

This paper was published in *Philosophy East and West*, July 2001. It lays down the framework for the project described in the abstract. During my presentation, I will suggest the ways in which I hope to sharpen the direction of my research towards not only (i) the programme given below, which is to engage with contemporary physicalism, but also (ii) to engage with ethical and popular assumptions about the self as they clash with physicalism.

### Saving the self?

#### Classical Hindu Theories of consciousness and contemporary physicalism

This is a highly programmatic paper. It aims to provide some suggestions on how classical Indian philosophical material may contribute to current discussions in consciousness studies, but does not attempt to provide either a textual exploration of that material or a detailed taxonomy of issues in consciousness studies. It is premised on the claim that at this early stages of such work, merely suggesting systematically as to where the Indian material provides scope for contribution is itself a worthwhile task.

The situation is this: classical Indian theories of consciousness generally evolved within a soteriological context in which the ultimate goal was some transcendental spiritual state. Contemporary consciousness studies, apart from where it is approached from the specifically religious concerns of Christianity (and increasingly, Buddhism), is generally oriented to scientific goals that allow no place for transcendental concerns. Of course, it is time the religious dimensions of consciousness are approached from Hindu perspectives as well, to join those of other traditions. But this paper is concerned with the interpretive possibilities of Hindu-derived systems within the non-religious, physicalist paradigm of consciousness studies.

A note on a terminological inexactitude: I have stayed with the conventional but misleading term 'Hindu', when initially describing the systems or schools. I take it for granted that the reader will keep in mind the problems associated with that word, and the difficulty of reading it back into the history of Indian philosophy. It would be more accurate to call them 'brahmanical', to distinguish them from Buddhist and Jaina systems, since socio-religious circumstances stopped all but brahmin men from having access to the intellectual culture of the philosophical tradition. (It is no accident that Indian Mahāyāna schools, deeply engaged as they were in debates with the brahmanical systems, tended to be represented by brahmin converts.) 'Hindu' looks to be a simpler and more readable term for those not primarily concerned with the facts of Indian religio-philosophical history, while 'brahmanical' is more accurate. I will use both.

## Physicalism and classical Indian material: a challenge

I will take physicalism in the ontological sense, as the thesis that all occurrences and entities are constituted by the (literal, i.e., inorganic) material of physics. It can be added that the majority of physicalists also hold the epistemological thesis that all occurrences and entities are constituted by the logical material of physics, i.e., can be described and explained by physics. However, some ontological physicalists or materialists reject such reductive (or even eliminative) strategies, and so I shall not take this second conception as part of the basic framework within which I assume the Indian material should work.

Now, as ontological physicalism is generally accepted as true in (non-religious) consciousness studies, it is assumed that whatever consciousness is, it is made up of physical elements and their interactions. (This assumption is common to even many of those who hold that some features of consciousness cannot be (re-)described in the terminology of physics.) It would seem *prima facie* that that leaves no space for classical Hindu concerns about consciousness, in terms of its logico-metaphysical relationship with the self (*ātman*) that is the focus of soteriological endeavour. The goal of the classical philosophy is the attainment of liberation for that self from the flawed conditions of a material existence. The focus of that philosophy is, in other words, something that precisely is not a physical entity, that precisely seeks liberation from the physical (howsoever subtle and sophisticated the accounts of such liberation).

Classical Indian philosophy (and that includes the Buddhist systems that, even though they deny a metaphysical self, nonetheless have the soteriological goal of liberation) then, has concerns that are simply incompatible with the framework of physicalist consciousness studies. On the other hand, it is undeniable, for those who know anything about the classical Indian texts, that there is much in these texts on issues of selfhood, consciousness, self-consciousness, mind, mental activity, etc. that appear germane to contemporary concerns. What sorts of responses may be given to this situation?

### Three responses

1. The robust dismissal: the soteriological centrality of the *ātman* cannot be given up; the eternal aims of religion cannot be changed by physicalism. This claim should not be confused with the prejudiced orientalism that rejects the possibility of engagement through the contention that there is nothing in the classical material. It is a largely hypothetical position that holds that the Indian philosophical material is so intrinsically connected to soteriological aims that if, in consequence it turns out to be incompatible with physicalist-based consciousness studies, then so be it.

