and that it can be explained only in terms of the physical laws of the universe.

This essay begins with a critical examination of the broadly materialist and naturalist theories of consciousness by showing that naturalism and materialism as metaphysical theories have failed because they have misconstrued consciousness as a mere natural phenomenon in the universe. They have been too much concerned with the natural origin of consciousness to the utter neglect of the structures of

consciousness which bear within themselves the possibilities of higher consciousness. Philosophers have been successful in telling us how best we can explain consciousness within a physicalist metaphysical and epistemological framework. But that itself has proved to be a stumbling block for going beyond the physical or bodily dimensions of consciousness. The moral and spiritual dimensions of consciousness have been set aside by this framework as a result of which we have no knowledge regarding the superstructures of consciousness which embody values and meanings of life.

The main hypothesis of this essay is that there is a higher level of mind called the Supermind which integrates not only the cognitive and the emotional mind but also advances the frontiers of the human mind by extending consciousness within an evolutionary scheme beyond the confines of the bodily and the earth-bound mind. The present human mind, in spite of its stupendous cognitive achievements in science and technology, has remained stagnant and limited in many respects which touch upon man's spiritual and creative being. The inner spiritual being of man has been left in the limbo because the human mind has been straight-jacketed into the confines of the cognitive and rational structure of consciousness. Therefore, there is a need of bringing back the evolutionary perspective into metaphysics within which consciousness can be looked at as an evolving phenomenon that can transform itself into a supramental consciousness.

The idea of the Supermind may appear to be a distant dream at present because of the limitations of the present mind, but if the mind can look at its own past development from the primitive animal mind and consciousness to the present stage it can very well anticipate its own future development in the world history. The supramental consciousness is only a few steps away from the present human consciousness. The Indian thinkers from the Vedic times have been seized with the problem of supramental consciousness in various forms because they have been concerned with the problem of going beyond the finite and limited mind. This has resulted in the most inspiring spiritual quest of mankind for the unknown and the infinite realm beyond the horizon of the mental consciousness. The most singular achievement of the Indian mind is the Vedantic notion of Brahman as the one absolute cosmic and supracosmic consciousness. The Vedantic thinkers thus established the idea of the absolute being of consciousness which is transcendent to, as well as immanent in the universe. No idea in the world of thought has been more challenging than this idea of the oneness of consciousness as the ultimate Reality.

The Western thinkers over the ages have not been lagging behind in tracking the cosmic mind and consciousness beyond the horizon of the ordinary mind. From Plato to Hegel and beyond there has been a ceaseless quest for the higher mind in literature, philosophy and religion. This quest has resulted in the creation of the most exalted poetry, spiritual songs and the inspiring philosophies of the past ages. Needless to say that the West possessed the high illumination of the Supermind in the writings of its philosophical and religious masters. Philosophers both the East and the West have for the last thousands of years been in the quest of the exalted and enlightened mind in the form of the seers and savants of the most celebrated kind.

What prompted me to undertake this present work to bring back the idea of the Supermind is the frustrating effort of the contemporary thinkers to debunk the mind and consciousness as the relic of the by-gone ages and as the remnant of a superstitious past owing its origin to the unscientific and supernaturalist predispositions of the past generations. Nothing could be more absurd and irrational than to characterize the entire past of humanity as superstitious in believing that there is a stage of higher consciousness beyond the so-called cognitive consciousness which is the hallmark of the present scientific age. The contemporary times in the world history has been dismissive of the exalted metaphysics of mind and consciousness because of its own biases and presuppositions which are not entirely supported by reason.

My effort in this essay is to prove the following theses:

1. Mind and consciousness are real and autonomous (The autonomy thesis).
2. Consciousness is intrinsic to the world (The intrinsicality thesis).
3. Consciousness is primary over matter (The primacy thesis).
4. Consciousness is in the evolutionary process as the cosmos itself is on an evolutionary path (The evolution thesis).
5. The supramental consciousness is possible beyond the horizon of the present mental consciousness (The transcendental thesis).

