

The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual

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THE ENIGMA OF I-CONSCIOUSNESS

by *Anindita N. Balslev*

Abstract. Does reflection on the phenomenon of I-consciousness only lead to a reaffirmation that what is closest to us is furthest from our understanding? This enigmatic theme has been addressed in Indian and Western philosophical traditions from various perspectives, with different intents. Why do philosophers disagree while accounting for this phenomenon, although they seem to generally accept the indubitability of I-consciousness? The discussion focuses on the kind of philosophical issues that are raised and how differently these are dealt with. In the process, the reader will be acquainted with various types of analyses from the history of Indian thought, where one comes across many renditions of contrasting views about "Self" as a well as of "No-Self." The focus is in how these enquiries gradually assume not only epistemological and metaphysical but also important ethico-religious dimensions. Beginning with naturalistic interpretations in the Indian context, it will be outlined why mainstream traditions reject naturalism as an explanatory model.

Keywords: cross-cultural; epistemology; ethics; I-consciousness; Indian philosophy; mind-body problem; naturalism; no-self; physicalism; reductionism; self; soteriology; subjectivity

It so happens that long before my formal initiation as a student of philosophy, I used to wonder about this phenomenon of I-consciousness. In particular, I was—and still am—intrigued by the way it sustains its identity in the midst of all factual and conceivable changes surrounding it, but most of all, by the way it guards its secrets in a stubborn and invincible

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manner by resisting all effort to unveil it. I continued reflecting on it and in course of time got acquainted with various renditions of this theme in cross-cultural philosophical discourses. Although it still remains an open question, I have gradually become aware of some of the peculiar features that are characteristics of this specific phenomenon.

Given that I-consciousness occupies a central place in our mental life, it is not really easy at the outset to figure out what sort of philosophical questions can at all be raised with regard to this phenomenon. Indeed, many topics entailing words and notions that have been subjects for philosophical reflections are at first seen as problem-free, perhaps because of their frequent conventional usages with seemingly standard implications. All the same, these have provoked thinkers across the boundaries of cultures to ponder over. Consider for example the way that words and ideas such as God or time are used conventionally—almost everybody uses these terms—but nevertheless critical reflections and thought-experimentations on these themes have resulted in vast documents that have accumulated over the centuries. Existing literature on these subjects demonstrates that alternative interpretive strategies are employed in order to discern their significance, which in turn give rise to a wide range of views. Among the radical alternative possibilities that have been suggested with regard to these notions are whether these are merely conceptual constructions or are these integral features of what is called *reality*.

It is equally surprising that when we look at the recorded history of ideas we not only feel awestruck at the variety of readings on these topics but to find that often despite systematic philosophical argumentations in favor of one view, the opponents' views do not simply vanish. It is amazing that some of the most profound problems whose challenge we continue to face are indeed those that we are neither able to resolve to our satisfaction nor to dissolve as being irrelevant or trivial. Our fascination with such questions remains unimpeded. I-consciousness is such a theme.

Anyway, we are gradually persuaded to recognize that the task of philosophy seems to be more importantly to raise questions than provide final answers. We also learn to notice that the critical questions that are raised are not only with regard to their nature and function but also those that shed doubt about the claims of their very existence. Thus, for example, some may be fully convinced that there is God, whereas others may consider it to be entirely fictitious, at best as an idea invented by the priestly class. Also note that this idea has been questioned not only within materialistic or naturalistic frameworks. There are traditions of thinking that actually know of clear soteriological orientations, that is, where there is unmistakably a project for attaining Freedom these traditions retain their nontheistic character, where there is no mention of any notion of personal God, such as in the case of Buddhism, which is one of our world religions.

Again, in order to appreciate the complexity and profundity of the conceptual situation that incites theory-making endeavors, let's take the example of the topic of time (Balslev 2009). Look at the extensive records of debates in the history of philosophy—Western as well as Indian—regarding whether time is an objective reality or is it subjective, whether it is to be considered as an ontological category or simply as a conceptual construal, etc. The point to note is that in both these cases—God or time—there are not only examples of different views on these but also recorded instances of outright disavowals about the claim of their very existence.