2. The interpretative compromise: if the soteriological commitments are incompatible with physicalism, then they could be bracketed, and the actual philosophical discussion of self and consciousness should be studied for what they contribute to physicalism-conditioned contemporary discussions on those topics. This is reasonable, because it allows for historically sensitive study of classical thought to be integrated with more deliberately ahistorical philosophical analysis. The further merit of this strategy, as will become evident in the following pages, is that it reflects the very way in which the philosophical theories of self and consciousness tend to function in the Indian systems.

In general, much Indian philosophical discussion in any case proceeds freely in relatively autonomous spaces, engaging in analysis of language, world, knowledge, logic and the like, once the soteriological motive has been specified. Even in texts directly connected with soteriological issues, the analytic method is evident and therefore retrievable for the interpretative strategy.

3. The re-interpretative solution: the soteriological commitments should be dropped and the available ideas modified to become compatible with physicalism. While few explicitly espouse this strategy, it has in effect been adopted by a range of contemporary writers in Indian and inter-traditional philosophy. The fundamental methodological justification for it is comparativist. The historical development of modern philosophy in the West does not show the hermeneutic rupture that Indian thought suffers. The Western conceptualisations of philosophical activity are unquestioning in their cultural framing; Western philosophy is 'just' philosophy. In that sense, however much it is descended from historically and even textually specific sources, its creative energy can be seen as purely contemporary. Indian philosophy, in contrast, is seen by many Western philosophers and Indologists as lying on the far side of a historical divide. There is no continuity, no evolution into present circumstance that allows the past to recede from the foreground of intellectual concerns. To do Indian philosophy is not to do 'just' philosophy; it must be answerable to historical and textual specificities. This attitude lacks intellectual virtue. It closes, because of contingent historical circumstances, all avenues to a contemporary philosophy that can have its own cultural framing. (And I am not even beginning to think of the possibility of global philosophy...) The re-interpretative strategy is a strong response to this attitude. It seeks to actualise a contemporary Indian philosophy by choosing to de-historicise the textual specifics. What can be done to Aristotle can be done to Śaṅkara, in terms of the freedom one has to create discourse relevant to the present, however different the aetiologies of creative discourse are in the two cases.

Despite that polemical digression, I hope to remain neutral between the second and third strategies, when recommending features of certain Indian schools of thought that might be relevant to contemporary physicalism-conditioned consciousness studies.

### Outline

I will look at three schools: (Bhāḍḍa) Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya in one section, and Advaita in another. Specifically, I will look at what they say about the relationship between the focus of soteriology, the *ātman* or self, and consciousness (*caitanyaśamjñālbuddhi*, although that last can also mean ‘intellect’, as a specific mental instrument of ratiocination).

Consciousness is generally characterised in Indian philosophy as the occurrence of cognition (*jñāna*), which is a registering by the subject of what it is undergoing; it is a ‘continuous stream of cognition’ (*dhārāvāhikajñānam*). The standard metaphor for consciousness is ‘luminosity’ (*prakāśata*). I will also comment on the concept of the mind (*manas*) in Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya.

After presenting each type of theory, I will suggest the areas in consciousness studies to which each could contribute. In keeping with the programmatic nature of this paper, I will not attempt to say anything about the content of such possible contribution, for each area deserves attention on its own.

It may be possible for others to look at other schools, but I am both keeping to my areas of interest/expertise and assuming that these schools offer the most potential for contemporary discussion.

### The objective self and the body: (Bhāḍḍa) Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya

For both Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya, consciousness is a quality of the self. The self is the unified substrate of consciousness, that which provides the continuity of existence available in experience with regard to this life and available in testimony with regard to the cycle of lives. Both are committed to the metaphysical thesis of a unified self, and arguments in defence of it tend to rely on two interconnected types of argument. One concerns mental and moral continuities, the most important being memory and consequential agency respectively. The other concerns the requirements for a satisfactory account of the features of cognition, mostly to do with coordination of the modes of perception, and the demonstrative nature of the subject’s self-location and the experience of stable external objects. They are interconnected because they rely on the notion of embodied consciousness. This is important because arguments for the soteriologically important self proceed through consideration of the role and manifestations of consciousness, and the

purpose of this paper is to look at how their views on consciousness may contribute to contemporary consciousness studies.

It would seem from this brief introduction that these two schools ought to suffer precisely from an inability to contribute to physicalist discussions of consciousness, because their views on consciousness relate to that steadfastly non-physicalist entity, the self (a.k.a. the Western 'soul'). But that is not so. My case for their potential to contribute (through responses 2. or 3. in the last section) has two elements: first, what they both say about the conditions for consciousness; and second, surprisingly, their beliefs about the ultimate soteriological state of liberation as follows from their views on the relationship between self and consciousness.

