

Advance Social Science Archive Journal

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol.2 No.4, Oct-Dec, 2024. Page No. 1071-1080

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



## A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN ADVAITA VEDANTA

**Sajid Hussain**

Department of Philosophy University of Karachi

Email: [sajid.pjs@gmail.com](mailto:sajid.pjs@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

Critical hermeneutical approach has been used to understand the notion of consciousness in Advaita Vedanta. After analyzing the notion of Consciousness, we have developed our understanding about the notion of consciousness from the view point of Advaita Vedanta. Advaita Vedanta - non-dual vedanta - insists there is *one consciousness*, one consciousness shining through all of us. It has been analyzed that no western theory namely Panpsychism is similar to Advaita Vedanta while interpreting consciousness. However, consciousness in Panpsychism is as fundamental as an atom. Whereas the notion of Consciousness in Advaita is more profound as consciousness is not only all pervasive but there is matter appears in consciousness. It is not a second reality apart from consciousness, so consciousness is non-dual, no second thing apart from consciousness, hence, it is absolute. After deep digging the meaning of consciousness, two key misconceptions have also been cleared up. First one is that vedanta is the central philosophy of Hinduism and it belongs to a dogma or religion. But there is something unique about Advaita vedanta, it is not religion or dogma as it is generally understood that you have to believe in something, faith in something, not at all. It is quite the opposite, it is rather understanding and realizing something. The second misconception is that Consciousness is an Object. It is not an *object* rather it is the *one* in which everything is happening, it is all pervasive. It is evident that in Eastern wisdom, spiritualistic approach is often use to understand consciousness whereas in Western philosophy, scientific approach is used to understand consciousness.

**Keywords:** Consciousness, Advaita Vedanta, Panpsychism, Critical Hermeneutics, Eastern wisdom

### INTRODUCTION

In this vast universe, which is itself a collection of innumerable mysteries, humans are a unique and creative being. The greatest reason for humans to be unique and creative with other creatures is human consciousness. Indubitably, this consciousness distinguishes humans from all other creatures. Because of this supremacy of consciousness, humans are not only aware of the things around them, but they also realize that they are a different being (Saher, 1969). It is this consciousness that has brought humans from the age of stone and ice to the age of science and technology. The reason for this worldly development of humans is only the consciousness of humans which is constantly going through evolutionary stages and leading humans towards advancement.

Today's modern man longs to know consciousness not only philosophically but also scientifically. For science and philosophy, it is creating a state of anxiety as to why the depths of consciousness are not being solved. Consciousness is one of the most mysterious phenomena of the natural world (Kriegel, 2020). The problem of consciousness is the most fundamental and complex problem of science and philosophy. Today various philosophers, cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, and psychiatrists are presenting their research and theories about consciousness. Even today's modern world is using artificial intelligence (AI) to explain consciousness.

The meaning of Consciousness is different in Eastern wisdom and Western thoughts. In Western thoughts, the reductionist (materialistic) approach and non-reductionist approach is being used to explain Consciousness. The leading contender for a scientific theory of consciousness is integrated information theory (IIT) which is offered by Giulio Tononi. Integrated information theory, a mainstreams scientific theory which says that consciousness is all pervasive that it is there in all living beings (Koch, 2019). It is a big step forward actually it's only until recently scientists were telling us that all probability is consciousness only in human beings and the higher animals and the lower animals and plants, but the integrated information theory predicts that there is there is some level of consciousness in the tiniest of the creature -it's not that they have any kind of consciousness or awareness like we have but some basic level of consciousness. Similarly, the western Panpsychism theory of consciousness says that consciousness is a fundamental reality of the universe just like time space, matter energy. These two theories are very close to the Eastern theory of Consciousness which is called Advaita Vedanta.

### **Background**

Although Consciousness has been explored in different perspective in western thought. Yet, it emerges as an independent discipline of its own light in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A growing interest in the field of consciousness studies has been seen over the last two decades. Since then, it has become one of the most important fields in philosophy and science. However, the eastern approach of consciousness has been explored with the emergence of this field. Different scientific and philosophical theories are being presented in order to expand the horizon of consciousness studies. In this way, many misconceptions in the meaning of consciousness have been observed over the last two decades. It has been observed that few scientific theories of consciousness such as Panpsychism and Integrated Information theory (IIT) are being related with eastern approaches namely Advaita Vedanta.

