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Understanding the 'what'  
and 'where' of Consciousness  
Revisiting the Bhagavad Gita  
to ask a few more Questions

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There are two questions asked by all of us, crossing disciplines, about consciousness: “what is consciousness?” and “where is consciousness?”. This paper tries to see in the background of the Bhagavad Gītā whether consciousness is a ‘what’ which could be defined exclusively as ‘this’ or ‘that’, or whether the ‘where’ of consciousness could be allocated to ‘here’ or ‘there’. The dynamic and non-localised nature of consciousness is addressed through epistemological (*kṣētra* and *kṣētrajña*) and ontological (*yōgā*) routes in the Gītā, also discussing referential and contextual meanings of ‘conscious acts’ (*naiṣkarmya* and *niṣkāma*) and the ‘conscious being’ (*sthitaprajña*).

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## I. Introduction

### a. Where is consciousness?

*The Upaniṣadic story goes like this: The celestial beings were in a search for the 'Self'. They spent years in quest of the 'Self' advised to meditate by the wise Rishi. Every ten years they reported their findings to their teacher. After the first ten years they found the 'eye' as the 'Self'. Another ten year of meditation, the 'mind' emerged as the 'Self'. Finally on their report that 'I am the Self' the Rishi gave an affirmation.*

*Julian Jaynes in his book "The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind" says that consciousness evolved as a response to the increasing needs of civilised social development. Consciousness is necessitated.*

Having read this story and the above two lines you must have, intentionally or not, focused on the word 'consciousness' and 'Self' and formed a definition or at least an idea about 'consciousness'. This is where we lodge the question 'where is consciousness?' Debates on consciousness are often centered on 'locating' an experience that is very well spelt out subjectively. It is a question of the 'where' of something that could be undoubtedly said as 'here' but the 'here' which does not

admit itself for or located in conventional and known spaces. The shift is from 'what is consciousness?' to 'where is consciousness?'. Unfortunately many discussions on 'consciousness' are evoked to place the theory outrightly and map it according to set standards, without getting interested in the understanding of the framework or making of the theory. The search continues in this manner, for the evading, for the obvious reason that 'my niche is not yours' when we think about 'consciousness'. In the process of theorising, the word 'consciousness' is taken as arbitrary. We debate on complex levels of 'consciousness' without having a consensual meaning even about simpler perceptual levels.

### **b. Conceptualising consciousness**

For any analyst there are two difficulties in conceptualising 'consciousness'. The immediate problem would be to limit and specify conscious functions whether perceptual, emotional or cognitive and to lodge 'consciousness' in respective meanings. To maintain these specific meanings in constructing the theory and thereafter to follow uniformities would be the second problem. At both levels the casualty is for the 'conscious experience'. Reductive approaches, in the class which I will include all those attempts that trace the 'origin' or 'locus' or 'correlate' of a (conscious) function, begin with something given and

proceed to map it according to the prescribed theory or experimental parameters. In order to facilitate an easier start discrete functions are taken into account, and also that are segregated by their nature. Hence there are discussions on 'synesthesia', 'blind vision', 'implicit cognition', etc. But are we concerned only with these levels of experience when we talk about 'consciousness'? Definitely not!

In a writing of his Ken Wilber<sup>1</sup> takes our attention to a totally different dimension of experience. He talks about appreciation of any art form as a transpersonal enterprise. *(Though this has been indirectly said in much of the classical Indian mystic literature, the holonic interpretation which Wilber gives for art appreciation is novel.)* This is something simply stated, we might think, at first. But this issue brings into forefront something, which has been forgotten or often neglected in conventional ways of understanding a phenomenon. Imaginations which underlie metaphorical usages evince and thereby can explain the object of experience in different ways such that the explanation itself can influence and lead to experience of the same object in a different level or intensify the original experience. The main feature of such approaches is that they motivate to create new and varied meanings for the same object, the object being redefined everytime by the experiencer. A non-reductionistic approach can at

the most be a challenge for reductionistic approaches to search for alternate methodologies, but cannot undermine or substitute them, for the very reason that we are not interested in repeating the ancient myth of chicken and egg.

The emerging forum is for using alternate methodologies that are unconventional and non-standardised and are open to different levels and kinds of experiences both given and emerging. The 'experience' of an 'experience' otherwise ends in the categorical translation ('reduction' would be appropriate) of an experience to a theory which almost shrinks the experience into a formula. I would like to encourage, when we discuss about understanding the 'origin' and 'evolution' of consciousness, that we consider a non-causal causality of an initial experience leading to further experiences. It will not be a formulating of the experience in any cognitive sense but a redefining of it every time, where we could talk not about better definitions or theories but various definitions having their own intrinsic standards.

