

**ON THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS: INTENTIONALITY
AND REFLEXIVITY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
VEDĀNTA AND PHENOMENOLOGY**

ABSTRACT

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Statement of the Problem

The dilemma that has been pointed out by M.K. Bhadra in his article, *On Mohanty's Conception of Intentionality*, regarding Mohanty's attempt to derive reflexivity of consciousness from intentionality, is one of the most provocative issues that may compel anyone to indulge into consciousness studies. The necessity to carry out the present inquiry has emerged significantly from the same source. Over the times, both Husserlian phenomenology and Advaita Vedānta, have ventured exceedingly to work out the nature and fundamental features of consciousness. However, the debate among them became vibrant due to the intervention of contemporary scholars, noticeably the renowned phenomenologist J.N. Mohanty who in the true sense has made the problem to reinforce. The age-old questions that continue to poke the Indian scholars especially the Advaitins and the phenomenologists of different times can be stated as – 'What is the nature of consciousness?' 'Is consciousness by nature intentional or self-luminous (reflexive)?' Precisely, the purpose of this study is to evaluate these two well-known theories, namely, 'the theory of reflexivity or *sva-prakāśa* of consciousness' as specifically advocated by Śāṅkara and 'the theory of intentionality' as propounded by Husserl in a new light. In addition, the study aims to examine whether the derivation of reflexivity is logical to detain intentionality. Does intentionality occur prior to make consciousness self-aware? In other words, does reflexivity presuppose previous act of intentionality? Lastly, the present study aims to clarify whether the nature of consciousness permits any real reconciliation between these two theories or not.

The history of debate between these two theories does not only involve these two traditions but is an overriding concern of the philosophers engaged in consciousness studies. As a result, several attempts have been made to map the problem from different perspectives. A phenomenologist,

particularly J. N. Mohanty, lines up with the compatibility view to circumvent the problem. But this sort of measure is unlikely to be approved by an Advaitin who is committed to the thesis of reflexivity. Hence, the questions come: do we need to adhere to the compatibility view to settle down the issue? Does the nature of reflexivity or intentionality really leave a room for such uniformity? However, any such measure as has been taken up by Mohanty following other phenomenologists seems to overrule the view of their counterpart and thus, the intricacy of the problem has remained unaddressed in its entirety. It is this complexity of the problem that necessitates a complete reappraisal of the theories of reflexivity and intentionality in the context of Advaita and Husserlian phenomenology.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the intentional and reflexive nature of consciousness.
- To evaluate the theories of intentionality and the reflexivity from classical and contemporary perspectives. (Indian and Continental)
- To study thoroughly the objections against these theories and to measure the available solutions.

Methodology

Present work is a conceptual analysis in the fields of Vedānta and Husserlian phenomenology. Besides this research work involves two important methodologies of east and west. Following the Nyāya method of philosophical inquiry, the study establishes its *siddhānta* (conclusion) by a thorough investigation and refutation of the *pūrvapakṣa* or *dr̥ṣṭanta*. Further, by an application of the phenomenological method the study describes the nature of consciousness as given in experience.

Organization of Chapters

The study has been classified into the following chapters.

Chapter- I Introduction

Chapter-II Nature of Consciousness in Vedānta: Classical and Contemporary

Chapter-III Reflexivity of Consciousness in the Philosophy of Śaṅkara and His Followers

Chapter-IV Contemporary Perspectives on Intentionality of Consciousness

Chapter- V Critique of Intentionality and Reflexivity of Consciousness

Chapter-VI Conclusion

An Overview of the Study

Chapter II: Nature of Consciousness in Vedānta: Classical and Contemporary

The beginning chapter immediately after introduction titled *Nature of Consciousness in Vedānta: Classical and Contemporary* is two-fold. The first half of the chapter has commenced by taking into consideration the standpoints of two classical Vedāntic thinkers, particularly, Rāmānuja and Madhva, who reflect passionately on the core questions of reflexivity and intentionality of consciousness. Rāmānuja does not only mark out consciousness with object directedness rather his realistic conviction impels him to challenge the unique nature of consciousness as he has reduced its being to the level of objectivity. Even though, both of them are firm in their position to maintain reflexivity as an essential aspect of consciousness, yet there is an explicit attempt in their part to objectify consciousness along with other phenomenal entity, which on the one hand proves the conceptual gap with Advaitic understanding, on the other

hand, opens a scope for reconciliation between reflexivity and intentionality. Precisely, to them, the revelation of consciousness is destined in its correlation with object and not in its autonomy. According to their views, the absurdity that Advaitins are facing is that either they have to abide by the immediacy of consciousness which invalidates the non-cognizable essence of consciousness or they have to adhere with non-cognizable nature of consciousness which fades away the possibility of its immediacy. Moreover, being an advocate of substantialist notion of self, Rāmānuja denies any independent existence of consciousness by characterizing it a mere quality of the self that provides its access to the world. Going a step further than phenomenologists, Rāmānuja rather attributed consciousness with double intentionality that correlates it at the same time both with the self and the object. Thus, by objectifying consciousness they ignore the foundational role of consciousness.