Philosophy is dead, said by Stephan Hawking (Hawking, 2010). He made this statement probably because science and technology are expanding their scope and philosophy is closing in or philosophy is stagnating somewhere. In Philosophy of Mind, the mind-body problem indeed a fundamental problem. After the Cartesian dualism, the mid-body problem has become an emerging topic to investigate among philosophers. Because of the legacy of this problem, the subject of consciousness studies came into being. There has been a lot of research on this subject (consciousness) for the last

twenty-five years. The hard problem is fundamental in consciousness studies. So far, no consensus has been reached on a solution to this problem.

The reason for the technological revolution is the multi-disciplinary approach. In which researchers from different fields are giving their input on various issues. Consciousness studies are also evolving towards a multi-disciplinary approach where scholars from all fields' i-e, neuroscientists, psychologists, and cosmologists are taking keen interest to know more about consciousness. The rationale behind this study is to explore the meaning of Consciousness from the view point of Advaita vedanta in order to avoid the prevailing misconception related to this concept.

### **Statement of the problem**

Today, there is a great interest in consciousness studies due to the developments in neuroscience, new imaging technology of the brain, and artificial intelligence. There is a tremendous interest in understanding scientifically what consciousness is where does it come from what does it do what are its possibilities and so on. Consciousness studies is not a new subject; consciousness studies are very ancient as the philosopher Evan Thompson says consciousness studies goes all the way back to the Upanishads. These very ancient texts in the Hindu scriptures, the Vedas (Thompson, 2014). These Upanishads contain the final the highest spiritual and philosophical teachings of the Vedas dating back to 5000 years or more, and they made a remarkable breakthrough in consciousness studies. Centuries ago those insights into consciousness -into human consciousness- were developed over the centuries into this philosophy of non-dual vedanta - Advaita Vedanta -which is a school of vedanta.

This study is intended to explore the meaning of consciousness from eastern perspective, particularly from the view point of Advaita Vedanta. However, this study is also planned to critically explore the latest consciousness theories available in western thoughts i-e integrated information theory (IIT) and Panpsychism. These theories are often thought to be have similar conception of consciousness as available in Advaita Vedanta. So, this study is intended to interpret the notion of consciousness in Advaita Vedanta.

### **Research question**

The research is intended to answer the following question;

- How to interpret the notion of consciousness in Advaita Vedanta?

### **Research objectives**

Following are the research objectives which have been attempted to be achieved during the study;

- To interpret the notion of consciousness from Eastern perspective, particularly from the view point of Advaita Vedanta.
- To clear up the misconception between modern Western theories of consciousness such as Panpsychism and Advaita Vedanta.

### **Significance of the research study**

The significance of this research can be gauged from the fact that it is timely addressing the issue of philosophy and science. If only the hard problem is researched scientifically then the theories of science will prevail and an intellectual vacuum will be

created. Therefore, this research will play its part in solving the hard problem of consciousness according to the philosophical method. This research will help us to know in depth the easy problems are the objective things that can be measured from the third person point of view, typically tied to behavior. This research has a multi-disciplinary attitude. So, people from different walks of life (those who are interested in consciousness) will be able to benefit from this research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Consciousness**

The word "Conscious" is derived from Latin word "Conscious" which mean cognizant of or conscious to oneself. The word "conscientia" is also a related word which means shared knowledge. In Western philosophy, it is defined as a "state of being aware of surroundings". In Western philosophy, it is a subjective experience from first person account which is called the phenomenal consciousness. However, In Eastern wisdom, particularly from the perspective of Advaita vedanta, there is only one consciousness, consciousness is one unit, it is one consciousness shining through hundreds of millions of minds and bodies. In the advaitic approach to consciousness, matter is an appearance in consciousness; matter is the material universe, nothing separate from consciousness. Consciousness is very key concept in Eastern wisdom as well as in Western thought. In Eastern wisdom, spiritualistic approach is often use to understand consciousness whereas in Western philosophy, scientific approach is used (mostly) to understand consciousness.

### **Contemporary Debate on Consciousness – A Western perspective**

The central question of Consciousness studies in Western thought is the "hard problem of Consciousness". David Chalmers has coined this term of "hard problem of Consciousness. According to him, how can a physical system – brain - generate first person experiences or philosophically saying that phenomenal consciousness – subjective experience from first person account?

The problem of consciousness is the most fundamental and complex problem of science and philosophy. Today various philosophers, cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, and psychiatrists are presenting their research and theories about consciousness. Even today's modern world is using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to know about consciousness. The fundamental problem facing to know consciousness is called "The Hard Problem of Consciousness" (Chalmers, 2018).