Where is consciousness? The question is definitely meaningful, if and only if it is juxtaposed with another question 'who is asking?'. And the answer might enlighten both the intentional presence and non-intentional history of consciousness, the 'consciousness' of the questioner.



This paper will address some of these issues in the context of the focal ideas in the Bhagavad Gītā and Adi Śankarācāryā's commentary of the Gītā.

## **II. Revisiting the Bhagavad Gītā**

It might be argued that questions about consciousness across disciplines do not suggest the specificity of the problem addressed. Precisely, it is this argument I want to preface before I attempt to ask a few more questions. There could be two kinds of questions, though the structure and 'appearance' of the questions look the same: The first kind is those which address the specific nature/s and function/s of consciousness restricting to theories or experiments proved/agreed upon. The second kind is addressing to same issues based on experiential possibilities. It is not that the second kind is not structured by theories/ experiments. The difference is that it takes a non-linear path of looking into the possibility of having new experiences from the vantage of the already given, and also integrating the given into new experiences.

If we accept the complexity of consciousness then we need to ask both kinds of questions: to go from fewer specifics (nature/function) to more specifics, to imagine and confirm imaginations into universal and attainable realities and ways of living.

### **a. The 'what' and 'where' of consciousness**

I am not sure which question precedes which. Should we proceed from the 'what' of consciousness, or the 'where' of consciousness? Unless I determine the 'what' of something the 'where' of it cannot be traced and revisited. Nevertheless if the 'where' of something is not found, how could the 'what' of it be verified? This position leads to circularity. But to posit this circularity here is not to say that any attempt to understand 'consciousness' is futile or incomplete. The evading nature of the problem suggests that there need to be a precise starting point 'deep' enough to take the unexpected complexities and contradictions which could be presented in due course of the inquiry.

The second chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā initiates a metaphysical discussion which starts with the statement<sup>2</sup> that the wise do not grieve over 'that which has gone' (*gatāsūn*) and 'that which is going' (*agatāsūn*). A contradiction is presented. Two kinds of actuals are mentioned such as the non-existent, and that which is proceeding towards that state. The relation between the two is investigated from a response to them by the *paṇḍitāh* (those who have known their self)<sup>3</sup>. The contradiction is that a metaphysical idea is juxtaposed with a behavioural idea.

Through out the Gītā we find that whenever a metaphysical idea is discussed an ethical or behavioural correlate is juxtaposed. There are descriptions of conscious experiences for 'me-in-the-world' corresponding to my ontological nature or possibilities. The chasm between the not-so-ordinary experience and ordinary experience is bridged by a concept of self which not only vouchsafes both but also goes beyond opposites. The concept of consciousness is presented so as not to replace ordinary experiences by an alternative of transcendental self, but to see the infiltration and embeddedness of the transcendence in the ordinary experiences and ways of living. It is not a case of 'either or' but of 'non-duality'.

If the wise (*paṇḍitāh*) do not grieve over 'that which has gone' and 'the which is in the process of going' what is the nature of that eternity which enables them not to grieve? The second chapter answers with an explanation of similar style: there is no non-existence for the real and there is no existence for the unreal. Any experience involves two-fold cognitions.<sup>4</sup> We know that something exists. We also know that something does not exist. It is not that our consciousnesses are only of the different existences available to us during conscious experiences. We also become conscious of the non-existence of something in an experience. Since both existence and

non-existence are available for our conscious experience could both be accounted as metaphysically real? Though we know various existences our cognitions about them change when they are reduced/classified according to causal connections. The example given by Śankarācārya is the replacement of '*ghaṭa buddhi*', the cognition of pot, by '*mṛda buddhi*', the cognition of clay. The unreal is that about which we have a continuous or unchanging cognition. This does not imply that since all cognitions can be reduced to relations and causal connections there is nothing which is continuously cognised, and therefore the real is non-existent.