In contrast, the second half of the chapter highlights K.C. Bhattacharyya's attempt to establish the autonomous being of consciousness. By a careful phenomenological study of different modes of subjective expressions, it has been shown that it is the essence of consciousness to be free at each level of its relatedness to the objects. It is this freedom that constitutes the essence of subjectivity and not its relatedness, which indeed disappears in course of its self-realization. Bhattacharyya methodologically establishes that consciousness is not only free from the corresponding object and the perceived body rather there are successive stages of dissociation that certifies its absolute freedom. In doing so he indeed, has pointed the possibility of conscious subject to transcend its relational nature which confirms the real essence of reflexivity.

In brief, while the first half of the chapter is framed to enhance the position of phenomenologists by a critique of pure, non-cognizable and eternal notion of consciousness; the second half of the chapter is an attempt to reinforce the notion of self-luminosity as upheld by Advaitins by

pointing towards the possibility of transcendental, autonomous and non-intentional nature of consciousness.

Chapter III: Reflexivity of Consciousness in the Philosophy of Śaṅkara and His Followers

The third chapter provides a theoretical framework to establish the notion of self-luminosity or reflexivity by overthrowing the ordinary narrow sense of the term. The essence of reflexivity being embedded in its non-cognizability does not allow any scope to objectify consciousness. Since, the transcendental nature of consciousness excludes any internal or external dichotomy that cognitive process includes. The nature of consciousness therefore, needs to be realised by transcending the so-called subject-object distinction, which is the basic constituent of empirical cognition. According to Advaitins, reflexivity is an immediate realization of consciousness, which is analogous to the being of consciousness. Reflexivity, to be precise, is a case of *kevala-vyatireki anumāṇa* that only consciousness is reflexive and immediately known and thus, there is no other instance of the same. Hence, ‘luminosity’ is not the cognition of a previous act. Since, consciousness is assumed to be something that does not remain unmanifest, yet is revealed in the most direct manner, although it is not revealed through any sensory representation¹. Reflexivity, says Citsukha, in his famous treatise *Tattvapradīpikā*, is ‘the capacity of being called immediately known in empirical usage while not being an object of cognition.’² Again, explaining the non-objectivity of consciousness, T.R.V. Murti writes

“...any usage of words would mean objectifying the thing. The Vedāntist, however, makes a distinction. He accepts *svayamprakāśa* in a symbolic way, but it is not confronted as an object. That which is not known as an object is still something that can be referred to in significant discourse and can be said to be validly known.”³

Establishing the distinction between transcendental and phenomenal experiences, Advaitins thus finally argue that irrespective of the conditional nature of empirical consciousness one must presuppose a foundational conscious experience behind all cognitive states that transcends the limitations of subject and object. It is an all-pervading existence and thus the character of agency that confines empirical experience in intentional relation cannot be ascribed to it. In other words, understanding of the notion of reflexivity in Advaita demands an end of the epistemic trinity or else it would lead us towards an infinite regress.

Chapter IV: Contemporary Perspectives on Intentionality of Consciousness

The fourth chapter named *Contemporary Perspectives on Intentionality of Consciousness* focuses exclusively on the theory of intentionality as has been developed in the Continental philosophy. There is widespread agreement among phenomenologists regarding the intentional nature of consciousness. Intentionality is not simply one property that consciousness carries like continuity, subjectivity etc.; it is in fact, the very essence of consciousness in the sense that consciousness can never reveal itself without being intentional. It is the ‘meaning-giving’ and ‘world-constituting’ mechanism of consciousness as the world itself along with all objects including both real and unreal derives its meaning from intentionality of consciousness. In other words, consciousness does not simply receive the empirical data through bare mechanism but also conceptualizes them by granting sense and meaning to them. Consciousness therefore, is not something like contentless torchlight illuminating all that comes in front of it as assumed by Advaita rather possesses a content that directs it towards the intentional object. Thus, hold the phenomenologists, consciousness is always conscious of something as something.