The key idea about the conditions of consciousness comes down to this: consciousness requires embodiment. Common to the brahmanical (and Jaina) schools (and most Buddhist ones) is the thought that embodiment is a psychophysical complex, including both the gross body and its apparatus, sensory and mental. Crucially, the 'mind' (*manas*) is understood as part of the body complex. All the schools talk of an 'internal organ' (*antafkara\_a*), which is required to explain the undergoing of such states as pleasure, satisfaction, frustration and the like. These two schools hold this internal organ to be a sixth, perceptual mode, taking its functioning to have the same physical processes as the familiar perceptual ones. It would seem that most of what is understood as the mind in Western thought coincides with 'manas'; but not all. To the extent that a stable internal entity that functions as the mode of awareness is 'the mind', it is so in Indian – just as it is in Western – philosophy. Where, clearly, the 'manas' is not the 'mind' of Western, philosophy, is in the non-physicalist sense, the mind that Descartes thought outlived the body, the mind of mind-body dualism, where it is by definition something independent in its essence from (although contingently found in) the body.

Crucially, the *manas* operates solely as and through bodily process. It is sensory just in that it is defined by embodiment (*śarīrāvachchinnasyaiva tasyendriyatvam*)<sup>1</sup>; the unconditioned mind cannot be a sense-organ (*manaso 'nupahitasya nendriyatvam*)<sup>2</sup> according to Mīmāṃsā; and Nyāya holds much the same thing.<sup>3</sup> All explanation of this mind is of the same order as explanation of perceptual – i.e., bodily – states. To that extent, it is not too difficult to present the views of these schools on the *manas* within the context of physicalist discourse. Analyses of its functions are compatible with contemporary discussions about modalities of perception and other cognitive processes that are premised on the physicality of awareness-structuring faculties and processes.

The delicate distinction, however, is the one between the cognitive apparatus, including the mind so defined, and consciousness. The mind may be like the perceptual mechanisms, but it is an instrument of consciousness, which latter is the actual undergoing

of processes by, and the illumination of what is happening in and to, the subject. Consciousness is the general phenomenon given content by the functioning of mind and senses. The question is whether the distinction between the psychophysical apparatus (the body) and consciousness creates anything like the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, thereby making the Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya views incompatible with physicalist discourse on consciousness.

The answer is that it does not, for consciousness itself is clearly stated as requiring embodiment. There is simply no functioning of consciousness without body. This tying of consciousness to the body is significant in the potential it provides to these schools in contributing to physicalist discourse on consciousness, as I will argue shortly. But before that, it should be acknowledged that this point is often obscured by the strategies that they adopt when making the metaphysical case for the existence of a unified self. The characteristic defence of a unified self usually involves appeal to the perception (*pratyakṣa*) or, more generally, the very notion (*vikalpa*) of the self, in the form of the 'I' (*aham*).<sup>4</sup> Since the self is avowedly spiritual and non-physicalist, the appeal to features of consciousness in the proofs of its existence would seem to make Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya views of consciousness incompatible with physicalist-conditioned discourse.

One must go beyond this impression. In an unexpected way, the very link that these schools make between consciousness and the non-physical self, while allowing them to use appeal to the former in order to help establish the existence of the latter, also allows talk of the non-physical self (with its ultimate soteriological goal) to be bracketed or dropped. The link is one of qualification: consciousness is a quality possessed by the self, one of operational activity (*kriyātva*); and it is quite distinct from the self as such.<sup>5</sup> And that quality is manifested – functions – only when the self is embodied. So, where proofs for the existence of the self take recourse in the material of experience (and most proofs do), they do, of course, appeal to the features of consciousness, for experience is embodied consciousness, and there is no other form of consciousness. This means that, although consciousness is evoked in support of a non-physical entity, it is itself held available only in a physicalist context, namely, embodiment. The features of its occurrence are strictly within the constraints of physicality.

Does that not lead to an insuperable contradiction – between physicalistically-conditioned consciousness and the avowedly non-physical self? What is the self, independent of embodiment? Surely this question is important, because, presumably, the self is the concern of soteriology, and soteriology is a matter of freedom from the conditions of embodiment. If consciousness is available only in embodiment and the self is to be freed from embodiment, what happens to the consciousness of the self? The answer is available in their theories of liberation: the self is without consciousness in liberation. (This is to

ignore the dramatically inconsistent later Mīmāṃsā writers like Nārāyaṇa, who take liberation to be a joyful state. I will also ignore the possibility that some sort of cognitivity is implied in some Nyāya characterisations of liberation.) Ultimately, the self is not consciousness.