Irrespective of particular cognitions and the absence of those attributive cognitions because of the absence of the substantive objects of cognition, there is a continuous transempirical cognition, which is the of 'isness' (*sad buddhi*). Discrete conscious experiences are founded or preceded by an inherent conscious state of 'isness' which is not modified by the rest of the consciousnesses be it of the existence or non-existence<sup>5</sup>. The issue which follows this contention of a discrete metaphysical reality underlying all cognitions as 'isness' is the origin or cause for such a real: the location or 'whereabouts' are asked for. To understand the more complex through the less complex, causal relation is the framework with which our mind works. The intention for such a knowledge is to

repeat and predict the more complex through less complex variables. This method is valid. But in an approach which factorises the experiencer into the understanding of experience the 'where' of the experience is replaced by the 'who' of the experience. Tracing the locus of unchanging real, the Gītā says, "that which is imperishable pervades everything"<sup>6</sup>; "the 'dēhi', the embodied, in all bodies is imperishable"<sup>7</sup>. Though the attempt is to describe the locus/loci of the unchanging, the focus is on an ontological Self for which locality is not a defining term.

## **b. Who is conscious?**

The inherence of the transempirical cognition of 'isness' is traced to *kṣētrajñā*, the conscious experiencer, in the thirteenth chapter of the Gītā<sup>8</sup>. The nexus between that which is known (*kṣētra*) and that which knows (*kṣētrajñā*) is discussed from the perspective of different levels of I-ness. An ontological route is built in order to knit together apparently discrete cognitive events and phenomenologically manifest and unmanifest levels of I-ness. *Kṣētra* is that which is fast decaying (*śarīra*), which could be objectified (*idam*) and includes all that which falls into the field of conscious activities. *Kṣētrajñā* is the cognitive agent who knows that which falls in its field. But here the function of *Kṣētrajñā* as a knower is different from being a knower in any ordinary sense. The

knowerhood of *Kṣētrajñā* lies in its being the conscious experiencer. It is the underlying I-ness that which is emphasised by *Kṣētrajñā*. It is the I-ness of my self which performs different roles like being the *upadr̥ṣṭa*, the onlooker, *anumanta*, the sanctioner, *bhārta*, the supporter, *bhōkta*, the enjoyer, *maheśvara*, that which is the cause of the-world-outside-me, *parapurūṣa*, the highest self<sup>9</sup>.

The classical question in Indian thought about the metaphysical nature of the knower and the known is asked in the Gītā too by differentiating their ontological and phenomenological status. This is done by allocating consciousness to *kṣētrajñā* and conscious functions to *kṣētra*: "He experiences the sense objects using sense organs and the mind"<sup>10</sup>; "From me arises memory, knowledge as well the loss of both"<sup>11</sup>. Generally metaphysical positions consider 'transcendence as the defining characteristic of that which beholds ordinary experiences and therefore 'away' from them. In the Gītā 'transcendence' takes a different turn. The ontological rigidity of being transcendent is smoothed by regarding an ordinary experience like for eg. a perceptual experience, as having the ontological potential to scale into higher planes of *jñāna*, understanding one's self. Therefore though 'transcendence' is a necessary characteristic for my self to integrate ordinary experiences

into a larger scheme of my existence, it doesn't become a hierarchically or linearly attainable state. It is unattainable since it is something-which-is-already-I-am. Also because any state which could be attained aftermath to the completion of certain pre-requisites could also be feared to slip away. Therefore the transcendental nature of my self and the ordinariness of my perceptual/cognitive experiences do not become the defining characteristic of my I-ness or what I am ontologically. They are only descriptions to parade between different phenomenological manifestations of my Self. The Self is higher to both manifestation and unmanifestation. This contention is made clear in the ninth chapter of the Gītā in a series of verses such as "I am in everything in my unmanifest form, everything is in Me, and I am not in them"<sup>12</sup>; "Holding everything, but not dwelling in anything, is my Self which is the cause of everything."<sup>13</sup>. The Pure I-ness, *Ātma*, is not an abstraction which either does away with its manifests, or upholds its acausal purity. It is the highest ontological reality of the human self which gives content to the causal and metaphysical reals, and that which integrates diverse existential manifestations into a larger whole. The exegesis of *puruṣōttama*, *akṣara puruṣa* and *kṣara puruṣa* in the fifteenth chapter deals with the manifest and unmanifest states of the self.

From the standpoint of Pure I-ness I have to correlate with my experiences. And from the standpoint of me as having varied conscious experiences I need to integrate them. But my Pure I-ness is not defined by the presence or absence of either of the acts, since both the choices spring from my ontological state of *brāhmi sthiti*<sup>14</sup>, being in Pure I-ness. Pure I-ness has the ontological primacy. But it is non-opposed to the experiential I.