The chapter here highlights the transition of the notion of intentionality in the hands of phenomenologists which has proved conducive to ascertain Advaitic view of intentional mental states. Since, to the subsequent phenomenologists, particularly for Merleau-Ponty and Mohanty, intentionality is not just exclusive to consciousness rather it is more essential to the body-subject. However, here the peculiarity is phenomenologists' attempt to reconcile these two aspects of consciousness; as for Mohanty, every act of consciousness is both directed towards the object as well as aware of its own awareness, which is not another act or second order intentionality as have been considered by many. Moreover, Mohanty along with Advaitins defines reflexivity as an immediate self-awareness of consciousness 'without being an object of any cognition'⁴.

However, the study latter points out that Mohanty was not strict to his initial remark about reduction as like Rāmānuja, Mohanty too has made reflexivity contingent on the object-directedness of consciousness. Consciousness is defined to be reflexive or self-luminous only when it is intentional or directed towards the object. In fact, the higher the degree of intentionality is, the more it is claimed to be reflexive. Though, it does not imply that all states of intentionality are equally reflexive or self-luminous since there are unconscious states which are intentional, yet not reflexive.

However, Mohanty at this point has left us unanswered how intentionality which is no longer essential to consciousness rather more crucial to the body-subject can be a condition for the being of reflexivity that is solely private to consciousness.

Chapter V: Critique of Intentionality and Reflexivity of Consciousness

The fifth chapter titled, *Critique of Intentionality and Reflexivity of Consciousness* is the final and crucial edifice of the study from which the conclusion follows. Fostering a rigorous critique

of these two theories the chapter aims to penetrate more deeply into the standpoints of antagonists. It begins with a critique of the notion of ‘intentionality’ from an Advaitic perspective by means of thorough phenomenological investigation into the three states of experience in empirical level following a denial of the non-difference between seeing and seen. In short, the chapter thoroughly explores the possibility of refuting intentionality from the domain of consciousness by an examination of waking, dream and deep sleep states. Phenomenological inquiry shows that unlike the prior two states, deep sleep is characterized by the non-existence of subject or knower but not by the non-existence of consciousness. In other words, sleep may be described as a state of ego-abstention where the knowing subject is refrained from any act of doing and knowing though it is not a suspension of consciousness. The study determines that self-revelation of consciousness is neither a result of the activity of the knowing subject nor it is because of the influence of the object on consciousness since the trinity of epistemic knowledge does not prevail in deep sleep rather it gets absorbed in positive ignorance and what remains thereby is one isolated consciousness revealing the dimness alone. Thus, consciousness in third state, says K. C. Bhattacharyya, ‘is the light flashing in circumambient gloom, revealing nothing but the gloom⁵.

Though the phenomenological study of Husserl seems bound within waking state yet a recent study by a reputed scholar Nicolas de Warren in the field of Husserlian phenomenology seeks to enhance this application. Nicolas in his long essay *The Inner Night: Towards a Phenomenology of (Dreamless) Sleep* argues insistently to extend phenomenological inquiry even up to dreamless sleep along with waking state. Nicolas firmly upholds that Husserl’s phenomenology of time-consciousness would be incomplete without an adequate consideration of “sleep-consciousness” i.e. dreamless sleep. Moreover, in the course of his discussion Nicolas has noted Husserl’s own

attempt to deal with the state of dreamless sleep specifically in his manuscript D-14 which Husserl could not formulate explicitly. And thus, he asked for conducting a phenomenological study of sleep state in the widening context to comprehend Husserl's notion of time-consciousness. Needless to say, any study of sleep experience whether conducted by an Advaitin or a phenomenologist does not comply with the intentional thesis proposed by the latter. Rather, it confirms to the presence of one non-intentional, undifferentiated conscious experience devoid of any act and object.

The paradox is that both Advaita and Husserl argue for the being of the transcendental consciousness that is self-constituting and conferring sense to object, yet for Husserl this transcendental consciousness constitutes itself by means of constituting and revealing its own object, whereas for Advaita consciousness being transcendental cannot be delimited by anything that gets revealed through consciousness. It looks while Husserl's transcendental subject becomes relative and conditional in the course of being transcendental, Advaitic transcendental consciousness is transcendental throughout. To put in different way, the binary between the knowing subject and the object where Husserlian consciousness is enslaved even in its transcendental phase fails to lock the pure consciousness of Advaita. However, the study also ensures that Śāṅkara does not absolutely repudiate intentionality rather limits it only to the waking and dream states and thus there is a sense of admitting partial compatibility between reflexivity and intentionality. However, it must be argued that in the strict sense reflexivity does not leave any room for intentionality though not vice versa.

