



## Phenomenology of Consciousness in Ādi Śamkara and Edmund Husserl

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### Abstract

*The philosophical investigation of consciousness has a long-standing history in both Indian and Western thought. The conceptual models and analyses that have emerged in one cultural framework may be profitably reviewed in the light of another. In this context, a study of the notion of consciousness in the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl is not only important as a focus on a remarkable achievement in the context of Western thought, but is also useful for an appreciation of the concern with this question in the Indian philosophical tradition, and especially in the tradition of Advaita Vedānta of Ādi Śamkara. The starting point for this paper is the belief that phenomenology has a recognizably common face for both these traditions.*

*This paper investigates the possibility of a parallel notion of consciousness in the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl and the Advaita Vedānta of Śamkara, with particular emphasis on Husserl's 'Transcendental I' and Śamkara's 'Witness Consciousness' (Sākshi Caitanya). In the process, it explores the phenomenological relevance of the concept of consciousness in Indian philosophy, with special reference to the concept of pure consciousness as one of the essential criteria for any sound theory of knowledge. It more importantly highlights the Advaitic understanding of pure consciousness as one of the major contributions to the field of comparative philosophy that forms a vantage point for cross-cultural comparison. While pointing to significant differences in their respective approaches to understanding the nature of consciousness, the exploration finally unveils the common thesis for both Śamkara and Husserl that 'pure consciousness' is essentially foundational, evidencing and absolute for any epistemic act.*

### Introduction

In linking the philosophers' names in the phrase "Ādi Śamkara (688-720AD) and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)", the "and" does not imply any relationship or influence obtaining between the two. Any such relationship is obviously out of the question for the classical Indian philosophy of Śamkara. While it is thus only when we come to speak about more recent and contemporary trends in Indian philosophy that it

makes sense to ask if the phenomenological movement has had any impact, we can nevertheless still aspire to look for some phenomenological elements in the Advaita Vedānta of Śamkara.<sup>1</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> The crucial thesis of Śamkara's philosophy of Advaita Vedānta submits that the all-pervading consciousness called "Brahman" is the Ultimate Reality. It is the centre

paper is an exploration of the phenomenological elements in the complex world of the Vedānta doctrine of consciousness. In this context, it is worthwhile to quote the observations made by J. N. Mohanty, one of the pioneers in the study of the links between Indian philosophy and phenomenology. Mohanty greatly desired that the philosophies of ancient India should demonstrate phenomenological investigations of a high order, and accordingly comments:

It has been unfortunate that little notice of this aspect has so long been taken by Indian scholars in their attempts to place Indian philosophy in the perspective of the Western philosophies. As a result, the dynamics of philosophical thought have been lost sight of. And what we have been given has only been a table of parallel world-views on either side. A world-view, however, is not philosophy. Philosophy is an activity, progressively leading on to new truths. What comparative philosophy can best do is to trace parallel lines of progress, parallelly-motivated dynamics of thought. (Mohanty, cited in Bilimoria, 1993, p. 249)

It was during the last decades of the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th centuries that Vedāntic philosophy came to be confronted with the grand systems of German idealism, and then with the idealistic positions of the British and American neo-Hegelians. Attempts were made to look back at the systems of Vedānta, for example, through the neo-Hegelian spectacles. The attempts made by philosophers like

<sup>1</sup> Cont.

and basis of all knowledge and experience. Knowledge is the result of the association of it with the internal organ (*antahkarana*). There is no distinction between the all-pervading consciousness and the individual self (*jīva*); it is the one and the same ultimate reality, viewed differently from the *Paramārthika* (transcendental) and from the *Vyavahārika* (empirical) levels. Since the all-pervading consciousness has no distinguishing marks, it is described through the negative approach called *neti ... neti* (not this ... not this ...). It is called *Turīya*, the 'Fourth' from the perspective of three states of human consciousness, viz., waking, dream, and deep sleep. It runs through all the states remaining unaffected by them. It appears to be intentional through all the states, but essentially it is non-intentional. When the individual self attains the state of *Turīya*, he is called *Jivan-mukta*, liberated from suffering in the embodied state. Finally, Śamkara concludes that the knowledge of the world is illusory and indescribable either as real or unreal (*anirvachaniya*).