### **c. A few more questions and a program for 'being' and 'transcending'**

The Gītā does not discuss the concept of consciousness *per se* in an abstract fashion. Therefore the metaphysical and the ontological dimensions of consciousness is presented only in the context of phenomenological relations. Experience is the prime category of understanding, in Gītā, of even that which is only a phenomenological possibility arising from an ontological commitment. The questions asked, analysis outlined, distinctions made, relations distinguished and identities sought are all on the basis of the 'mind' of the person who does the thinking and makes the inquiry. It is not a relativistic pluralism, but an integrative transcendentalism that is reflected in the Gītā metaphysics of consciousness. Hence the question 'why am I conscious?' is discussed motivating the analyst to contextualise all his questions in a larger framework of



two primary questions: 'what am I from what standpoint?' and 'who is asking?'. The factorisation which is unique in this methodology is that of the questioner, the knower, the experiencer, the me-in-the-world.

The theory of '*guṇās*' constituting one's *prakṛti*, existential make up, addresses the problem of intentional acts directed by different choices. The first two manifests of intentional consciousness such as 'I am the doer' and 'I am the enjoyer' (*aham kartā, aham bhōktā*) is a conjoint creation of the *kṣētrajñā* and the three *gunas* (*sattva, rajas* and *tamas*)<sup>15</sup>. All intentions are directed by the contact of the *kṣētrajñā* and the three *guṇās*. The choices one make, intentions by which one is directed, the perceptions one has, the value systems one follow etc. are influenced by the dominance of one of the three *guṇās*. The *guṇās* have no independent metaphysical subsistence and they are of continuous change. Their existence is owed to *kṣētrajñā*. Due to this nature of *guṇās*, or one's *prakṛti*, a distinction has to be made in the effect of classifying the results (*phala*) of activities (*karma*) in the spectra of *prakṛti* and relocating one's self in Pure I-ness. The liberation is from untrue identities (*bhūta prakṛti mokṣam*). The ontological status of the *kṣētrajñā* is valid when the nature of and relation to *kṣētra* has to be accounted for. When viewed from the standpoint of/as a non-relational (to *kṣētra*) real

the ontology of *kṣētrajñā* resolves into the transcendental existence of *Puruṣōttama*, the supreme or Pure I-ness.

The relationship or interplay between the manifested reals and the unmanifested Pure I-ness is intertwined with, and to be discovered through the mode of activity. Any transcendental state of one's self is disclosed through one identifying one's identity. Revisiting the identity can happen only through activity. *Karma/Yōgā* is a key concept in the Gītā.

A verse in the sixth chapter talks about 'āruruṣu' and 'yōgārūḍa'. They are two phenomenological representatives linked to a common ontology of their selves. Both take to activity, when for the former *karma* is a means to attain a quiescent state of mind, for the latter *karma* is an expression of his quiescence<sup>16</sup>. *Karma* has a phenomenological and transcendental nature about it that it becomes expressed in either way according to one's constitutional make up, *guṇaprakṛti*. The transcendence of *karma* is experiential, and the phenomenology of *karma* is transcendental. This is evidenced by the four definitions given to *yōgā*<sup>17</sup> and the two concepts of 'naiṣkarmya' and 'niṣkāma'. The four definitions of *yōgā* are the following: Equanimity is *yōgā*. Here *yōgā* is taken as a transcendental category and transcendence (*yōgā*) is equated with equanimity (*samatvam*)<sup>18</sup>. The transcendental nature of

*yōgā* could manifest as 'skillfulness in action'<sup>19</sup>. Yoga becomes a practice and state under two me-in-the-world situations. The state of *yōgā* is attained by 'abidance on equanimity' for opposites.<sup>20</sup> It is also attained by giving up the union with *dukha*, unhappiness.<sup>21</sup> The two concepts of *naiṣkarmya* and *niṣkāma* also serve the purpose of underlining the idea that the transcendence of *karma* is not in the giving up of it but being in it. The 'being in' is backed up by the four definitions of *yōgā*. The pursuing of activity takes place from a different understanding of it. A *karma yogi* does not engage in activity expecting an ontological completion to be brought about by his doing it. He does not abandon activity to prevent an ontological loss happening to his transcendental beingness. To Gītā actionlessness (*naiṣkarmya*) is equivalent to pursuing activity with *yōgabuddhi* (*niṣkāma*). This idea is elaborated by the concept of *sthitaprajña*.