David Chalmers (2018) used the concept, "Meta problem of Consciousness "in his recent research article. Here the word "meta" is used in this context as we say meta-problem is a problem about the problem or meta-theory is a theory about theory. When do we use the meta-problem? In my opinion, we use Meta – beyond- when we are stuck in solving an initial problem or there is no consensus solution or we are unable to look at this basic problem from different angles. So we try to solve this initial problem through the meta-perspective. The meta-problem provides us with different views or ideas to solve the initial problem. Of course, these different theories help solve the initial problem. The meta-problem of consciousness is adopted to solve an initial or the hard problem of consciousness.

The primary problem is the hard problem of consciousness: why and how does the physical process of the brain evoke conscious experiences? In simple words, we can say that the meta-problem of consciousness explains why we think that it is difficult to explain consciousness. Here consciousness is described as phenomenal consciousness or subjective experience.

There is a clear distinction between the easy problems and the hard problems. These easy problems are basically the objective things which can be measured from the third person point of view, typically tied to behavior. These are all data too for science to explain. The relevant functions. For example, how it is that one gets to say there is a red thing over there or walk towards it. Here, you find the mechanisms involving perceptual processes and action processes in the brain that leads to that behavior. Find the right mechanism that performs the function you have explained what needs to be explained with the easy problems of consciousness. But for the hard problems, for subjective experience, it is not clear that this standard method works.

Its looks like explaining all that behavior still leaves open a further question. Why does all that give you subjective experience? Or what is like to be? Explain the reacting, the responding, the controlling, and the reporting, and so on. It still leaves open the question, why is all that accompanied by subjective experience? Why doesn't it go on in the dark without consciousness? According to Philosopher Joe Levine (1983), there seems to be an explanatory gap between physical processes and subjective experiences (Levine, 1983). Approaches to Consciousness in contemporary Western thought is given in the Table 1.

**Table 1**

Approaches to Consciousness in Contemporary Western thought

Consciousness is irreducible	Consciousness is reducible	Science and Consciousness
Dualism	Functionalism	Artificial Intelligence (AI)
Panpsychism	Biological materialism	Integrated information theory (IIT)
Idealism	Quantum materialism	.....

**Source:** Chalmers, D. J. (2018)

**Panpsychism**

Consciousness is fundamental is typically known as Panpsychism. The word "Pan" is for "all" and "psychism" for "mind". The crux of Panpsychism is that every system including humans, animals, instants and elementary particles have some degree of consciousness. Consciousness is as fundamental as an atom in the universe.

### **Integrated Information Theory (IIT)**

This theory is based on mathematical equations. These equations tell us that information is integrated in a system which has been named as "Phi". It means a human brain has large amount of information integration, thus has a high degree of Phi. Similarly, it goes to the tiniest creature to find the amount of information integrated. This theory again explains the consciousness at fundamental level.

### **Vedantic Philosophy**

The Sanskrit word "Vedanta" literally means "the final part", veda – anata. The Vedas are comprising of four parts, first three parts of Vedas are dedicated to prayers and rituals whereas the fourth and the last part is focused on the spiritual wisdom of ancient rishis (sages). The word "Rishis" means Sages, these two words have been used interchangeably in this research. This particular text that from the last part is called "Upanishads" (Radhakrishnan, 1914). So Vedanta consist of the wisdom of the ancient rishis, has found in the Upanishads. From the standpoint of spiritual practices, Vedanta is to be understood "Moksha Shastra" which means scriptural teaching that lead to liberation or Moksha. Moksha literally means "freedom", freedom from suffering, here and now. The liberated or enlightened person is the one who completely freed from the suffering through the teaching of Vedanta. To sum up, in eastern wisdom, vedanta is the solution the human suffering.

Vedanta is a separate school of thought which is part of the eastern wisdom. There are numerous variations of Vedanta, such as Advaita, Dvaita, and Vishit Advaita (Purushothaman, Kumaran, & Civilization, 2014). All these school of thoughts come under the single umbrella term "Vedanta". Vedanta – being an ancient ideology – entails distinct, rational, scientific philosophies for the scholars of the modern era of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Advaita Vedanta**

Advaita mean non-dual. The foundation of Advaita Vedanta is rooted in Upanishad. The Upanishads contains the wisdom of ancient sages called "Rishis". Adi Shankara Acharya has disseminated the teaching of Advaita Vedanta by writing a commentary in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Consciousness in Advaita Vedanta**

Advaita Vedanta goes all the way back to the Upanishads. Advaita vedanta says there is only one consciousness, consciousness is one unit, it is one consciousness shining through hundreds of millions of minds and bodies (Indich, 1995). In the advaitic approach to consciousness, matter is an appearance in consciousness; matter is the material universe, nothing separate from consciousness. Consciousness is not only all pervasive but there is matter appears in consciousness to consciousness. It is not a second reality apart from consciousness, so consciousness is non-dual - no second thing apart from consciousness. It can be further explained through Sat, Cit and Ananda. Here the word "Sat" means real or eternal, the word "Cit" means consciousness, the word "Ananda" means bliss or inner source of happiness.