The metaphysics of consciousness attempted here is a comprehensive theory of consciousness that locates consciousness in the universe and outside it so as to prove that consciousness is a metaphysically primary reality. It also grounds the physical world within an evolutionary scheme of things in which it is shown that the mind and consciousness are evolving from the simplest forms to the most exalted forms as the supramental consciousness. The path of evolution so far traversed by consciousness is at the threshold of the supramental consciousness. Supramental consciousness is the next stage of the human evolution.

In pursuit of the above mentioned goal, this essay begins to understand why the contemporary scenario in the philosophy of mind and consciousness is so depressing and uninspiring. Chapters 1–4 are devoted to examining critically the main presuppositions of the contemporary metaphysics of mind such as materialism or physicalism, functionalism and computationalism and other allied doctrines. I have brought out the alternative theories to naturalism and physicalism in phenomenology which have given the hope of understanding consciousness in a non-naturalist way. In Chaps. 5 and 6, I have discussed the Vedantic metaphysics of consciousness within the Advaitic tradition so as to build up a case for a transcendental theory of consciousness. In Chaps. 7 and 8, I have discussed the theory of Supermind of the Vedantic thinker Sri Aurobindo who had made it his mission to establish the metaphysics of supramental consciousness.

In Chaps. 9 and 10, I have examined the possibility of an evolutionary metaphysics of consciousness within the transcendental perspective by showing that the evolutionary approach provides a better alternative to the existing theories of consciousness. I have argued that consciousness can evolve into the supramental

consciousness in the process of evolution. In Chap. 9, I have examined the naturalist theories of evolution and have shown their inadequacies. In Chap. 10, I have laid down the main outlines of the metaphysics of consciousness on the basis of Sri Aurobindo's theory of supramental consciousness.

My conclusions are no doubt metaphysical but they carry the insights of the past masters in the exploration of the supramental consciousness. I owe much to the great thinkers of the past and so all that I claim to have done here is to bring those insights back to work out a metaphysics of consciousness.

Shimla, India

Ramesh Chandra Pradhan

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About the Author

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Chapter 1

The Naturalist Metaphysics of Consciousness: Some Contemporary Issues



1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline the main problems which are dominating the metaphysics of consciousness in the contemporary times. The most important problem is that of making the nature of consciousness explicit and of making a case for a vivid representation of the nature of consciousness. This problem has arisen because of the attempt of many philosophers and cognitive scientists (Dennett 1991), to refuse to accept that there could be an independent reality called consciousness. There is a prevailing atmosphere of scepticism about the exact nature of consciousness not only because we have no right method to understand it, but also because it is believed that consciousness itself is not a reality on its own.

The studies of consciousness undertaken by the scientific minded philosophers have given rise to many theories which come under the purview of materialism and naturalism (Searle 1992). The metaphysics of consciousness under the influence of the sciences such as psychology, neurobiology and the cognitive sciences, in general, have accepted the picture of mind as a mechanism which acts as a machine to produce consciousness (Dennett 1991). There is a common agreement amongst the scientific minded philosophers to refuse to accept that there is a substantive reality called consciousness. The widespread belief is that mind is at best a biological organ not different from the brain which is the seat of consciousness (Churchland). This belief has undermined the very idea of consciousness as a creative force which is responsible for the development of the mental life of the human beings.

The present chapter is concerned with outlining the major theories which have negatively impacted our understanding of the mind and consciousness. The main thrust is to find out where the naturalist metaphysics of consciousness has gone wrong and to indicate how consciousness can be rediscovered.

1.2 The Age of Naturalism

The present age in the philosophy of mind is the age of naturalism because since the beginning of the twentieth century philosophy has taken a naturalist turn after the fall of idealism in the West (Husserl 1931, 1960). The Copernican Revolution initiated by Kant (), which led to the rise of idealism culminating in Hegel (), was thrown overboard by the new tide of naturalism which swept over the entire philosophical landscape of the twentieth century. This led to the rise of many variants of naturalism such as materialism, functionalism, body-mind identity theory and so on which were sceptical about the classical notion of the mind and consciousness. As in other fields, naturalism had its negative impact on the philosophy of consciousness because its agenda was to naturalize all phenomena including the mental phenomena to the extent of making it dis-encharnted (McDowell 1994).