This is very disorienting from most Western points of view, especially of generally Cartesian Christian philosophy of religion. When the ‘soul’ of soteriology and the ‘mind’ of philosophy are run together as non-physical and trans-thanatic, there seems to be some access to an understanding of the substantive nature of the former. (Of course, there can always be purely formal qualities, like eternality and the like, attributed to the self or the soul by any system.) But there is no hold on the self-in-itself of Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya, for the phenomenal access to it, as that which is conscious, is denied in liberation. All that we thought we knew of ourselves is asserted to be non-intrinsic to us, if we are intrinsically – and ultimately – the selves of liberation. This is not incoherent, but my concern here in any case is not to explore the religious implications of this disjuncture between ordinary and liberated existence. Instead, I want to point out how this view allows the student of these two schools to come into contemporary physicalist-conditioned debates.

The self is undeniably a non-physical(ist) entity, and arguments using consciousness with the aim of establishing the self and its ultimate state cannot be squared with physicalist consciousness studies. But the belief is that consciousness is a quality of the self not found in liberation. This is to be conjoined with the argument that consciousness itself is available, because functioning, only in embodiment. So all that is and can be said about consciousness is confined to the constraining physical(ist) demands of the body.

In sum, the rigorous Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya requirement that consciousness be understood in terms of the broadly physicalist bodily apparatus (including the purely instrumental mind) – evident in the eventual de-linking of consciousness from the ultimate soteriological state of the self – allows their views on and arguments about consciousness to contribute to contemporary physicalist-conditioned studies. All actual talk of consciousness is confined to talk of its functioning through the body, and that is consonant with the minimal assumptions of physicalism. This is not to say that either of these schools would necessarily accept anything like modern eliminativism, in which nothing but physical entities are accepted and talked about, or even reductionism, in which mental phenomena are analysed down to physical ones. Acceptance of such doctrines would indeed require a strongly re-interpretative response, in which all soteriological commitments were dropped. The schools can best be seen as holding some sort of non-reductive physicalism. But the resolution of the issue of the constitution of mind and consciousness is not the only aim of consciousness studies. Much that concerns processes, conditions for occurrence, types of functions, etc., can be studied without addressing the issue of what all this is made up of.

And it is in these areas that there can be potential for contributions from Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya.

There are other aspects of the theories of consciousness of these schools that, while saying nothing in themselves about physicalism, also contribute to some contemporary issues in consciousness studies. One of these is the analysis of the nature of the access that a subject has to consciousness that makes it different from, say, access to the functioning of the heart. This accessibility to the content of consciousness is expressed, as I have mentioned, in the metaphor of luminosity by the Indian philosophers.<sup>6</sup>

Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya both hold that there is a difference between the actual creation of cognitive content and a subject's grasp of it, although they differ on the nature of the relationship between the two. According to both of them, consciousness is not auto-reflexive: the very occurrence of a state of consciousness does not by itself make it phenomenally accessible to the subject of that state. A cognition given content by some object is not, just by its occurrence – i.e., not intrinsically to that content – a cognition that the subject who has it is able to take itself as having. In other words, another and higher-order state must function on contentful states in order for the latter to be something a subject can ascribe to itself. (The difference between the two schools concerns how contentful states become available to the subject, so that that subject can be said to know that it is having/has had that state. Mīmāṃsā holds this higher-order ascription to be a correlative and necessary accompaniment to the initial state. Nyāya takes it to be a contingent operator that permits 'blank' states of consciousness, i.e., contentful states that are not phenomenally available to the subject.)

For both these schools, the embodied self is the object of its own embodied consciousness. The self is accessible to itself, having both agency (*kartṛtva* – having the nature of doer) and objecthood (*karmatva* – having the nature of the done) of consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The intentionality or object-directedness of such consciousness is manifested in the 'I'-form, that is to say, in the use of the first-person as an operation on the bearer of accessible states of consciousness. The self is experienced in the form of 'I know' (*aham jānāmi*),<sup>8</sup> according to Nyāya. The Bhāṣya Mīmāṃsakas too argue that the cognising subject is the object of the 'I'-form (*aham pratyaya*), since the one who apprehends, apprehends his own self as the 'I'.<sup>9</sup>

This identification of the self as the object picked out by the consciousness of the first-person form offers many interesting philosophical possibilities, but I mention it more to contrast it with the rather more surprising Advaitic denial of this identification, which we shall examine later.