Kalidas Bhattacharyya, J. N. Mohanty, Debabrata Sinha, R. Balasubhranian and various others have paved the way for a meaningful dialogue between the two traditions. The confrontation of the Vedānta with the phenomenological movement is of recent origin. Edmund Husserl, the spearhead of recent German idealism, was led to his notion of transcendental consciousness through various philosophical motives. Similar notions are also reflected in the tradition of Indian Philosophy, especially in the Śāmkhya and Vedānta systems, where one can look for parallels. If anywhere, it is here that we find the Cartesian search for indubitability. The *Ātman* or transcendental consciousness is supposed to provide the absolute foundation for all knowledge, and indeed for all conscious behaviour. In Husserl, there is the idea of an absolute and adequate givenness, a relentless search for the 'originary' given, and the call to return to 'the things themselves'. It is, however, one of the cardinal doctrines of the Śāmkhya and the Vedānta that consciousness alone is self-given (*svaprakāśa*), that it alone in fact is the very principle of givenness, whereas all transcendence is given in and through relatedness (real or apparent) to consciousness. Within these Indian traditions, and especially in the Advaita Vedānta, consciousness is a phenomenologically primitive term. It is given apodictically and adequately, as it alone is capable of being absolutely given. Śamkara, like Husserl, traces back the ego to the dimension of transcendental consciousness which is both foundational and unconditional.

### Close Parallels in Śamkara and Husserl

Husserl happens to be one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. His philosophy seems to have gained in fascination partly because of the various apparent parallels that can be found with Indian philosophy. One such parallel between Husserl's philosophy and Indian philosophy, and central to both, is the nature of consciousness. The following discussion is aimed at investigating parallel notions between Husserl's philosophy and Indian philosophy such as (1) the nature and constitution of consciousness and (2) the distinction between the empirical and transcendental consciousness in both the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl and Śamkara's philosophy of consciousness.

The principal task of phenomenology is to understand the nature of consciousness. Over the years, both the Eastern and the Western schools of philosophy have attempted to arrive at a phenomenologically true understanding of the nature of consciousness, with their primary interest in pertinent questions such as whether consciousness is (a) pure, self-revealing and

non-intentional, (b) exclusively intentional, or (c) both self-revealing and intentional.

The schools of philosophers have argued over these issues throughout the centuries, each refining its arguments and strengthening its theses as the controversies continued to develop. In order to initiate the discussion here pertaining to the aforementioned issues regarding consciousness, it is appropriate to attempt to highlight the nature and limitations of the arguments of the respective schools.

To begin with, the philosophy of Husserl is based on certain central themes, such as the doctrine of essence, the method of description, the *epoché*, the doctrine of intentionality, the concept of lifeworld, and the doctrine of transcendental phenomenology. Husserl called his phenomenology ‘transcendental phenomenology’, with his use of ‘transcendental’ clearly having Kantian overtones. What he meant by the word was that everything in the world, and the world itself, derives its meaning from consciousness and its intentionality. The purpose of the phenomenological programme is to demonstrate that all things are constituted in consciousness, and in this sense consciousness is said to be transcendental. But consciousness is not only intentional; temporality is one of its important characterizations, so that the process of constitution is exclusively a temporal process that gives rise to the historicity of the transcendental consciousness and to the world which it constitutes. We are also confronted with the question of how I as a transcendental ego come to share a common world with other co-constituting transcendental egos.

The Indian philosophical tradition, on the other hand, has witnessed lively discussion on the nature of consciousness, identifying some of its essential features as *aparokshatva* (immediacy), *pratyakshatva* (inner nature of consciousness) and *abadhitatva* (infallibility). Although the Western tradition, and especially the Cartesian tradition, accepts the immediacy, infallibility and so forth of consciousness, the point which differentiates Śamkara’s Vedāntic interpretations from Descartes is that there is no distinction between the ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’ in the Cartesian scheme. But the spiritual dimension, as pure subjectivity or as ‘*Cit*’, has much in common with the transcendental Ego of Husserl’s phenomenology.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika system of Indian philosophy treats consciousness as intrinsically intentional. Yogācāra Buddhism denies the external world and puts forward a distinction between subject and object within consciousness, which sounds like the “*noesis-*

*noema* structure” of Husserl. Śamkara seems to deny intentionality of consciousness and rejects any attempt to describe consciousness logically. Of course, for common understanding (*lokavyavahāra*) of the concept, he attempts to define it as self-shining or self-manifesting (*Svayam-prakāśa*), although by its very nature it is undefinable. The very reason why he seems to deny the intentional nature of consciousness is because he considers the “object-directedness” of consciousness to be the result of ignorance (*avidyā*). Consciousness, by its very nature, is non-intentional (*asanga*). Thus Śamkara could not logically blend intentionality of consciousness with its intrinsic non-intentionality or self-luminosity. He nevertheless made it very clear in the first verse of his *Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya*, introducing a notable distinction between Consciousness (*asmad/visayi*) and Object (*yusmad/visaya*). To him, consciousness and object are as diametrically contrasted as light and darkness (Śamkara, trans. 1965, p. 1). According to Mohanty, this polarity arises not due to the fact that consciousness and object cannot coexist, but due rather to the fact that the kind of opposed properties they possess cannot be confused with one another. Mohanty, however, feels that it is not sufficient to rule out the “object-directedness” of consciousness simply because consciousness and object have very different properties (Mohanty, 1992, p. 45). The only philosopher who combines both ‘self-shining’ and ‘object-directedness’ of consciousness is Rāmānuja (1017-1137AD), the exponent of Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy (Qualified Non-Dualism). Rāmānuja takes these two features to be mutually dependent. For Rāmānuja, consciousness reveals itself to its locus (Owner or Ego) only when it manifests its object (Gupta, 1982).