THE INDUBITABILITY OF I-CONSCIOUSNESS

I have been mentioning these in order to draw your attention to a unique characteristic of the phenomenon of I-consciousness, which is the topic of discussion today. No one questions or denies the presence of this phenomenon. I-consciousness plays a pivotal role in our mental life. There is room for doubt with regard to whether there is God or not, whether there is time or not but no one asks “whether I am or not.” Rather, it is acknowledged that even if just about everything else can be doubted, there is hardly any room for doubt in this case. Its indomitable presence in all experience is of such magnitude that it seems absurd to contest its existence. There are explicit statements by many philosophers across cultures expressing the conviction that this phenomenon is beyond the scope of that ardent philosophical skepticism that can call into question the claim of existence of just about anything else—God, time, reality of external world etc. Recall the well-known utterance of Vacaspati Misra, who while elaborating on Shankara's famous commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* remarks: “No one doubts whether I am or not, nor does anyone maintain the contrary of I am” and then he further observes that I-sense is not a matter of mediate knowledge, but that it is “immediate, hence unquestioned.” Again, recall how Jean Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher, in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, has put it in his characteristic manner: “No one says, *perhaps* I have an ego” ([1957] 1960).

It can be said that there is unanimity among philosophers cross-culturally concerning the thesis that *I-consciousness is indubitable*. To be sure, many remarks by different philosophers from both hemispheres could be quoted in support of the thesis of the indubitability of I-consciousness. (It is not easy to collect examples of such unanimity among philosophers with regard to most other topics). However, this consensus should not augment any expectation that in the long-run philosophical accounts and analyses of the theme of I-consciousness are likely to converge or that theoreticians will opt for a common interpretive strategy or eventually go for a common explanatory model.

As I had mentioned in the beginning—what is especially remarkable about I-consciousness is the manner in which the phenomenon seems to be able to guard its deep mystery by resisting every cognitive attempt to unveil it. Questions remain and this is so even in the case of such philosophers who otherwise steadfastly proclaim its indubitability, as Descartes did. His thesis “*cogito ergo sum*” is well known ([1641] 1993), but let us also listen to him carefully as he wonders: “I know that I exist; the question is, what is this ‘I’ that I know?”

Let me emphasize here that the crucial question for philosophical investigations is not “whether I exist or not.” The matter for enquiry really is, “what is this ‘I’ that I know?” given that, to repeat with Descartes, since, “I know that I exist.”

I-CONSCIOUSNESS IN CROSS-CULTURAL PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

In what follows, I will focus on the multiple facets of the theme of I-consciousness indicating issues and concerns that know of many overlaps in the cross-cultural philosophical context, and will occasionally refer to Western philosophy but mainly to philosophical analysis from the history of Indian thought in order to show how differently philosophers have responded to that key question: “What is this ‘I’ that I know?” and discuss briefly some of the implications that are read into these answers.

In a way, it is rather astonishing that there can at all be room for such a range of conceptual possibilities for interpreting this simple, indisputable awareness expressed in the word “I,” as it seems to be at first sight. However, the fact is that philosophers who attempted to discern the status and the constitution of this apparently uncomplicated phenomenon of I-consciousness—in the past as in the present, and that too across the boundaries of cultures—seem to be puzzled by the perplexities that are entailed in it. Indeed, it is their observations and comments—cautious and penetrating—with regard to this theme that has created the intellectual space in which the alternative modes of interpretations have gradually emerged. Like many other major philosophical problems, I-consciousness has been looked at from diverse perspectives such as the phenomenological, the metaphysical, the epistemological, and the linguistic. In fact, if one watches carefully the various usages of the word “I” in everyday language and the variety of ways in which its sense is actually deciphered and grasped, one can begin to perceive the complexities that call for explanation and how these actually open up the possibilities for diverse metaphysical renditions. Among others, the linguistic investigations have given rise to a range of questions regarding the referent of the pronoun in the first person, singular number. Besides these, there are other intriguing features pertaining to I-consciousness that deserve mention as this theme knows not only of phenomenological, epistemological, linguistic, and metaphysical

but also of ethical and even of soteriological dimensions. To try to obtain a comprehensive view of this intricate situation where some or all of these divergent aspects can be adequately dealt with in a coherent manner is by no means an easy task. However, such efforts definitely bring out the formidable challenges that need to be confronted just as these also explicate why there have emerged so many contending viewpoints on the theory-making front.