The basic thrust of my presentation of Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā should be clear: their views and arguments on consciousness can be brought to bear on contemporary, physicalist-oriented consciousness studies, because their very soteriology and metaphysics allow the bracketing or excision of non-physicalist concerns. Some of the areas in which they might contribute are suggested below.

To start with, the assertion that there is some object of study – the conscious, embodied self – is itself a useful methodological point. This will be evident in the contrast with Advaita. The majority of those undertaking the study of consciousness take it to be accessible to systematic study. The philosophical issue is whether this is defensible, and Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā think it is. Their arguments in favour of the objectivity of the conscious self – its being a proper focus of knowledge – can contribute to the large and primary issue of what consciousness studies should be able to do.

In more specific areas of study, their arguments for the role of the bodily complex in providing self-identity are worth studying. Here again, the soteriological motive, at first a block on re-interpretative study, turns out not to be so. There is no denying that the classical philosophers hold the identification of the self with the bodily complex to be a grievous spiritual error. They assume that the natural (*naisargika*) notion of the self – as the embodied individual – is wrong (*atattva*).<sup>10</sup> However, precisely because of this conviction, they focus sharply on the reasons for that natural notion, in effect providing justification for why and how the ordinary identity manifested in self-consciousness has its foundation in the bodily complex. Since they take their eventual task to consist in clarifying the erroneous nature of this natural notion, they take it that it behoves them to be absolutely clear about the content of that notion. This provides good material for philosophising on the role of the bodily complex in ordinary self-consciousness, if we leave out the metaphysical commitment to the non-physical self. Of course, they also then provide arguments for why this natural notion does not capture the right concept of the self; but whether one accepts those arguments or not will depend on the weight one attaches to the traditional Indian sources of epistemic authority.

### The subjective self and the phenomenology of consciousness

An alternative approach to consciousness is found in Advaita Vedānta. The cosmogony suggested by its soteriology is radically opposed to everything that physicalism stands for. The irreducible reality is some ground condition only approximately describable (because ineffably transcendental) as a universal consciousness. The self is a continuum only contingently individuated by psychophysical conditions, and its ultimate state is its de-individuation into that universal ground. The self, then, does not have consciousness as a

quality; it simply *is* consciousness under certain conditions: ‘there is no further conscious seer apart from the seeing’ (*dr̥ṣḍivyatirikto ’nyāścetano dr̥ṣḍā*).<sup>11</sup>

Advaita maintains that the ‘luminosity’ of consciousness – its accessibility to itself – is intrinsic to it; Advaita therefore holds the thesis that consciousness is auto-reflexive. The accessibility that the subject of consciousness has to its contents is not through the function of some other, higher-order state, but constitutively part of those contents. If there is no element of phenomenological transparency internal to a process, that process is not a conscious one. Apart from arguing through best explanations for the subjectivity of experience, Advaita also offers criticism of the extrinsic, higher-order schema of Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya.

According to Advaita, it is not the specificity of each physically determined locus in which consciousness occurs that is striking but the generality of its (consciousness’s) nature as reflexive (even if in individuated loci). Stripping away the specificity of loci, consciousness is a type of occurrence that is characterised by auto-reflexivity.

The self is the consciousness auto-reflexively available within (apparently) pre-determined parameters, according to Advaitins. The primitive presence of consciousness is also the primitive presence of the self in Advaita. This undeniable self is not some substantial entity of which there can be knowledge; its undeniability consists strictly in the inescapability of the occurrence of consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

To the analytic identity of self and consciousness, Advaita also adds the thesis that the self is never an object of consciousness.<sup>13</sup> Of course, particular states of consciousness can perfectly well become objects of other states, as too their contents. But the self is simply always the fact of consciousness, and no matter how focussed the point of consciousness, what is objectified is a particular contentful state, never the conscious entity itself, namely, the self. So, in the most rigorous and abstract way, there is no self-knowledge in Advaita, if by that is meant knowledge of a self; what is possible is only knowledge of the states of consciousness of which the self is a subject.

