

SOME RECENT TRENDS IN CONSCIOUSNESS STUDIES: A VIEW FROM THE VEDANTA

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Abstract: The primary goal of science is to remain objective and exclude subjective aspects as much as possible. The twentieth century has seen tremendous advances in various fields of modern science. It is found in the recent developments of some fields of modern science that there cannot be any meaningful experimentation without a conscious observer. It appears that the subject who was kicked out of the front door has made his way through the back door!

Developments in some fields of science such as Quantum Physics, Artificial Intelligence, Psychology, and Neuroscience naturally led to the study of consciousness. Philosophers also have pondered over the problem of consciousness. Rigorous study in these disciplines lead to the interdisciplinary study of Consciousness.

Development of digital computers paved way for developing machines simulating various human behavior. In Artificial Intelligence (AI) there is a tendency to consider that information processing in the human brain causes human intelligent behavior, and that such information processing can be simulated in a computer and hence produce intelligent behavior artificially. John Searle considered that any machine with same causal powers as brain could have intentionality; accordingly silicon brains in principle should have consciousness. He also considered that consciousness is an ordinary biological phenomenon like digestion.

According to Daniel Dennett mind is the brain, and he considered that every mental phenomenon can be accounted using physical principles. In neuroscience there is a tendency to find neural correlates of consciousness. There are neural correlates for every sense perception. How multiple sense perception in the natural world gives raise to unitary conscious experience is discussed as 'binding problem' and it is indeed a challenging task.

Human intelligence has the exclusive characteristic of intentionality, understanding and other subjective qualities. Thomas Nagel questioned the legitimacy of objective methodology in handling the subjective nature of

consciousness. According to Colin McGinn, consciousness forever will be inaccessible to objective explanation. David Chalmers proposed to expand physical concepts to explain the 'hard problem' of subjective nature of conscious experience. The evidences from the newly emerging field of mind-body medicine shows that mental states could affect bodily, physical states.

Science and philosophy seem to have exhausted all means to explain conscious experience, and are looking for some new, non-reductive concepts. Indian philosophy has rich scriptural texts on the nature of consciousness and has great potential to address the problem of consciousness.

According to Vedanta, the body, including the brain, belongs to the physical realm, and the consciousness belongs to a non-physical realm. The consciousness is considered intrinsic characteristic of the self and it pervades the entire body. The subjective experience is non-mechanical and the possibility of consciousness in machines denied. The Vedantic concept of consciousness proposes a worldview in which both objective and subjective polarities can be naturally accommodated and paves way for bringing science and spirituality closer.