According to Advaita vedanta universe is nothing apart from consciousness, it sounds so unwise, so widely different from what we are used to we think of this material

universe as the solid reality in which consciousness is just a spark like a you know like an epiphenomenon. Advaita reverses this consciousness is the solid reality, it is the only reality that we can ever be certain of, the material universe is obviously an appearance in consciousness.

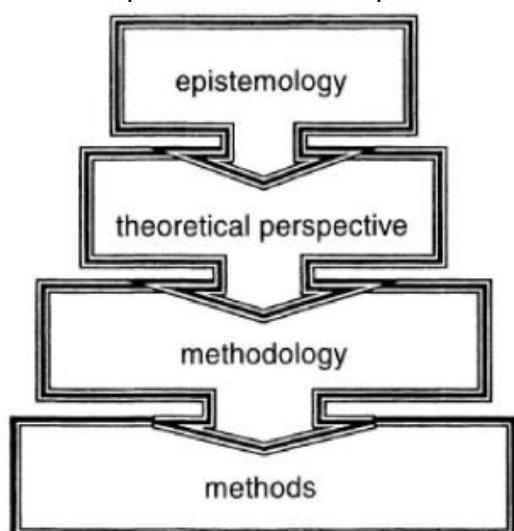
Take the piece of paper and the pen, they're separate, pen is separate from paper and paper is separate from pen but when you come to something like clay and pot - the classic vedantic upanishadic example, Clay is not the pot but the pot is nothing other than clay, once the pot is broken, it's no longer a pot but it's still clay. clay is not the same thing as pot, pot is a name and a form and a function imposed on clay temporarily but the part is nothing other than the clay - the part cannot exist for a minute for a second without its constitutive substance.

Similarly, another good analogy is our dreams, you are not your dreams, you are Independent, you can exist without anything that you saw in the dream, you do exist, you wake up from a dream but your dreams are nothing; your dreams are nothing apart from you, they do not exist for a moment when you wake up they disappear, if you do not support it, according to Advaita vedanta, the universe is the dream of consciousness.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Strategy

An important attention is to identify a suitable research methodology that will qualify to answer research question. This research study is using qualitative research methodology. This research is grounded in the critical hermeneutic approach. The hermeneutic methodology developed out of the work of Jürgen Habermas. Drawing on the work of Crotty (1998), research methodology may be defined as a strategy or plan of action. Crotty (1998) states the four important elements are important for a research process. These important four elements are depicted in Figure 1.



**Source: (Crotty, 1998)**

**Figure 1. Four key elements of research process**

These four elements of research process can be explained as follows:

- **Methods:** Methods are used as a procedures or techniques to analyze and gather data related to research questions of the study.
- **Methodology:** Methodology is known as a strategy or plan of action to decide a particular method.
- **Theoretical Perspective:** It is a philosophical stance which provides a context for the research process.
- **Epistemology:** It is a theory of knowledge which is rooted in the theoretical perspective and in methodology.

This research is based on the following research process, presented in Figure 2.

Epistemology	Theoretical perspective	Methodology	Methods
Objectivism Constructionism Subjectivism (and their variants)	Positivism (and post-positivism) Interpretivism • Symbolic interactionism • Phenomenology Hermeneutics Critical inquiry Feminism Postmodernism etc.	Experimental research Survey research Ethnography Phenomenological research Grounded theory Heuristic inquiry Action research Discourse analysis Feminist standpoint research etc.	Sampling Measurement and scaling Questionnaire Observation • participant • non-participant Interview Focus group Case study Life history Narrative Visual ethnographic methods Statistical analysis Data reduction Theme identification Comparative analysis Cognitive mapping Interpretative methods Document analysis Content analysis Conversation analysis etc.

Source: Crotty, M. (1998)

Figure 2. Four key elements of research process

From the Figure 2, following elements of research process are adopted to carry out intended research inquiry. The chosen element of research process is depicted in Figure 3.