Regarding the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental consciousness, there are some differences between the two traditions. In the Husserlian tradition, consciousness is transcendental in the sense that it constitutes the world, while in the Indian tradition, especially in Advaita Vedānta, consciousness is transcendental in as much as it detaches or dissociates itself from the world and enjoys its freedom within itself. This is how K. C. Bhattacharyya (Bhattacharyya, 1929/1958, Vol. 2, Preface) construes the transcendental dimension of consciousness from the Indian perspective. It is only in Sāṃkhya that the empirical world is taken to be the product of *prakṛiti*; it is also in this dimension of reality of the world that the philosophy of Sāṃkhya keeps room for the relationship between each *Purusha* and its own world and the one common world that would emerge from the shared experience of all *Purushas*. It appears that, in the schools of

theism, and especially in one system of philosophy, namely the Kashmir Śaivism, which is a modified form of Advaita Vedānta, pure consciousness itself is construed as temporal, or, more exactly, as time itself.

Against this background, I will now turn to a comparative study of the notion of pure consciousness in the philosophy of Śamkara and Husserl respectively.

### Husserl's Pure Consciousness versus Śamkara's Pure Consciousness

Husserl's phenomenology centres around a specific understanding of the nature of consciousness: the intentionality of consciousness. The thesis of intentionality has two parts: firstly, that consciousness has object-directedness and as such is always directed towards an object, irrespective of the fact that the intentional object may or may not exist; secondly, that every conscious state has a correlative sense or meaning or a *noema*. Husserl also talks of pure consciousness as the transcendental subjectivity that is the foundational and the constitutive consciousness which is arrived at by the performance of the transcendental *epoché*. Husserl considers this pure consciousness as world constituting, as it is only through consciousness that this world could be presented as meaningful. It is only in this sense that all world-related meanings, including the meaning of the term "world", have their origin in appropriate structures of consciousness. It is this constitutive consciousness alone that provides the ultimate evidence for all cognitive claims and is thus the absolute foundational consciousness.

At first sight, Husserl's thesis of a world-constituting, evidencing, absolute foundational and pure consciousness seems very close, in spirit, to the pure consciousness of Śamkara's Advaita Vedānta. As for Śamkara, the most fundamental principle, the foundational reality that underlies and makes possible all cognitive activity, is consciousness (*cit*, and also called *Ātman* or *Brahman*). This consciousness, in Śamkara, is self-showing (*Svayam-prakāśa*), and it is this light that illumines all objects including itself. In its ultimate stage, however, it is not intentional. The state of its intentionality, being-of-this-or-that-object, is only a "superimposed" property arising out of the wrong association of consciousness with *avidyā* (Individual Ignorance). Consciousness, for Śamkara, is basically non-intentional, freed from the empirical constraints of body and world, one and not many, not differentiated into mental states, and with no intentional directedness towards the world. The possibility of empirical experience requires, besides

consciousness, a principle of 'ignorance' or 'limitation' that projects the world of names and forms on the one consciousness.

It emerges from this brief discussion that there is one point that both Śamkara and Husserl hold in common: pure consciousness is foundational, evidencing and absolute. But in this there are some differences, as, for Husserl, this ultimate consciousness is also, at the same time, active and constitutive. Although agreeing that it is absolute and foundational, Husserl deviates from Śamkara in holding that consciousness constitutes itself first and then the world. For Husserl, the pure or transcendental consciousness is intrinsically temporal and, by virtue of its intrinsic time, it constitutes itself as a flux. It constitutes its unity as an enduring ego, as unities of immanent acts and temporal entities. All these constitutive accomplishments, including the temporal dimensions of past, present and future, have their origin in the "living present", which is, for Husserl, the absolute pure consciousness. Śamkara's pure consciousness does nothing. It simply manifests, reveals, illuminates or evidences; as non-intentional, non-temporal, non-actional consciousness, it is non-constitutive. It is still the foundation of the world-appearance, but it does not constitute the world in any sense. Husserlian constitution is a constitution of sense, not constitution of the thing itself. Mohanty (1988) is of the opinion that one reason why, in spite of a metaphysics of transcendental consciousness and a rich descriptive psychology of the inner life, Indian thought does not yield to a transcendental constitutive phenomenology, is that the Indian theories did not quite come to subscribe to the sort of theory of meaning or sense – as distinguished from reference – that seems to have led Husserl to a theory of constitution (primarily of *sense*). With regard to the constitution of things, in as much as a *thing* can be shown to be a *noematic* structure, we have to look for similar doctrines not in Vedānta but in Buddhism (for example, the Buddhist *apoha*-theory, where the concept of reference is called into question) and in some versions of the *spḥota* theory, where the belief in the eternity of 'word' led to the positing of eternal meanings. The Indian theories of meaning, however, were referential (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 272-273).