The Advaitins have a three-fold classification of the self, and it depends on three construals of consciousness. The self is individuated and has its own parameters of reflexive occurrence, given by the body and its apparatus; it is then called the *jīva*. The self is also auto-reflexivity as a type of occurrence; it is then called *ātman*. Then there is general consciousness, which is typically reflexive and the singular, irreducible, universal entity; it is then called *brahman*. A proper articulation of the Advaitic position must go from highly individuated – personal and subjective – states of awareness to general features across subjects to the universal consciousness.

The distinction between the self as consciousness in itself and the self as the ordinary subject of cognitive states is repeatedly emphasised by Advaita.<sup>14</sup> The former is

pure auto-reflexivity, precisely in the sense that it is not specific to any particular state or set of states, whereas consciousness is encountered in its objectual states only in specific psychophysical loci. But that is not to say that there are two different consciousnesses: particular states of consciousness are what consciousness is when it is specified; they are, we might say, tropes of general consciousness. The individual being is simply (neutral, typical) consciousness individuated by physical conditions and manifested only in specific mental states.

It is this identification between the different modes of consciousness that allows the Advaitin to insist that there is continuity between awareness in the *ātman*-mode and awareness as we normally have it, i.e., in the *jīva*-mode. Consciousness as typical auto-reflexivity is not incompatible with the life of the conscious individual. But the soteriological aim is to secure the ultimacy of consciousness free of these contingencies, and that is consciousness as the decidedly transcendental universal being of *brahman*.

On the Advaitic picture, not only what I take myself to be is not ultimately the case, but the consciousness that takes itself to be me is ultimately universal. I, however, am not universal consciousness, for I am merely me. The Advaitin holds that it is this sense of individuated self that is picked out by the 'I'-form (*ahamkāra*) of consciousness. The transcendental sense of self is consciousness itself, rather than the ascription that consciousness makes. In this unliberated life, there is (no phenomenological difference on the whole, i.e., apart from in liberating realisation), for all states of consciousness are expressions of egoity ('I'-ness). General consciousness and individuated consciousness are like fire and wood, burner and burnt.<sup>15</sup> There is no way in which it can be said that there is consciousness here (using the demonstrative to indicate the occurrence of consciousness in the present psychophysical complex) without my being conscious. But that is compatible with maintaining that there is a conceptual – because metaphysical – difference between them. Therefore, although that is a phenomenologically inaccessible difference, Advaita distinguishes between consciousness itself and consciousness of being so,

Consciousness of being conscious involves identification of that which is conscious, or at any rate, involves an attempt to define a being which is conscious. The conclusion is that I am this conscious entity. This putative being to whom consciousness is ascribed by consciousness itself is, thinks the Advaitin, not the same as consciousness as such. This latter understanding of consciousness is not of it as the object of experience but that which must exist if ordinary (i.e., object-involving and individuated) experience is to be possible. This consciousness is not any specific individuated and object-directed state or set of states of awareness. However, that does not vitiate the claim that every occurrence of consciousness in experience is specific to locus and object.

Advaita, it must be noted, does equivocate between the physically embodied individual having access only to the specific mental states (i.e., access only to *jīva* consciousness) and being able to attain de-individuated consciousness (in what is considered liberating realisation). This uncertain phenomenology attempts to realise the conceptual distinction between the different construals of consciousness given above.

This general understanding of consciousness is straightforwardly incompatible with physicalism. So, if it is to contribute to contemporary consciousness studies (other than as a challenge to physicalism) it must bring methodological strategies to bear on issues about the very study of consciousness. To the possibility of such contributions I now turn.

Advaita recognises that there is a *prima facie* contradiction between its claim to a universal, ultimate and singular consciousness and the sheer individuality and variety of conscious experience and its objects. The task then becomes two-fold: to provide an account of consciousness that yields something universal to all the variety, and to say how variety is possible if there is only one ultimate consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

While the second is of great interest to the cosmogonic defence of Advaita, the first is of immediate value to consciousness studies; for, given the actual experience of being individual, the first stage in the philosophical de-individuation of the self and (self-)consciousness is to provide for possible non-individual features of consciousness. (This is what post-Kantian philosophers have called the abstraction of consciousness, although in the Advaitic context it is also a generalisation of consciousness.) Advaitic accounts of the general/abstract features of consciousness can contribute to contemporary discussions of the logical requirements for the constitution of consciousness, for all that the original motivation is so very different. The exploration of the manifestations of consciousness, especially the requirements for what count as conscious phenomena, is important to Advaita because that allows it to re-interpret the manifestations as deriving from one source. But that extra step need not be taken, or can be deferred in (re-)interpretative strategies. What is common to Advaita and consciousness studies is the attempt to come to terms with the commonality of the phenomenological undergoings that come under ‘consciousness’.