Given these intricacies, it is truly interesting to observe that whatever may be the genre of philosophy and however varied be the accounts concerning this theme, the presence of I-consciousness as an integral component of all our experience hardly provokes any misgiving. In fact, it is precisely because nobody seems to question whether or not there is such a phenomenon that renders the story of unraveling I-consciousness all the more perplexing. However, while exploring the theme of I-consciousness, it is important to take note that neither the fact that there is such an awareness (*pratiti*), nor that it is expressible via a linguistic entity such as the word “I” (*asmad-sabda*), a pronoun in first person singular number constituting an essential component of conventional language, are at all matters of any controversy. This observation holds in the cross-cultural philosophical context. Philosophical disagreements seem to become pronounced when one attempts to account for the source or the basis, the nature and structure of the phenomenon. The many inherent difficulties of such an enquiry become explicit as one investigates such questions as what specifically forms the base of I-consciousness or what the word “I” actually refers to.

In this connection, it may be mentioned that the phenomenon of subjectivity—a topic that has been currently a subject matter of much discussion among the neurophilosophers in the field of consciousness-studies—is rightly recognized to be a feature that can be attributed to consciousness alone. Evidently, this is intimately related to the issue of I-consciousness prompting a series of questions. Among those that can be listed as being central to this enquiry, one could consider the following: Is the egological structure integral to consciousness or not? No matter which of the alternative positions one seeks to support, an explanation is needed regarding how to account for the status of I-consciousness. Apart from these, there are a number of other issues that have been repeatedly discussed in the philosophical circles such as whether all consciousness is consciousness of something or is consciousness in essence nonintentional? Again, how to account for consciousness of consciousness? Is a state of consciousness self-revealing or must it be revealed by a subsequent state? Is consciousness a substance, a quality, or a function, and many other issues? These form a common pool of concerns and questions, which, as is to be expected, are answered variously by the advocates of various schools.

Indeed, while following the story of the theory-making endeavors about I-consciousness in a cross-cultural philosophical setting, one notices that it is precisely this process of intellection (*manana*) that brings forth alternative

answers to various queries, some of which get steadily crystallized into full-fledged theories. Moreover, although such enquiries proceed through different venues and give rise to theories that know of a great deal of variation, it has seemed to me that there are nevertheless some dominant paradigms. There are, on the one hand, those that highlight the idea of self as the source and basis of I-consciousness and on the other hand, others which categorically deny such an explanatory model, while advocating one or another version of a no-self theory. However, let me repeat once again that in all these attempts aspiring to account for the phenomenon of I-consciousness, the question “do I exist or not” is held to be nothing but redundant. This is an important point that must not be lost sight of. Again, while dealing with ideas of self or no-self theoreticians also seem to struggle with two major rival explanatory models—the model that subscribes to naturalism in one or another version and that which regards the naturalistic mode of understanding consciousness to be absurd. In the naturalistic camp, it is noteworthy, one comes across various forms of physicalism (*dehatmavada*) and there is again room for internal differences, mostly by affirming or abandoning the strategy of reductionism.

I-CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIAN THOUGHT

Self or No-Self. At this juncture, let me now turn to the Indian conceptual world. Indeed the intense preoccupation with this question of consciousness has given rise to the two major traditions that are born in the Indian cultural soil—the Upanishadic and the Buddhist. There are other important traditions (such as Jainism, etc.), but I will focus only on the Upanishadic and the Buddhist, the former being designated as *atmavada* as it is here the idea of Atman or self that plays the central role and the latter as *anatmavada*, as it stands for the no-self view. Each of these traditions knows of different versions of their preferred positions that have been historically held by various schools that emerged within their respective frames. The literature is a rich repository of ideas and bears witness to the ardent philosophical engagement in exploring the theme of consciousness in general and of I-consciousness in particular. For the participants of these traditions, these ideas are of capital importance for their respective soteriology as well. The story of these internal divergences within each tradition is not only intellectually stimulating it is also spiritually elevating. Each is a representation of an inward journey exposing the amazing dimensions of subjectivity that usually escape detection. Also, it is noteworthy that the Upanishadic and the Buddhist traditions share much in common despite their metaphysical differences and that they have all refused to accept the view advocated by the Indian Naturalists who held consciousness to be nothing more than a natural phenomenon. The debates and the polemics that ensued among the proponents of various versions