From the perspective of Husserl's phenomenology, Buddhism offers greater affinity in terms of its theory of meaning. In its theory of meaning, Buddhism, in all its forms, originally tended to deny direct reference, and tended to regard the thing to which language claims to refer to be rather a conceptual construct (*vikalpa*). In a more developed form, the theory of meaning became "differential"; the word

“man”, for example, means what it does insofar as it serves to *exclude* nonhumans but does not positively denote all men. Such a theory of meaning is based on the *Apoha* theory of the Dignāga School of Buddhism, which defines *Apoha* as literally meaning “differentiation” or “exclusion”. Words are the result of mental conceptualization, and as such they refer to mental images and cannot be directly associated with external realities. Meaning, therefore, denotes the ‘referend’, the instrument of an act of reference, as distinct from the referent, the object toward which the act of reference is directed. The Buddhist regards it as only a logical concept, not an external entity inherently residing in the individual image or word. In other words, meaning implies the relation between the word and the image of the object. The word cannot directly be associated with external objects; it cannot, therefore, denote the object. The word has an a priori existence, independent of external objects (Sharma, 1968, pp. 3-10).

Along with this theory of meaning and consequent disavowal of reference, Buddhism, in contrast to the Indian philosophies, understood consciousness to be a stream of events (of ‘consciencing’) rather than as states of a substance, and also as having a form or content (*ākāra*) of its own, as opposed to the generally accepted Indian view that consciousness is formless or contentless (*nirākārā*), with what appears to be a content being really an object out there. Given these two conceptual resources, Buddhism could arrive at the view that both the ego and the object are but constructs – in other words, constituted in the ongoing stream of consciousness. This emphasis on ‘absence’ over ‘presence’ brings ‘*apoha*’ theory closer to Derrida and his emphasis on ‘*differenz*’.

### Transcendental Ego of Śamkara

At this stage it seems that the *Sākshin Caitanya* (Witness Consciousness) of Śamkara is very similar to what is understood by the transcendental Ego in Husserl’s phenomenology. This assessment is further strengthened by the fact that Husserl himself admitted the possibility of a witness- or spectator-like ego or consciousness. In order to understand the parallels between the *Sākshin* and the transcendental Ego, one has to keep in mind the nature and role of *Sākshin*, on the one hand, and the notions of the transcendental Ego or I and the intentionality of consciousness, on the other hand. Etymologically, consciousness as ‘Witness’ (*Sākshin*) is contrasted with consciousness as the enjoyer or sufferer (*bhoktā*) and the implication of the latter that consciousness is involved in action and its consequences. While the outward-looking consciousness is involved in actions which it

performs because of desires and aversions, and hence enjoys or suffers pleasure or pain., the witnessing consciousness is a disinterested on-looker, not a performer of actions, and hence not an enjoyer or sufferer. Ordinarily an individual passes through three different types of states of consciousness – waking, dreaming and deep dreamless sleep. Witnessing consciousness witnesses not merely what the individual does in his waking state, but also in the dream state, as well as in dreamless sleep. Consciousness that is aware of the ‘blank’ of dreamless sleep cannot be of ordinary experience of objects. Witnessing consciousness, which cannot go to sleep, is there to ‘know’ the state of sleep.

Gaudapāda,<sup>2</sup> too, speaks of the witness consciousness as the ‘all seer’ always (*sarvadrīk sadā*) (Śamkara, trans. 1995, I.12). The term ‘*Sākshin*’ indicates that that which directly or immediately perceives is the sole agent of this intimate and immediate perception. Accordingly, the term ‘*Sākshi*’ stands for a witness. It refers to a witness in the sense of the phenomenologically pure observer, the observer who observes without the mediation of any process. It signifies the self, which, although not itself involved in the cognitive process, functions as a disinterested,