Ironically, this attempt to provide a theory of consciousness in itself may be of special use to physicalist-based models that want to allow for artificial consciousness free of the organic requirements of body and bodily awareness. One of the intra-physicalist debates concerns the possibility of reduction or even elimination, of any process, event or entity that cannot be explained purely in the language of physics. A type of physicalism can well maintain that, while there are no mental or spiritual entities, there are processes – like consciousness

– that are emergent on physical forces and cannot be explanatorily and terminologically reduced to the language of physics. In other words, while consciousness may lie in the domain of science, it may be only in the domain of the biological (or perhaps chemical) sciences. This is physicalism broadly construed. Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya views of the embodiedness of consciousness will probably most easily lend themselves to this sort of non-reductive physicalism, and implicitly stand against the reduction of consciousness to processes free of organic requirements.

In that case, oddly enough, Advaitic arguments, while being put to uses diametrically opposed to Advaita, can contribute to the strongly reductive/eliminative project of creating artificial consciousness. By insisting on a way of analysing consciousness as a process that is not intrinsically constrained by body, Advaita provides philosophical grist to the non-biological physicalist. (Of course, there is nothing that Advaita can provide for the actual scientific project of constructing artificial consciousness.)

Less speculatively, the Advaitic analysis of the use of the ‘I’ can be of great interest in challenging the general assumption that equates self with ‘I’-ness. Advaita de-links the ‘I’-form from consciousness, even from self-consciousness, and suggests that it is a contingent feature of embodiment. The problems associated with the equation of ‘I’-ness with self-consciousness could receive novel treatment through use of the Advaitic material.

The fundamental problem with equating the sense of ‘I’ with the self of all consciousness – as opposed to any particular (set of) state(s) – is that the ‘luminosity’ or ‘transparency’ of consciousness, its accessibility to itself, seems to require ascription to a bearer by that bearer. That, in turn, calls for reflexive identification through available and pre-existing mental phenomena at the very least, and an account of the nature of this availability and pre-existence. The study of consciousness then leads directly into metaphysics, for even if it is denied that there is some agglomerated entity whose existence explains the availability and pre-existence of identity-forming mental phenomena, that very denial is a matter of metaphysics. In brief, if the reflexivity of consciousness – which is a minimal requirement for anything to be called consciousness – is expressed as egocentric ascription through an ‘I’, there is no getting away from metaphysics for any physicalism. Indeed, it ties down consciousness studies to the first task of settling the metaphysics for the minimal requirement for reflexivity. This obviously also poses a problem for any physicalist project of artificial consciousness.

Advaita, of course, takes consciousness to be the self; but as we have seen, this use of ‘self’ is nothing like standard (even philosophical) usage would have it. What Advaita calls the self is not the physically isolated occurrent of other systems but the sheer fact of auto-reflexivity, whose identity lies, paradoxically, in the non-individuated universality of a singular yet general entity, *brahman*. Again, strangely, this yields a mode of analysis

congenial to physicalist consciousness studies. For this radical reading of the 'self' leads Advaita to deny that the individuated isolate of consciousness, signified grammatically and picked out phenomenologically by the 'I', is the irreducible bearer of consciousness. While acknowledging that particular states are indeed formally accompanied by ascription to and by an 'I', Advaita does not take the actual occurrence and nature of consciousness to be a matter of individuated selfhood. It does not interpret (auto-)reflexivity as egocentric ascription. Indeed, it argues that such ascription is entirely contingent on extrinsic factors. So, available and pre-existing phenomena that allow ascription are reduced away from the content of consciousness. The 'I' is not the constitutive bearer of consciousness; consciousness can be analysed without building in a requirement for an individuated first person.

To repeat, this is done with a vastly counter-intuitive soteriology in view, but (re-)interpretative strategies can concentrate on the freedom from commitment to a metaphysical 'I' that Advaita allows in the study of how consciousness occurs and functions. By relativising the use of the first person to contingent features, Advaita suggests philosophical grounds for thinking that a physicalist project can proceed in which consciousness does not have a pre-requisite sense of individuated, self-identifying selfhood. Of course, this does not guarantee that a model of consciousness can be constructed and realised in which reflexivity is secured without a sense of individuated selfhood. (And if Advaita is right cosmogonically, consciousness cannot be constructed in any case.)