of self and no-self theories as well as that of Naturalism actually spanned over centuries. These documents witness the varied historical phases of the intellectual movements in India.

Given that a declared tenet of the Upanishadic tradition is that “Knowledge of the self is the highest knowledge” (i.e., salvatory knowledge), the project of unraveling I-consciousness becomes a key challenge, since no other issue can bring us closer to understanding what the self is all about. All the Upanishadic schools of philosophy acknowledge the ontological existence of the self and all agree that knowledge of the self is indispensable for obtaining emancipation from bondage.

However, the existing documents of philosophical discourses show that the quest for the self, despite some core common perceptions, has yielded results that know of significant variations. Although no one questions the presence of I-consciousness, since it is accessible and testified by all (*sarvanubhavasiddha*), still the advocates of various schools belonging to this tradition have responded differently to the question “what is this I?” Consequently, issues like whether the I is identical with the Atman the “true self” or is it to be taken as merely empirical, whether this is a simple, homogenous entity or is it composite in character become matters of debate and discussion.

Naturalism. Before taking a closer look at the various conceptual models of the self in the Upanishadic tradition that go along with their respective analyses of I-consciousness, it is worth noting that they unanimously rejected the naturalistic contention that the self/consciousness is a natural phenomenon—a view that was propagated by the Carvakas. There are of course internal differences among these ancient Indian naturalists in their efforts to weave comprehensive theories, but they all agreed that the phenomenon of consciousness does not need to be treated as a separate ontological category and that it must be accounted for as a natural phenomenon.

Despite the paucity of material that is available to us in order to reconstruct a complete picture of the naturalistic movement in India, it is clear that there were also important differences among the different versions of physicalism that they propounded. These theories, while seeking to account for the emergence of consciousness, focused either on the body (*deha*), the sense organs (*indriya*), or the mind (*mana*). They argued that the seat of selfhood is to be found in one of these, since no one has ever perceived consciousness outside or independent of these. Many of the analogies used in support of these views show that these philosophers, while reflecting within the naturalistic frame, were advocating and anticipating various versions of physicalism, reductionism, epiphenomenalism, etc. in an elementary form, of which we know many sophisticated formulations today.

It is equally interesting to observe how attitudes to ethics and soteriology are influenced. Like the Greek Epicureans, the Carvakas advocated hedonism, claiming pleasure to be the highest good (*summum bonum*) in life. This being the only life, they argued, one ought to seek maximization of pleasure. There are various sayings attributed to them such as—“As long as you live, live happily, borrow money but live on butter.” They ridiculed religious beliefs and proclaimed that ideas of God, salvation, and that of the “other” world are all inventions of the priestly class, who preach these since they need to have a livelihood. “Death is salvation”—the Carvakas boldly uttered.

Be that as it may, what is commonly shared by the Naturalists—Indian and Western, ancient and modern—is that none of them without any exception subscribe to dualism. This also explains why the Cartesian dualistic understanding of matter as *res extensa* and the mind as *res cogitans* has been a target of attack by many naturalists in the West. There has been much discussion both for and against the very idea that there are two radically different kinds of substance—the extended and the unextended thinking substance. However, this dualistic position has exerted considerable influence and there are advocates to this day who propound the view alongside others who consider that reading to belong to some prescientific period. Interestingly, a nonphysical view of the self is prevalent also among scientists and critical thinkers of our time. One such example is the book entitled *The Self and Its Brain*, published as late as in 1977, written jointly by the neurophysiologist John Eccles and the well-known philosopher Karl Popper. Moreover, as we know, there are many examples of internal divergences among the naturalists today as well. Some of them are rigorously reductionists, but there are others who vehemently oppose that stance, some even, while rejecting substance dualism, look at the possibility for attribute-dualism, trying more or less successfully to work it out within the naturalistic frame of thinking.