<sup>2</sup> Gaudapāda, the author of *Māndukya Kārika*, aims at an exploration of the various states of human consciousness, namely, waking, dreaming and sleeping, and concludes that the ‘Self’ (*Ātman*) has been identified with the “Fourth” state called “*Tūriya*”, the witness consciousness, even though it is not really a state. The highest truth is non-dual *Tūriya*, which leads to “*Ajātivāda*”, the theory that nothing is ever created as all duality is illusory. Gaudapāda exercises a very significant position in the Advaita Vedānta tradition as the grand teacher of Adi Śamkara. He focuses on a religious or spiritual pursuit where philosophy is presented as a rational attempt to understand the experiential dimension. Furthermore, Gaudapāda aims at the nature of man’s experience and exploration of truth by a method called *Asparśa Yoga* using homologies based on the syllable ‘OM’ (AUM), manifested through four *pādas* (quarters) as basic states of the Self (*Ātman*). The four states are: *Viśva*, the waking state – where consciousness goes outward and is intentional; *Tajjasa*, the dream state – where consciousness goes inward, and is still intentional, and *Prājna*, the deep sleep state – where mass consciousness exists, is non-intentional but has the possibility of becoming intentional. Besides these three states, the ‘Self’ has been indicated as the “Fourth” state called “*Turīya*”, the witness consciousness. Gaudapāda uses two levels of truth, namely, *vyavahārika* and *paramārthika*. *Turīya*, being *paramārthika*, is the only ever-present reality or truth. Critics acknowledge some kind of Buddhist (Mādhyamika School) influence on Śamkara through Gaudapāda.

uninvolved onlooker. A phenomenological exploration leads to the recovery of this principle as a necessary ingredient in any epistemological process. In simple terms, it represents an attempt to understand experience and its implications. The object as such is not the focus of attention. Rather, the focus for attention, *vis-à-vis* the object, is consciousness, which functions as the medium for the manifestation of the object. *Sākshin*, in other words, is a form of apprehension, which as such is direct, non-relational, non-propositional and non-evaluative in both cognitive and practical matters. In the absence of this notion, no knowledge at all would be possible. Mohanty, however, observes that a non-intentional consciousness or *Sākshin* or *Tūriya* such as that of the Advaita Vedanta school of thought does not phenomenologically constitute any object. Nor do the other layers of consciousness correspond with transcendental-constitutive phenomenology. It could thus perhaps be termed a sort of *descriptive* phenomenology of consciousness that “oscillates between *descriptive* psychology and metaphysics of consciousness” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 274).

### Transcendental Ego of Husserl

The transcendental ego, argues Husserl, is ‘purified consciousness’ or ‘transcendental consciousness’. It is reached by a conscious reflective methodological move called the *epoché*. Husserl (1931/1973, p. 26) describes the *epoché* as follows:

By phenomenological *epoché* I reduce my natural human ego and my psychic life ... to my transcendental-phenomenological Ego, the realm of *transcendental-phenomenological self-experience*. The objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me – this world with all its objects, I said, derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, *from me as the transcendental Ego*, the Ego who comes to the fore only with transcendental-phenomenological *epoché*.

The *epoché* involves complete suspension of all presuppositions, a ‘bracketing’, that is, a setting aside by the knowing mind of all beliefs about the world. Husserl seeks to establish phenomenological truths about consciousness with the help of the *epoché*. In fact, Husserl even goes a step further and asserts that a certain type of intentional act corresponds to each type of object. Mohanty explains this aspect of Husserl’s position as follows:

On the one hand, there is, for Husserl, a

correlation between types of objects and types of intentional reference in the sense that to each type of object there corresponds a certain mode of givenness. In fact, the mode of givenness characteristic of a certain type of object may be used to bring out the phenomenological distinctiveness of that type. In the second place, to each particular object there corresponds a whole series of factual and possible intentional acts which have precisely that object as their intentional object. Two typically Husserlian notions arise out of this latter situation: the notion of *noesis-noema* correlation and that of the constitution of objects in the acts. (Mohanty, 1972, p. 56)

What follows from this is that, if we succeed in setting aside all presuppositions of our conception of the world, as well as of consciousness as a part of the world, then what would result would be an experience of one’s own consciousness which does not belong to this body or person. The consciousness thus experienced as the ‘transcendental I’ sounds very much like the ‘witness consciousness’ of the Advaita Vedānta of Śamkara. If we turn to the writings of Eugen Fink, an assistant and a close co-worker of Husserl during the last years of his life, we find that Fink talks about three types of Ego. Of the three types of ego, one seems to sound like the *Sākshi Caitanya*, the Witness Consciousness. The most fascinating factor here is that Husserl himself acknowledged Fink’s understanding of the three egos. Fink’s understanding of the three egos has been reflected in his portrayal of the *epoché* or transcendental reduction. Fink holds that it “... is not a ‘direct’ refraining from belief paralleling the believing life of the thematic experience of the world which directly enacts its beliefs, but – and this cannot be overemphasized – is a structural moment of transcendental reflection. The *epoché* is a reflective *epoché*, it is a refraining from belief on the part of the reflective observer, who looks on the belief in the world and the actuality of its live *performance without taking part in it*” (Fink, 1933/1970, p. 115). Fink’s point is that, in the natural reflective attitude, a human ego reflects upon herself within the confinement of the natural attitude. Bracketing the world establishes a reflective ego which is outside human apperception. He adds, “This ego knowingly directs itself toward the universal world apperception as its theme. The disconnection of the world, however, not only makes possible the formation of a nonworldly reflecting-self, but ... also makes possible the discovery of the true subject of the belief in the world: the transcendental subjectivity which accepts the world” (Fink, 1933/1970, p. 115). Fink outlines