The most radical use of Advaita in contemporary consciousness studies would be to challenge the entire analytic assumption of the contemporary programme of understanding consciousness. Advaita holds that the self can never be an object, and since the Advaitic self is strictly just consciousness, that is only to say that consciousness as such cannot be an object of study. Whatever it is, it escapes its own attention, for whatever is attended to is the content of consciousness and not consciousness itself. Physicalist consciousness studies treats consciousness as if it were like, say, blood circulation or neural activity, something that can be objectified. The most basic objection to this attitude is that there is a circularity involved: only when we know what it is that is to be studied can we study it, but the purpose of study is precisely to know what it is. The Advaitic view suggests why this situation occurs: we cannot know what it is that is to be studied because it is not something that can be studied, for all study requires objects, and the self of consciousness is never an object. The ground conditions required for the study of anything do not exist in the case of consciousness. This non-existence is not a contingent matter, it is constitutive of consciousness itself: for all study is the exercise of consciousness and consciousness is always just that exercise. It is the seer of the seeing and therefore, whatever is seen, it is not seen, since it is always and only the seeing. If this line of Advaitic thought is pursued and

defended, it may provide a deep critique of the dominant aims of consciousness studies. It could contribute to the contemporary response that suggests that the 'hard problem' of consciousness ('what is consciousness?') cannot be solved precisely because consciousness is conceptually closed to itself.

All that could then be done is systematically to describe the phenomenology of consciousness, find ever-finer descriptions of its reflexively accessible features and thereby gain insight into it. Consciousness studies would proceed but without its objectivist fantasy. The deep Advaitic attention to the tropes of consciousness, again bracketing Advaitic cosmogony, provides a good deal of conceptual analysis of introspective material. Philosophy for Advaita only takes one so far as to exhaust analysis, until only the intense absorption into consciousness remains. Perhaps the most ancient of strategies, the Upaniṣadic reporting on consciousness, which is the core of Advaitic study, holds out a lesson to the insightful contemporary thinker who is sceptical of the presumptions of physicalist consciousness studies.

It must be added, however, that this is not specific to Advaita. Whatever their views on the self, other brahminical Hindu, Jain and Buddhist schools all have extended meditations on the nature of the 'what-it-is-likeness' of consciousness. They thereby provide a well-worked out tradition of analytic description of the sort that is only beginning to be undertaken in contemporary consciousness studies, physicalist or otherwise.

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Vācaspati *see* Śāṅkara *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*

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<sup>1</sup> Nārāyaṇa, *Mānameyodaya*, I.ii.5.

<sup>2</sup> II.ii.126.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Gaṅgeśa, *Tattvacintāma\_i*, I.12, p 827-8.

<sup>4</sup> The *locus classicus* of Nyāya is Udayana, *Ātmatattvaviveka*, section IV, p 344ff. For the most authoritative early formulation in Bhāḍḍa Mīmāṃsā, see Kumārila, *Ślokavārttika, ātmavāda*, 125-6, ff.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., for Nyāya, Udayana, *Ātmatattvaviveka*, p 347.

<sup>6</sup> See Matilal, *Perception*, ch. 5.

<sup>7</sup> For Mīmāṃsā, see Nārāyaṇa, *Mānameyodaya*, II.ii.84.

<sup>8</sup> Udayana, *Ātmatattvaviveka*, p 347.

<sup>9</sup> Pārthasārathi Miśra, *Śāstradīpikā*, p 251.

<sup>10</sup> Udayana, *Ātmatattvaviveka*, p 3.

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<sup>11</sup> Rāmakara, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad-bhāṣya*, I.iv.10, p 163.

<sup>12</sup> Rāmakara, *Brahmsasūtrabhāṣya* and Vācaspati *Bhāmatī*, I.i.4.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Śaṅkara, *Kena-upaniṣad-bhāṣya*, II.i.

<sup>14</sup> Śaṅkara, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad-bhāṣya*, IV.iv.6, p 665.

<sup>15</sup> Sureśvara, *Naiṣkarmyasiddhi*, III. 59-61.

<sup>16</sup> For a survey of several Advaitic efforts in this regard, see Appayya Dīkṣita, *Siddhāntaleśasamgraha*, II.1.