Epistemology	Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Methods
Constructionism	Hermeneutics	Critical hermeneutics	Conceptual analysis

Source: Author

Figure 3: Elements of research process adopted for this research inquiry



## **Constructionism**

The main claim of Constructionism is that all knowledge and meaningful reality is not discovered but constructed. Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). As this research is intended to explore the meaning of Consciousness from Advaita Vedanta perspective where the notion of consciousness is based on the wisdom ancient sages who constructed the meanings as they engaged with the world. A thoughtful conclusion will support the Constructionism as an epistemology to conduct this research under the light of this theoretical perspective. Since the research of this stance is that reality is socially constructed as the text of Upanishad was constructed with the interaction of social actors with their world, namely ancient sages – the writer of Upanishad. So, it justifies the choice of this theoretical perspective.

## **Hermeneutics**

The word "Hermeneutics" is derived from a Greek verb "Hermeneuein" which means "to interpret". Similarly, the Greek noun "Hermenias" which means "interpretation" can be linked with Hermes – a messenger of Greek gods in Greek mythology. It was the responsibility of Hermes to get the divine message of Greek gods (i.e. Zeus) and to explain to the humans. Hermeneutics can be defined as "art of interpretation". Since the Hermeneutics concerned with the understanding, our intended study is concerned with the understanding of consciousness from the view point of Advaita Vedanta – eastern approach.

## **Critical Hermeneutics**

Critical hermeneutics developed as an important domain when prominent critical scholar Jürgen Habermas participated in discourse on hermeneutics in order to expand its horizon (Prasad & Mir, 2002). He gave new direction to hermeneutics by identifying the three generic domains of human interest: the technical, the practical and the emancipatory.

Hermeneutics can be defined as the "study of textual Interpretation". Critical hermeneutical analysis has to be done under the light of following key concepts.

- Hermeneutics Circle
- Fusion of Horizon
- Rejection of author-intentionality
- Emancipation

Taken as a whole, these five methodological procedures turn critical hermeneutics into a powerful device for interpreting/understanding the notion of consciousness.

## **Methods**

Conceptual analysis has been used as per the requirement of the study. It is suitable method under critical hermeneutical methodology as this study is interpreting the notion of consciousness which itself is a concept.

## **ANALYSIS**

Our analysis starts by applying key concepts of critical hermeneutics namely, Hermeneutics Circle, Fusion of Horizon, Rejection of author-intentionality, and Emancipation.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

This study will contribute towards the literature of this evolving multi-disciplinary approach of Consciousness studies. The ever-increasing interest in consciousness studies is creating a new revival in philosophy in the 21st century, the century of artificial intelligence (AI). However, the scope of this research is of universal significance.

### **Future Research**

Future research can be conducted by using Phenomenological hermeneutics to explore the notion of Consciousness in Advaita Vedanta. Comparative research between Advaita Vedanta and Panpsychism can be conducted to highlight the similarities and differences in both approaches to consciousness.

### **References**

- Chalmers, D. (2018). The meta-problem of consciousness.
- Crotty, M. (1998). The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process: Sage.
- Hawking, S. (2010). The grand design: Random House Digital, Inc.
- Koch, C. (2019). The Feeling of Life Itself: Why Consciousness is Widespread But Can't be Computed: Mit Press.
- Kriegel, U. (2020). The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness: Oxford University Press.
- Levine, J. J. P. p. q. (1983). Materialism and qualia: The explanatory gap. 64(4), 354-361.
- Purushothaman, A., Kumaran, S. J. J. o. I. C., & Civilization. (2014). A vedantic study of "cosmic consciousness"-Brahmam. 1, 1-27.
- Saher, P. J. (1969). Eastern wisdom and Western thought: A comparative study in the modern philosophy of religion.
- Thompson, E. (2014). Waking, dreaming, being: Self and consciousness in neuroscience, meditation, and philosophy: Columbia University Press.
- Hans-Georg, G. (1975). Truth and method.
- Schleiermacher, F. J. S. H., & criticism. (1809). General hermeneutics. 227-268.
- Mendelson, J. J. N. G. C. (1979). The Habermas-Gadamer Debate. (18), 44-73.
- Prasad, A., & Mir, R. J. T. J. o. B. C. (2002). Digging deep for meaning: A critical hermeneutic analysis of CEO letters to shareholders in the oil industry. 39(1), 92-116.
- Jacobs, A. H. J. S. A. J. o. P. (2014). Critical hermeneutics and higher education: A perspective on texts, meaning and institutional culture. 33(3), 297-310.
- Radhakrishnan, S. J. T. I. J. o. E. (1914). The Vedanta philosophy and the doctrine of Maya. 24(4), 431-451.
- Indich, W. M. (1995). Consciousness in advaita vedanta: Motilal Banarsidass Publ.