the three egos he identifies in Husserl's thinking thus: "1. The ego which is preoccupied with the world (I, the human being as a unity of acceptance, together with my intramundane life of experience); 2. The transcendental ego for whom the world is pre-given in the flow of the universal apperception and who accepts it; 3. the 'onlooker' who performs the *epoché*" (Fink, 1933/1970, p. 115-116).

It thus appears from Fink's thesis that there are three Husserlian egos, namely (1) the empirical ego which is engaged in the world, (2) the transcendental ego, which is involved in the constitution of the world and so is not in the world, and (3) the transcendental ego as the 'on-looker' for whom this distinction between the first two egos holds good. In other words, it is possible to distinguish between two 'I's, the empirical 'I' and the transcendental 'I'. The former belongs to the natural order, while the latter is the same 'I' but purified of all natural presuppositions. The observer who apprehends this distinction must be a purely disinterested spectator, an 'on-looker'. Such a concept of a phenomenological 'onlooker' who does not participate in the world perhaps comes closest to the Advaitic notion of *Sākshin* or the witness consciousness, the disinterested witness. Finally, it is worth nothing that, in the *Preface* to the article in which Fink introduces the notion of disinterested spectator, Husserl himself acknowledges that he agrees with Fink's interpretation of his philosophy. Husserl writes, "I am happy to be able to state that it contains no sentence which I could not completely accept [as] my own or openly acknowledge as my own conviction" (Fink, 1933/1970, p. 74).

The above analysis, however, should not be taken to imply that there is complete agreement between Husserl's disinterested 'on-looker' and the Advaita notion of 'disinterested witness'. The Advaita account holds that, in cognition, of whatever sort and of whatever object, besides the cognitive process appropriate to that kind of cognition and to that object, there must necessarily be an accompanying witness consciousness. The witness consciousness, for the Advaitins, is the presupposition of all knowing; it illuminates all that is known as well as the process of knowing, thereby making knowledge possible. Husserl's transcendental 'I', unlike the Advaitins' disinterested witness, is not merely a spectator; it is also a constitutive ego. This on-looker, argues Husserl, is revealed in reflection. The existence of this on-looker, however, is not, for Husserl, a necessary condition for the occurrence of any cognition. Nonetheless, the fact still remains that what Husserl calls the 'disinterested on-looker' very closely captures the Advaita concept of 'witness

consciousness'.

It can, however, be observed from the investigation into the nature of consciousness in Husserl and Śamkara respectively that the Self or consciousness is different from the ego, just as it is different from the senses, the body, and the external objects. Western phenomenologists do not generally draw a distinction between the concepts of 'self', 'consciousness' and 'ego' and the entities they refer to. At one stage, Husserl does draw a conceptual distinction between consciousness and the ego; but he does not adhere consistently to this distinction throughout his phenomenology. Husserlian phenomenology, which has gone through descriptive, transcendental and egological stages in its development, is aware of the distinction between the Self and the ego when it speaks of 'the transcendental I' and 'the empirical I', 'the pure ego' and 'the psychological ego'. However, since this distinction is not strictly adhered to, scholars are of the view that the tension between the two 'I's, between the two egos, has not been resolved in Husserlian phenomenology (Sinha, 1974, p. 74). The usage of the words 'I', 'ego', 'self' and 'mind' seems to be ambiguous and thus confusing.

The more critical followers of Husserl, like Sartre, who have been inspired by the programme and method he initiated, are of the view that Husserl went back to the Cartesian ego in the final stage of his phenomenology notwithstanding his insight into pure consciousness as the 'phenomenological residuum', that which stands on its own providing meaning and validity to every aspect of our experience, outer as well as inner – that is, our experience of the life-world as well as our experience of the cogitations of the ego. These ambiguities of meaning of the self, ego, consciousness and so forth that one finds in the writings of Western phenomenology do not, however, arise in the phenomenology of Śamkara's Advaita. The Advaita of Śamkara very clearly differentiates consciousness from the ego. There is absolutely no confusion of these two terms. The term used for consciousness is *cit* or *caitanya*. Sometimes the word '*Purusha*' is also used to suggest that the Self or consciousness dwells in the body, or pervades the entire body. Since *Atman*, which is translated in English as Self, is consciousness through and through, the terms 'consciousness' and 'Self', or *Cit* or *Ātman*, signify one and the same entity. The other entity called the ego or the mind is the internal organ (*antah-karana*). As stated earlier, the internal organ is designated in four different ways as mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), ego (*ahamkāra*) and memory-stuff (*citta*) depending upon the function it is performing. Since everything other than consciousness is material,