The schools that emerged within the Upanishadic tradition systematically took up the challenges that were presented by these naturalistic thinkers. We come across in the literature records of elaborate discussions on a range of issues. Among the advocates of the Upanishadic schools who made significant attempts to establish their own positions, precisely by going against the hardcore naturalistic readings, are those who tacitly claim that the word “I” refers to the self. Some of them are dualists and their views are not unlike the Cartesian stand. A few of the major schools argued that the self or atman could not be identified with the body, the sense organs, or the mind taken separately or as an aggregate; the self is a distinct reality that stands apart (*“deha-mana-indriyatirikta”*). The philosophical arguments that are put forward in support of this position range from analysis of language to accounts of explanations of such psychological phenomena as memory, recognition, etc. How to

understand the phenomenon of consciousness in relation to this notion of self again becomes a crucial matter for philosophical speculation. There are in fact several views. Gradually, as relevant documents disclose, the analyses become more and more subtle and refined and the differences among the Upanishadic schools themselves become intriguingly poignant, despite their unanimous adherence to the idea of the ontological reality of self and their common refusal to accept Naturalism as a satisfactory philosophical strategy. The philosophical search concerning the status of consciousness gave rise to different views. This is also largely due to the employment of diverse conceptual strategies and setting up of metaphysical and epistemological frameworks, although inevitably there is room in each system for the self as an unchanging and unchangeable ontological reality. This is itself a long story.

Homogeneity versus Heterogeneity. What is of special interest for the present discussion is to note that whereas some of the schools from within the tradition such as Vaisesika, Mimamsa, and the Dualist Vedanta hold the position that the self, being the referent of the “I,” is a homogenous entity, a substance, etc., there are other schools such as Sankhya, Yoga, which advocate a view of heterogeneous constitution of I-consciousness. The most radical understanding of the idea of self emerges in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta where the self is understood not only as something apart from the body, sense-organ, and the mind (*deha-mana-indriya*) but also from the “I.” The analysis pushes toward the idea of the ontological reality of the nondual consciousness, entailing a clear distinction between the self and the ego. A deeper understanding of subjectivity emerges where consciousness in its transcendental aspect is not treated as being knowable or objectifiable but as the ultimate subject in the light of which the “I” is seen as merely empirical, derived, even as not-self. A metaphysics entailing the idea of plurality of selves is rejected. This is how the philosophy of nondualism seeks to highlight the Upanishadic reading that “the self is the self of all.”

All these need elaboration. It is not possible within the short compass of this paper to go into the details of the analysis that knows of much philosophical ingenuity. However, the story of the history of Indian philosophy pertaining to the theme of I-consciousness does not end there. An investigator encounters as well a conceptual reading where the notion of an identical self as the basis of I-consciousness has been questioned and the very idea of an abiding, indivisible self has been perceived as a major fallacy. The Buddhists were perhaps the pioneers in this direction in recorded history as these philosophers had introduced already around 500 B.C. the no-self theory, adopting a strategy of looking at ourselves as composites (*sanghata*), as a stream (*santana*) rather than as indivisible, identical entities. However, abandoning the notion of self is no easy task. Indeed, there exists