The chapter also has countered the charges leveled by Rāmānuja against the Advaitic theory of reflexivity. It is to be noted that the bifurcation Rāmānuja has made between two substances and then has attributed one into other indicates total failure of his position. If attributive-

consciousness even after being a substance is in a need of another substance to inhere then the second must require a third one and that third needs a fourth and thus involves an infinite regress. If to avoid this, Rāmānuja confirms that even if the attributive-consciousness inheres in another substance but the latter does not, it logically approves Advaitic claim about the being of consciousness without any locus or *nirāśraya*, which in other way pervades all. Moreover, the reason Rāmānuja stated to disprove the existence of consciousness in sleep state instead of ascertaining that proves the non-existence of attributive-consciousness or intentionality of conscious state.

Chapter VI: Concluding Remarks

The core objectives of the present thesis were to explore the nature of consciousness and the correlation if any between intentionality and reflexivity from the frameworks of Vedānta, particularly Advaita and Western phenomenology. It is observed that the questions on the nature of consciousness came into view at different times and each occasion both the traditions have revealed something more than what is usually realized.

As long as Husserl and his followers continue to concede self-awareness as an immediate, internal and autonomous being of consciousness it is reasonable for Advaitin to handhold their position. However, phenomenologists do not just stop by characterizing consciousness as intentional rather they are radical to derive reflexivity from intentionality. It has been noticed that in case of later phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Mohanty, intentionality is not just exclusive to consciousness rather it is the body-subject which is intentional. Now, the reason to derive reflexivity from intentionality as held by Mohanty is the all-encompassing nature of the latter. Intentionality is not just fundamental to consciousness, there are other unconscious mental

states which are too intentional. It has a wide periphery of which consciousness is a fragment. It is certain thereby that even if all reflexive or transparent states are intentional, there are intentional states (unconscious mental states as held by Mohanty) which are not transparent⁶.

But, this being the position of Mohanty and other phenomenologists, it is logically objectionable. The difficulty is that intentionality being admitted as the essence of consciousness cannot be characterized to anything apart from consciousness. Just as the way, 'extension' being the essence of matter cannot belong to anything immaterial; or 'humanity' being the essence of human being cannot be possessed by animal. Similarly, if intentionality is the very essence of consciousness, it cannot be owned by any unconscious state. More importantly, as phenomenologists admit the existence of mental states which are intentional though not conscious, it is obvious that intentionality could not be called essential to consciousness. Rather, it sounds better to state that though all mental states are essentially intentional, yet consciousness is not.

Again, if there are unconscious states which are intentional but not reflexive, it does not just denote that intentionality has wider extension than the latter rather it endorses that reflexivity is more fundamental and akin to consciousness than intentionality. Since, we cannot ascribe self-luminosity to anything without consciousness; which affirms as well that only consciousness is reflexive and thus it is analogous to say that to be reflexive is to be conscious. Though it is not proper to state that to be intentional is to be conscious. This is indeed what Advaita seeks to establish. Intentionality is intrinsically associated with the psycho-physical body due to its unique formulation and distinct from consciousness *as such*. Though, in case of ordinary experience or any cognitive process we confront a conscious state that is allied with mental faculty and thus seen to be 'object-directed'. However, the disparity is accounted for by the fact

that Advaita strictly acknowledges the distinction between cognitive state and consciousness by designating one as opposed to other and not as substratum of other. This is a distinctiveness of Indian philosophy, particularly of Advaita, that is not appreciated by the Western thinkers.

It is also far from clear that why the act of intentionality is considered to be prior than reflexivity. If revelation of consciousness is due to its object-directedness, it is equivalent to say that consciousness in itself is always unconscious but appears to be conscious in terms of its association with object. In brief, any attempt of denying or suppressing self-luminosity would imply that consciousness is intrinsically unconscious; which is quite illicit to argue. The nature of consciousness is self-luminous in the sense that it reveals itself unlike an object but it reveals objects too. This is a peculiarity that only consciousness owns. That cannot be categorized as 'an act of directing to the object' where conscious act posits an object. Since consciousness simply manifests its objects. The initial blunder phenomenologists have committed is to confuse this object-directed character of cognitive act with the object-revelation which leads them to place intentionality over self-luminosity. In brief, what one needs to understand is that consciousness is reflexive intrinsically while it turns to be intentional by virtue of being associated with mental states.