the internal organ, in differing from consciousness, is material too. Carrying the reflection or semblance (*ābhāsa*) of consciousness, it performs the manifold operations of cogitations, becomes the first entity to be the object of consciousness, and also serves as the medium for all other entities to be related to consciousness as its objects. Consciousness becomes intentional only because of the internal organ's presence and functioning. When its functioning gives rise to a doubtful cognition of an object, then it is called mind. If it produces definite knowledge of an object, then it is called intellect. When the sense of 'I' arises from its functioning, it is called ego. It goes by the name of memory-stuff when it recollects the past. The functional modifications of the internal organ are called *vrittis*; and each of these *vrittis*, when illumined by consciousness, is called *vritti-jnāna* – what the Western phenomenologists call the cogitations of the ego, which appear and disappear. The Husserlian tripartite formula, “*ego cogito cogitata*”, applies respectively to the internal organ, its intentional performances – doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, feeling, willing, and so on – and its intended objects. While consciousness has neither structure nor function, the internal organ has both structure and function. Since consciousness is present as a witness to the absence of objects in the state of dreamless sleep, it is not intentional; it is, however, intentional (*samsrīta*) in the other two states, revealing the objects which it is conscious of. Thus Husserl's intentionality approximates Śamkara's intentionality only to the extent of the waking and dreaming states. Śamkara, however, goes a step further by saying that consciousness is essentially non-intentional insofar as it witnesses all three the states without fail. Its intentionality is, thus, contingent and not necessary. Here, Husserl's transcendental ego (unlike the empirical ego which may come and go), which no reduction can ever bracket and which is the presupposition of all experience and also the residuum of pure consciousness, seems to come closer to the witness consciousness (*Sākshin*) of Śamkara.

In Rāmānuja's philosophy,<sup>3</sup> however, one can find

<sup>3</sup> For Rāmānuja, the founder of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta (Qualified Non-Dualism), consciousness is *ajada* (immaterial) and is distinguished both from matter (*jada*) and spirit (*cetana*). Consciousness is always of a qualified character and is also invariably related to a knower or the self, with the self being the substrate of knowledge. Rāmānuja agrees with Advaitins insofar as he holds that consciousness is the essence of the self (*Ātman*), but he differs from Advaitins when he asserts that consciousness is also an attribute of the self. Being a substance, consciousness constitutes the essence of the

the notion of intentionality more clearly than in Śamkara. For Rāmānuja, although consciousness is the essence of the self, it is not equivalent to the self, but is, instead, an attribute of the self (*Dharmabhutajnāna*). Consciousness is always consciousness of something. There is no such thing as consciousness without an object, for it is never encountered. Object-directed acts of consciousness belong to an agent of experience. Intrinsic intentionality is the mark of mental acts. This is where Husserl's notion of intentionality comes somewhat closer to Rāmānuja's philosophy of consciousness. Although consciousness for Rāmānuja is self-luminous, it is absolutely intentional and not a pure consciousness or a transcendental ego.

It is, however, worth mentioning here that the School of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika might possibly portray phenomenological elements in its doctrine of consciousness. To the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika School, consciousness is *formless* (*nirākāra*), since it is not a substance (*dravya*) but rather a quality (*guṇa*).<sup>4</sup> Whatever form (*ākāra*) it appears to have is derived from its object. For example, when an object is blue, the consciousness *seems* to be a consciousness-of-blue. To put it in another way, consciousness, of course, is of an object, but supposing that its object is a patch of blue, one is not entitled to say that being-of-blue is internally constitutive of that state of consciousness. In this strict sense, one might be led to understand that the Nyāya School does allow for consciousness having an intrinsically object-directed character (*svābhāvika visayaprvanatva*) (Mohanty, 1988, p. 272), thus formulating intentionality of consciousness which can be compared, while being duly cautious in respect of many of its other dimensions, with the phenomenology of Husserl. Nevertheless, since the intended focus of this paper is exclusively on understanding the phenomenology of consciousness in Husserl and Śamkara, this is not the place to reflect further upon the relationship between phenomenology and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika.

selves and God; and hence, it is called *svarūpa-bhuta-jnāna* (substantive consciousness); it is also an attribute, as it exists as an attribute of both God and the selves (*ātman*). When it so exists, it is called *dharmabhuta-jnāna* (attributive consciousness).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika School, all objects of experience can be classified either in terms of one of nine ultimately real substances (*dravya*) or in terms of the various properties and relations which pertain to these substances. According to this analysis, the self (*Ātman*) is only one of these nine real substances. Knowledge, or consciousness, is properly categorized as an attribute (*guṇa*) which is altogether distinct from each individual self and yet belongs to, or inheres in, the self adventitiously.