detailed documents of centuries of controversies on this issue that show how a chain of Atmavadins kept insisting on the indispensability of the idea of the self or atman on epistemological, metaphysical, ethico-religious grounds, and the way the Buddhists defended their position adamantly, claiming that all these issues can be settled adequately while retaining the No-self stand. The Buddhist philosophers hold that what is generally taken as identity is no more than a matter of similarity of conscious moments. Based on “*Ksanabhangavada*”—entailing the idea that the moment and the momentary coalesce ontologically, and “that which does not change does not exist,” the Buddhists rejected the notion of substance. Since nothing is exempt from change, it follows that there cannot be any unchanging self in the midst of the changing states of consciousness. Thus, a battle of ideas ensues. However, if the Buddhists insist that not only psychological phenomena such as memory, recognition, but also ethical, soteriological projects are explicable on the basis of this no-self stand, the Upanishadic thinkers persistently maintain that to be an impossible task. In brief, the Upanishadic conceptual world keeps on highlighting the notion of an abiding self as being foundational and fundamental whereas to the Buddhist, it is a superfluous conjecture, regarded even as a hindrance for ethical and soteriological pursuits. It is, however, noteworthy that the ideas of “beginningless world-process” (*anadi samsara*), moral retribution (karma), and rebirth remain the common elements in all Indic traditions, and there is much sharing of common values despite metaphysical differences.

It is interesting to recall in this connection that there is a record of dispute between the naturalists and the Buddhists that says that the Carvakas ask the Buddhists to join them since—like them—the Buddhists have equally abandoned the Upanishadic idea of self. In reply the Buddhists, who pursue the goal of Nirvana and accept Karma and rebirth, point out that they do not share the Carvaka naturalistic conception of consciousness. Debates continue.

THE UNIQUENESS OF I-CONSCIOUSNESS

At this juncture, let me now dwell on a few interesting points that this intricate process of reflection reveal regarding how this phenomenon of I-consciousness actually differs from any other topic of intellectual scrutiny—no matter how profound, complex, or abstract such latter concerns may happen to be. To begin with, this difference lies in the peculiar way I-consciousness manifests itself, the way its presence is apprehended. The episode of the awareness of the I is unlike any other episode where one is confronted with something distinctly as an “other” to or as an “object” of consciousness. This has prompted a range of epistemological analyses.

There are several theories regarding how the I is known and the related problems of I as the knower and the I as known, etc.

Again, it is also remarkable that although the presence of I-consciousness is universally acknowledged, what makes it especially difficult to unveil is the fact that the I is never encountered in our experience in an isolated fashion. This is evidently one prime feature that has been observed by some philosophers across cultures. No matter how carefully one proceeds to examine, by going deep into that inner recess of experience in order to grasp the sense of I-ness in its transparency, it resists disclosure. We simply cannot capture the "I-phenomenon" in abstraction for a philosophical inspection. It remains constantly and continuously intermingled with some other component, which is other than the "I." Even when one seeks to withdraw from everything else and to clasp it existentially or looks for the exact referent or even search for a sense of what is linguistically expressed by the pronoun in first person singular number, it can hardly be entirely disentangled from the not-I.

Philosophers in India and the West have indeed analyzed the word "I" with much skill. The literature is vast. Let me only mention here that the philosophical contribution of Advaita Vedanta from within the Upanishadic tradition is especially significant for throwing light on the distinctive characteristic of the word "I" by distinguishing it from the word "this," which is also an indexical. K.C. Bhattacharya, an Advaitin of the last century, has done a masterful work showing the peculiarity of the word "I" in his *Studies in Vedanta*. He, while following the traditional Advaitic insights, observes that the word "I" as used by a speaker is not understood by the hearer to convey what he would himself convey by the use of it. If he uses the word, he would intend himself and not the speaker. However, note that the hearer understands the word "I" in a manner that is different from as he would in the case of the word "this." In other words, it is possible for you and I and for that matter for us all to use the word "this" (the table) and mean the same but the word "I" can never be used by the speaker and the hearer to intend the same common referent as is possible in the case of "this." Bhattacharya makes the subtle observation that the word "I" cannot be said to have "a singular or a general reference." The term, he points out, "is not singular in the sense that different people use it of the same thing and not general in the sense that it is understood by any of the different things at a time."

My intention of bringing up the peculiarities of the episode of the consciousness of I and of the word "I" is to show that this is a theme that cannot be problematized as any other problem that comes in front of our intellectual scrutiny. This defiance is precisely because of its very intimate and subjective character whose source and support is not open for any facile cognitive grasp. It is, indeed, the "puzzle of all puzzles," as William James said it (2007). This is perhaps why a disclosure of I-consciousness

invariably demands much more than a purely cognitive probe in a discursive mode. No wonder that, as it is described in the Upanishads, the project of unveiling I-consciousness is inevitably bound to assume the character of a quest that requires a readiness to walk on a “razor’s edge.”