Now, finally I would like to argue by defending Advaitic position that there is incompatibility between reflexivity and intentionality not only in the *pāramārthika* level but also in the *vyāvahārika* level where pure consciousness is unrealized. Since, it is quite unconvincing to hold that absolute is absolute in terms of its relation to other. It does not mean that the absolute should be something isolated and silent spectator, yet the absolute cannot be called an absolute in the absence of its autonomous and independent existence. Rather, it would be a mere ephemeral

presence. Likewise, if the absolute consciousness of phenomenologists is absolute in terms of its relation to other, it is better to regard it relative-absolute, which is definitely a contradiction.

Each act of cognition by virtue of being directed towards the object presupposes the one that is foundational and objectless experience that correlates all fleeting states yet transcends them all. This is what constitutes the absolute essence of consciousness, since the foundational consciousness must be a non-intentional or content-less experience that is not immersed in the object but self-contained. Because, if the absolute continues to relate itself to the fleeting states directing to the object it would fail to hold its absoluteness. To put it differently, consciousness is absolute not by correlating to the fleeting experiences but by constituting and pervading them. It is the unity that merges all diverse acts of cognition, yet its own essence is without any split. And, thus goes beyond any sort of compatibility and incomparability. Since, to admit either of them is to permit further duality which the nature of absolute does not approve. In brief, the difficulty is that once we accept reflexivity as fundamental nature of consciousness then there is a logical illegitimacy to correlate consciousness with intentional cognitive states. It rules out the very possibility of object-directedness of consciousness and consequently, the question of reconciling the two does not arise at all. In fact, it is known that Advaitic notion of transcendental consciousness excludes ego-centric notion of Husserlian consciousness, it is impractical therefore, to expect for any compatibility between intentionality and reflexivity.

It follows that the primary task of Husserl is not simply to describe the essence of subjectivity rather he also seeks to explore the correlation between the subject and the object that has been ignored by his predecessors. As, phenomenology, for him, is ‘correlational research’⁷, that is, to explore the correlation between consciousness and objectivity. Though, in the later period his focus has turned in revealing the transcendental essence of subjectivity, yet it was his

apprehension about Cartesian solipsism that never allowed him to excel the intentional nature of the conscious subjective. As a result, even if the transcendental subject of Husserl is considered as the absolute ground of all constitution, it still reveals its own being in terms of its association with the object, with which it is intentionally correlated. Also writes Mohanty, 'It is only an intentional world-constituting consciousness which, by constituting a world, also constitutes itself as an item in that world.'⁸ It follows that to phenomenologists, the essence of transcendental consciousness is not contained in its absolute existence rather in its co-presence with the world. To be explicit, Husserl though claims for transcendental subjectivity he strives to unfold the 'thinking I', 'the cognizer', the knower who is engaged in a constant interaction with the objective world. Indeed, he aims to situate the ego that is bound in the plurality of thoughts through intentional acts. Whereas, instead of pursuing the notion of I-consciousness, Śāṅkara aims to unfold the one that is free, self-evident and absolute; that is both immanent and transcendental reality of the world. That is even after being associated with objective world transcends the limitation of epistemic trinity. It is neither the subject nor the object but permeates and surpasses the presence of both.

In brief, one needs to consider the dissimilarities between these two traditions while expecting for any comparative assessment. It is found that while Husserlian analysis seems quite extensive and more appealing than Advaita in respect of providing an elaborate account of intentional consciousness, the latter is unparalleled even in contemporary era in explicating the nature of reflexive consciousness.

At the end, I must acknowledge that the problem of consciousness is one universal problem and one of the most perplexing issues where we cannot simply think of reaching any concrete end. Therefore, there is no such conclusive understanding either through Husserl's account of

consciousness or Sartre's account of consciousness or Advaitic account of consciousness. What they indeed tried is to give a pathway to reach the problem and to proceed towards a comprehensive understanding without falling into any trap. We rather take the path for granted without pursuing it further to the end. The merit does not lie in sticking to a particular approach, rather in the openness to admit the limitations and to appreciate the one which goes even further. In brief, a comprehensive and evenhanded assessment of the nature of consciousness should not restrict us only to the empirical intentional consciousness that perception ordinarily reveals to us, rather must enable us in apprehending the one which is unyielding and shaping the ground of the empirical consciousness all through and which the ordinary perception fails to endorse. Hence, the popular western way of thinking and perceiving the nature of consciousness in terms of intentional act and through objectifying consciousness is neither the only philosophical way nor the ultimate way in solving the problem of consciousness.

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