In the Gītā the concept of *sthitaprajña* is treated as an ontological state as well as the description of a person who abides in the state of *sthitaprajñatva*. It addresses both the issues of how-am-I-in-the-world and the me-in-the-world. Therefore it is asked how does a *sthitaprajña* sits, walks, speaks etc.<sup>22</sup> His way-of-being-in-the world is important since that becomes an ethico-ontological ideal for the *ārurukṣu*. What is *sahaja*, natural, to a *yōgi*

becomes a *sādāna*, practice, for an aspirant of *yōgā*. What is *sahaja* to a *sthitaprajñā* originates from his ontological beingness which is described as, 'aṣṣēdyōham', 'adāhyōhyam', 'aklēdyōhyam', 'aśoṣyam', 'nitya', 'sarvagata', 'sthānu', 'aḥala' and 'sanātana'<sup>23</sup>. *Sthitaprajñā* too has an ontological identity like any other me-in-the-world. His identity is with his Pure I-ness which is not defined by its manifests but is characterized by its metaphysical nature. It is indestructible, non-divisible, imperishable, acausal, all-prevading, permanent, immovable and beyond time. He is indestructible since destruction is attributed to something which has non-existence before its origin and after its destruction. He is permanent since he is not caused by anything prior. He is imperishable since he is not made of parts. What is destructible, causal and divisible is *kṣētra* that which is known by *kṣētrajñā*. The knowables belong to the category of being caused and destroyed. That which knows the knowable has to be transcendental and does not belong to the category of the knowable. The ontological beingness of the *sthitaprajñā* is founded on a transcognitive understanding of the distinction between the *kṣētra* and *kṣētrajñā* and their integration into Pure I-ness. His *ācāra*, responses to situations, become the credential for his ontological identity. According to Gītā such a person doesn't act for happiness, but act out of his being happy. He acts not for freedom but as a free person. His acts

become manifests of his ontological identity and ontological maturity.

In the Gītā intentional consciousness is not pitted against a non-intentional consciousness. Therefore the me-in-the-world is not transcended by a third entity or to a third state of transcendence. The transcendence of the me-in-the-world happens in the world, since there is no 'other' world to be transcended, by means of distinguishing the me and the world and integrating them into my ontological beingness.

### **III. Conclusion**

The revisiting of the Gītā highlights two questions about looking into the problem of consciousness. The first question is 'what is consciousness from what standpoint?', and the second 'who is asking?'. The first question emphasises the category of definition, and the second factorises the analyst not only as a thinker but also as a participant in the understanding of 'consciousness'. The complexity of 'consciousness' is such that every factor employed in the understanding of the phenomenon opens to further leads in defining it. The mystery of consciousness is that there is a circular way of an experiencer, 'the conscious being', integrating the knowledge about itself into its beingness. There is a

tension between 'the experiencer' and 'the experienced' which is not only in a theoretical level but also in a subjective level. And it is this tension which makes 'consciousness' a subject for self-exploration.

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## Notes

1. Ken Wilber, *Eye to Eye: The Quest for the new paradigm*, London: Shambala, 1996, pp 123-152
2. Bhagavad Gītā 2.11  
*gatāsunagatāsumśca nānuśōcanti paṇḍitā*
3. Śankara Bhāṣya of Bhagavad Gītā 2.11  
*atmaviṣayā buddhi yeṣām tē hi paṇḍitā*
4. Śankara Bhāṣya of Bhagavad Gītā 2.16  
*sarvatra dve buddhi sarvaihi upalabhyante samānādhikaranē*
5. Śankara Bhāṣya of Bhagavad Gītā 2.16  
*idam udakam iti maricyādau anyantarābhāve api samānādikaranyadarśanāt*
6. Bhagavad Gītā 2.17
7. Bhagavad Gītā 2.30
8. Bhagavad Gītā 13.1-2
9. Bhagavad Gītā 13.22
10. Bhagavad Gītā 15.9
11. Bhagavad Gītā 15.15
12. Bhagavad Gītā 9.4
13. Bhagavad Gītā 9.5
14. Bhagavad Gītā 2.72
15. Bhagavad Gītā 2.14; 3.27
16. Bhagavad Gītā 6.3
17. *amatvam yōgā ucyatē*  
*samādau açalā buddhi*  
*yōgā karmasu kauśalam*  
*dukhasamyōgaviyōgam yōgasamjñitam*
18. Bhagavad Gītā 2.48
19. Bhagavad Gītā 2.50
20. Bhagavad Gītā 2.53
21. Bhagavad Gītā 6.23
22. Bhagavad Gītā 2.54
23. Bhagavad Gītā 2.23-25