In any case, deeper reflections gradually disclose an unfolding of the multiple layers of I-consciousness. It is not only absolutely central to all our cogitations on cognitions, emotions, and volitions but also invariably impregnated with deep existential concerns having subtle moral as well as soteriological dimensions. Here, we are confronted with a theme that is at the very root of our existence, which seems to be inextricably intertwined with the recurrent and rotating states of sleep, dream, and wakefulness. These states encompass what each of us calls “my life,” demarcating it thereby from the lives of others. To put it more poignantly, I-consciousness is, on the one hand, inseparably linked with our cherished sense of being here and now, and on the other hand, it can hardly be disentangled from the weird sense of uncertainty that arises from not knowing how it has manifested itself in the first place. To this, as if to make matters even worse, there is added a feeling of dead certainty that this “I” is not here to stay, at least not in its present accustomed base. It is noteworthy that in all cases, the immediate context of the awareness involves a physical complex that I describe as “my body.” Indeed, along with I-consciousness, there is always entailed a feeling of intimacy with “my body,” where the line between a sense of identity and that of difference is blurred but not fully missing.¹

In the history of ideas, one encounters a host of theories interpreting the dawning of “I-sense” in relation to this intimate yet ambivalent “body-awareness,” giving rise to such competing theoretical claims that are designated as dualism and monism. Each of these positions knows of several versions and subtle internal divergences. The former philosophical stance clearly acknowledges the reality of both, whereas the latter seems to assume the form either of one of the several versions of physicalism, or to swing to the other extreme, affirming the sole ontological reality of consciousness, while accounting for the first person variously. Indeed, there are a variety of nomenclatures that bear witness to the delicate intricacies that theory makers introduce while weaving theories about the status of I-consciousness—a phenomenon that otherwise no one doubts or denies. Interestingly, there are also some theoreticians who even claim the “I” to be no more than a conventional, socially constituted linguistic entity. Evidently, this is a vast and multifaceted topic.

THE NEED FOR CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION

Before wrapping up this essay let me make a few observations. A comprehensive undertaking in this direction is a venture that calls for collaborative work. This is still missing, largely due to the present

organization of academia along with the existing disciplinary structures. The science-religion forums such as The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS) can indeed render a huge service by encouraging a creative exploration of relevant issues that demands a crossing of disciplinary and cultural boundaries. There are diverse philosophical, scientific, mythological, and religious narratives containing imaginative speculations not only about the source of I-sense but also regarding its destiny in its eventual encounter with death (and thereafter?). Discourses, ancient and modern, are available across cultures that describe its emergence in terms of its creation/its embodiment/its embrainment. Some speak of its ultimate immortal character, others—on the contrary—of its inevitable dissolution and of its eventual passing into nothingness. Although there is consensus about life of the “I” being transitory, there are some who depict its present life to be unique, unrepeatable, whereas there are others that hold out the possibility of its many lives, understanding mortality as the shedding of the physical garb with which it is provisionally associated at present. Often these diverse interpretations are situated within soteriological frameworks. Renditions naturally are at variance in gross and subtle ways. Deliberations still continue about whether the phenomenon can exist independently only in close association with the physical and the neurobiological processes. Some keep wondering about how the first person features can be entirely embedded in physiological processes, holding instead the view that this phenomenon is an expression of an irreducible, nonphysical principle. All cultures are storehouses of such stories. A fresh assessment of all these issues within a common framework of enquiry will, among others, lead to a critical review of such positions as epiphenomenalism, psychophysical parallelism, mind-body interactionism, etc.—positions that have been philosophically defended as well as questioned earlier. Perhaps eventually, new conceptual strategies will be innovated that have not been tried before.