The process of dis-enchantment entered into all areas of human concern such as ethics, religion and metaphysics resulting in what may called the naturalization of values, meanings and mind thus subverting the normative structures in human life and society. This subversion of normativity of reasons, and values brought into focus the loss of meaning of life which led to the revolt of the existentialist thinkers (Sartre 1956) against the overriding menace of scientism. Thus, there is a crisis not only in the European sciences (Husserl 1970), but also in the life of the human beings as a whole. It is no less a spiritual crisis (Husserl 1970).

Before we evaluate the negative impact of naturalism on human life in general and the human sciences in particular including philosophy, let us see how naturalism came to occupy the centre-stage in philosophy in the twentieth century. There are two main sources of naturalism in philosophy; they are: (1) the triumph of the natural sciences as the sole repository of knowledge; (2) the loss of appeal of metaphysics as a source of knowledge about the world. Both the sources appeared simultaneously to make it explicit that no place can be yielded to any form of non-naturalism as a way of thinking about mind and the world because there is nothing real beyond the boundary of Nature. Nature is supreme, and that closes the possibility of going beyond what is naturally given in our common experience.

Naturalism is a counter movement against the classical notion of transcendental metaphysics. It reverses the very process of philosophical inquiry by subjecting all concepts to their verifiability in sense experience such that nothing could be accepted which does not fall within the domain of sense-experience. Thus, there is a strong motivation for naturalism to make scientific understanding of the world the very foundation of philosophical understanding. The natural sciences because of their experimental method could succeed in explaining the world and everything in it by appealing to the natural laws which are discovered in the due process of scientific investigation. Therefore, there is now nothing in the world including man's existence which could not be scientifically explained. The impact of naturalism was thus evident not only in the physical sciences but also in the domain of the human sciences. Philosophy fell into the naturalist trap because of its over emphasis on the scientific method in the realm of philosophical thinking.

1.3 The Realm of the Mind

Philosophy of mind like any other branch of knowledge in philosophy increasingly had a naturalist turn because of the impact of naturalism from the beginning of the nineteenth century. There was a new wave of protest against Descartes (1912), and also against Hegel (1977), for their elevating mind to a universal phenomenon and then making mind and consciousness central to the map of the universe. This was found to be against the very spirit of modern science. So there was reversal in the fortune of the philosophy of mind built on the metaphysical premises of the Cartesian dualism.

The very concept of mind underwent a change in the hands of the naturalists in the sense that it was no more taken as a substance the way Descartes (1912), had proposed. Mind became dis-enchanted in the sense it was no more a metaphysical reality central to the universe but merely another natural object to be found in the world. Mind was naturalized to the extent of being a mere secondary phenomenon to be understood only in terms of its biological and physical origin. Darwin's theory of biological evolution of the species added a new dimension to the naturalist theory of mind because it could show that the mental phenomenon itself is a product of evolution through natural selection (Nagel 2012). Mind being a natural phenomenon cannot but be part of the evolutionary process according to the Darwinians. This led to the idea that the mind cannot have an extra-natural place in the universe and so must be merged into the physical processes of the universe. Mind thus got a new place alongside the natural objects like the material bodies without claiming any extraordinary power for itself. Nietzsche took up the Darwinian way of analyzing mind to dismantle the transcendental metaphysics of mind in his theory of the will-to-power (Nietzsche 1968), which ultimately led to the idea of the mind being a part of the expression of will-to-power within the natural world. The mind-body duality is rejected by Nietzsche for the reason that both body and mind have equal stake in the manifestations of the will-to-power.

What Nietzsche wanted to achieve, but could not because of his concept of will-to-power which was accorded a metaphysical place having the power to change the universe, was the complete naturalization of the mind. He still had to make room for the will to exercise its control over the material forces so that it gets its complete manifestation in the rise of the overman (Nietzsche 1968). Thus, the mental realm remained an essential part of the universe without the threat of being reduced to a physical realm. The mental capacities which were elevated to the level of universality by Hegel (1977), were retained in Nietzsche without having any dialectical power, but nonetheless, these phenomena were the source of the power to beat all the physical forces on the path of the will-to-power (Nietzsche 1968). The mind thus got a new lease of life till it was threatened by the empiricists in the twentieth century.

The transcendental metaphysics of mind and consciousness got completely replaced by the naturalist metaphysics in the twentieth century which not only robbed the mind of its metaphysical aura but also of the natural powers which it enjoyed as a part of Nature.

1.4 The Metaphysics of Materialism

Materialism as a form of naturalism has been one of the oldest theories of mind from the early materialists in Greece and India to the present day materialists all over the world. Materialism has a long history as a counter move to mentalism and idealism since the earlier times to the present day. Materialism proposes a new metaphysics of the universe which is based on the following principles: (a) the universe is physical in nature and everything in the universe is governed by the physical laws; (b) the universe is physically closed as all the natural phenomena in the universe without exception are physical in nature. Both the principles are rigidly followed by the materialists in explaining the nature of man and the universe. Therefore, in conformity with these principles, they believe that since the universe is physically closed under the physical laws (Searle 1992; Kim 1993), mind has no place in it unless the mind itself is physical in nature.

However, the materialists are divided over the question about how to treat the mind in the world, that is, how the conscious mind can be accommodated in a predominantly material world which is largely unconscious. If the universe consists of the material objects which are unconscious, then how can there be conscious beings like the humans and other sub-human creatures? The question of the presence of the conscious beings in a material world poses the greatest challenge to the materialists (Chalmers 1996). It is because consciousness itself is not a material or physical phenomenon. It is a unique phenomenon because it has a very different nature from that of the material bodies. Descartes had realized the difference between the conscious mind and the material body in his encounter with the inner world of consciousness (Descartes 1912). Though his contemporaries did not appreciate his discovery of consciousness on a metaphysical footing, he went on to say that the conscious world of the mind has a metaphysical status of its own, even if we have to accept causal interaction between the mental world and the world of the physical objects (Descartes 1912).

Descartes's mind-matter dualism remained unchallenged for centuries but ultimately it came under attack from the natural scientists because the latter could not accept the fact that there is a metaphysical reality called consciousness which is located in a mind that is free from the operation of the physical laws. The whole Cartesian two-world metaphysics was questioned (Ryle 1949), not only because there are no two distinct worlds like the mental world and the physical world but also because there are no two sets of laws such as those for the mental world and those for the material world. Modern science failed to appreciate that there is a metaphysical order that transcends the physical order. This led to the wholesale rejection of the Cartesian metaphysics for a new metaphysics of matter which can be in conformity with the scientific discoveries about the material world.

The triumph of materialism in the twentieth century is due largely to the success of modern science. But the philosophical difficulties faced by the materialists made them realize that their metaphysics is not only incomplete but also unjustifiable because there are non-material phenomena like mind, consciousness, intentionality,

desires and thoughts which are left out of the scheme of explanation materialism offers. This divided the materialists on the scheme of explanations into the class of the hard materialists and that of the liberal materialists (Chalmers 1996).

1.4.1 Hard Materialism

Hard materialism is also known as reductive materialism (Chalmers 1996), which has been very much part of the contemporary discourse on the nature of mind. It is so-called because it believes that all mental phenomena can be reduced to the physical phenomena in the brain. Here reduction means that if M is a mental phenomenon then it can be reduced to, or proved to be identical with, a physical phenomenon P. M and P are identical according to this view (Place 2002; Smart 2002). Though the mind-body identity theory can take many forms (Chalmers 1996), it always tends to reduce the mental phenomenon to the physical phenomenon because ontologically they are the same, though they are conceptually different. The reductive theory does suggest that there is no ontological difference between mind and body.