However, it is a hopeful sign that today there is a clear recognition among thinkers that any attempt to comprehend our role and our place in nature demands a discernment of what consciousness is all about. Let me also mention here that the drift in contemporary interest on the topic of consciousness is remarkably strong in the West today—especially since the demise of behaviorism. The theme of consciousness is no longer regarded as redundant or as one of purely antiquarian interest for recapitulating a chapter of bygone history of ideas or even sidetracked as one of those topics, marked as mysterious and miraculous, on which religious superstition capitalizes. Indeed today, it seems to be an opportune moment for bridging the gaps in the ongoing Western discourse by bringing into play various ideas and issues that have been discussed and debated for centuries on this large theme of consciousness in the history of Indian thought. I tend to think that an overall survey of these ideas in a cross-cultural context

could pave the way for a deeper understanding of issues and help us to adequately appraise these ancient as well as the modern controversies among the naturalists and the nonnaturalists regarding the status of consciousness.

Indeed the current naturalistic readings are born of knowledge of neurobiology and not merely of theoretical speculations based on everyday experience, which often was unquestionably the case in bygone eras. However, what is fascinating to observe is that despite their common claim that their views are based on scientific data, the advocates of these naturalistic theories clearly part company in their respective philosophical interpretations. Some of those philosophers who advocate naturalism propose reductionism; others prefer nonreductionistic readings of the scientific data. In other words, despite basing themselves on data derived from neurobiological sources, there are obvious conceptual differences expressed in their theory-making effort. These differences are philosophically significant.

One important point worth noting in this context is that the reading that seems to be so much in vogue in current philosophical discussions in the West, viz. the “mind” belongs to the natural order or even the idea of its materiality (*jadatva*). This idea, although much highlighted in current discourses in the field of consciousness-studies, is not any startling new conceptual reading unknown to the Indian conceptual world. As a matter of historical fact, every school belonging to the Upanishadic tradition holds it to be so, but for them mind and consciousness are not synonymous. Thus, their main philosophical difference from those who are pushing such a point of view in contemporary West with a great deal of sophistication, even by drawing support from the neurosciences, lies essentially in the construals regarding what consciousness is all about. It must also be mentioned here that the ancient Indian philosophers were not only concerned with the question of status of consciousness and self in the context of the waking state but also in the state of dream and that of dreamless sleep.

It is noteworthy that religious discourses on consciousness have had a sway from time immemorial on the minds of people. Nowadays, with the progress in the areas of neurosciences and life sciences, it is the scientific investigations that are amply influencing the conceptualization process, neurophilosophies represent the task of seeking and offering theoretical strategies for comprehending and construing the presence of consciousness in the physical universe. There are prevalent intellectual forces that operate in support of as well as against the naturalistic interpretations. Intense focus on this theme is also unmistakable in various efforts to promote science-religion dialogue at present. It is indeed time to carry out the bridge-building task within the academy, transcending the existing disciplinary boundaries among philosophy, science, and religion. In the process, the

philosophical insights available from appropriate sources, cutting across the boundaries of cultures, need to be carefully considered.

Let me conclude this narrative with a personal note. Although I never quite expected that a purely cognitive endeavor could ever unveil this deep mystery or solve this formidable puzzle, nevertheless, I have kept on reading with great interest accounts of diverse views and varied analyses over the years and have enjoyed participating in that inward journey that thinkers across cultures have dared to undertake. What is and has been of crucial interest to me is not whether or not there is any final outcome to these debates but the opportunity to share the passion of these philosophers who have helped to keep alive the undaunted spirit of human enquiry about who and what we are. While weaving theories concerning the intricate topic of I-consciousness, philosophers often demonstrate a remarkable keen sensitivity to the diverse dimensions of the question of subjectivity that generally remain unnoticed. It is both an interesting and a disconcerting task to gradually uncover before one's own critical gaze theory after theory and recognize the depth of the mystery of our own being. What is known seems insignificant when compared to what remains to be known. Cognitively speaking, in more than one way it seems to me like confronting an unknown territory. I-consciousness is an enigma—it is existentially the closest and yet furthest from our understanding.

NOTE

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1. Gabriel Marcel, in his well-known book, *L'Être et L'Avoir* observed: "The primary object with which I identify myself, but which still eludes me, is my own body. We may well think that we are here at the very heart of the mystery, in the very deepest of having."

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