Reductive materialism is an ontological theory as it assumes that there is one and only one reality and that is matter, so that any other phenomenon which seems to differ from the material phenomenon must be identical with the latter. Thus, reductionism has been a way of denying the mind-body dualism inherited from Descartes. Reductionism as an ontological thesis has been defended by the materialists because that suits their metaphysics. But the fact of the matter is that it has failed to take into account many other ontological features of consciousness such as intentionality and subjectivity which cannot be reduced to any physical phenomena (Searle 1992). Therefore, reductive materialism has never been a complete doctrine because of its inability to explain consciousness.

Another form of hard materialism which has been offered by Churchland (1984, 1986), is known as eliminative materialism. According to this theory, mind is not reduced to the brain but is eliminated altogether because there is nothing called mind as such in the material world. Mind is a superfluous entity having no place for it in the universe. For the eliminativists, there is not only no mind-body dualism, but also there is no question of identity at all because there is one and only reality called matter. In the case of the human beings, all that is real is the physical body, so the so-called conscious phenomena can be taken as superfluous entities which are at best myths created by us. This radical form of materialism is acceptable to some because they think that within the scientific discourse there can be no place for the folk psychology which introduces the psychological entities like beliefs and desires (Stich 1983). The elimination of folk psychology makes eliminative materialism acceptable to the behaviourists and physicalists alike as they all assume that beliefs and desires are a metaphysical hindrance to the scientific study of the mind.

1.4.2 *Liberal Materialism*

Another form of materialism which is being offered by many (Chalmers 1996) is known as non-reductive or liberal materialism. This form of materialism does not offer reductive materialism as a solution to the mind–body problem. According to this view, mind and body are not identical the way reductivists have proposed. However, it is asserted by the non-reductivists that though mind is not reducible to the body or the brain, yet the mind is dependent on the body because it is the brain which causes the mental phenomena. The mental phenomena are real in the sense that they have their own properties such as subjectivity, though they are ultimately caused by the brain (Searle 1992, 2004). This form of materialism does not reduce the mental states to the states of the brain, but keeps the domain of the mental irreducibly different from the domain of the brains states (Searle 1992).

There are two ways in which liberal materialism can stake its claims regarding the irreducibility of the consciousness and other mental phenomena. First, it takes the mind as an emergent entity from the brain states in which case, the mind gets new emergent properties which are not available at the level of the brain states. Emergentism has had a long past (Alexander) because its solution of the mind–body problem remained widely accepted (Ganeri 2012). What is remarkable about this theory is that it gives due importance to the mind, even though it accepts the material base of the mind. However, it does not explain how the new properties are acquired by the mind, when they cannot be derived from the brain itself. The emergence of mind remains a mystery.

The other form of liberal materialism is the supervenience theory (Kim 1993; Chalmers 1996, 2010; Horgan 2002) which suggests that the mental phenomena are dependent on the brain states. Supervenience is a form of dependence of the mental on the physical and not vice versa. There can be no change in the mental realm unless there is a corresponding change in the physical realm.. This form of dependence of the mind on the body does suggest that the mental and the physical are so connected that we cannot have the mental states unless there is a supporting ground for them in the brain. The mental realm which is supervenient on the physical domain is real and so cannot be dismissed as superfluous. Supervenience is not reduction but a form of dependence. So the mind does retain its causality (Chalmers 1996; Kim 1993) even while it is dependent on the body or the brain.

Supervenience is different from epiphenomenalism (Chalmers 1996; Kim 1993) because it retains mental causation, while the latter denies it. For the epiphenomenalism the mind is inert and bereft of causal power so that the mental phenomena become superfluous in the world. This form of materialism is very close to the reductive materialism without being so because it at least accepts the quasi-reality of the mind though it is only an epiphenomenon. There is no attempt to reduce the mental to the physical in this theory (Ganeri 2012).