From the discussion so far, the following thesis emerges:

- The concept of consciousness as set forth in the Advaita is totally different from the one that is available in the West. In Advaita tradition, there is no confusion of consciousness, mind or ego.
- Husserl, who indicated a distinction between consciousness and ego at one stage in his phenomenology, does not hold on to it.
- The term ‘consciousness’ (*cit* or *caitanya*) means the self-luminous light or shining principle, whereas ‘mind’, which is but *antahkarana*, the instrument being located in the body, serves as the means for knowing, feeling and willing. So the two terms are not synonymous.
- In Śamkara, consciousness reveals objects on its own; it also reveals them through the ego or the mind.<sup>5</sup> It is with reference to this ego or mind that Advaita speaks of the intentionality of consciousness. The intentional performance is not ascribed to the pure Self or consciousness, but only to consciousness associated with the ego or ‘I’ which is transcendent to consciousness.
- The distinction which Advaita makes between the pure consciousness and the ego-consciousness (mind-consciousness), which is very subtle, but profound and crucial, is comparable to the distinction between the pure or the transcendental ego and the *epoché*-performing ego accepted by Husserl.
- Consciousness is immutable and inactive; but the mind is active and mutable, and plays its role as the knower, agent and enjoyer in everyday life with the help of consciousness. Thus, consciousness and mind are essentially different in Advaita.
- While consciousness is sentient, mind is insentient; and so they can never be identical in Advaita. Consciousness or *Cit* is beginningless, and it has no end as it is changeless.
- Mind, in Advaita, which has been active in the waking and dream states, becomes quiescent in sleep for the reason that it, being the product of *avidyā*, gets resolved in the latter in the same way as a clay-pot, on losing its identity as clay-pot, merges with clay, its material cause.

<sup>5</sup> Advaita holds the view that any ‘object’, whether known or unknown, must fall within the scope of consciousness. An often quoted statement conveys this basic standpoint as follows:  
 “*sarvam vastu jnātatayā vājñātatayā vā sākshicaitanyasya visaya eva*”.

- The earlier Husserl of *Logical Investigations* (1900) did not believe in the existence of the absolute, pure consciousness, but the later Husserl frankly admitted in his *Ideen* (1913) that his earlier scepticism with regard to the ego, an identical subject, was untenable. The later Husserl held that there is a transcendental ego, ‘standing behind’ or ‘presiding over’ the intentional consciousness. Consciousness is not empty consciousness, but is ego-endowed consciousness. Consciousness in Śamkara, however, is not egological; the ‘ego’ is a mundane object of consciousness. This transcendental ego of Husserl is comparable to the Self (*Ātman* or *Brahman*) which stands behind the internal modified consciousness (*antahkarana*).
- For Husserl, the intentional act of consciousness is something ‘directed towards an object’ outside it. Consciousness, therefore, is always consciousness of something. This view of Husserl is comparable to the ‘internal organ’ or modified consciousness (*antahkarana*) whose sole function is to intend to, to deal with, some object in the world.
- A question that can be raised in the context of Husserl’s distinction between ‘the pure I’ and ‘the empirical I’ is: Which consciousness is it that is intentional? Is it the pure consciousness, ‘the phenomenological residuum’, that is intentional? Or is it the *epoché*-performing ego that is intentional? It seems to me that Husserl replies positively to the second question, as a result of which ‘the *epoché*-performing ego’ comes closer to ‘the internal organ or *antahkarana*’ of Śamkara’s Advaita.
- On the basis of the distinction between consciousness and the ego, Advaita may hold that not only the intentional act, but also the functions of objectivation, identification, fulfilment and constitution mentioned by Husserl, belong to the ego or the mind, which is transcendent to consciousness. It justifies this position on the ground that these cogitations are known in the same way as the external objects and their qualities are known, and what is known must be transcendent to the knower. In other words, since consciousness is aware of these cogitations as they occur from time to time, as they appear and disappear in the mental horizon, they cannot belong to, or be part of, consciousness. For example, when someone sees an object, the object seen is transcendent to the seer.
- Like Husserlian phenomenology, Advaita philosophy holds that whatever is presented to

consciousness is 'transcendent' to it and thus becomes an object of consciousness. Śamkara puts it as the distinction between '*asmad*' and '*yusmad*' (subject and object). The description of consciousness which Aron Gurwitsch (1966) derives from the writings of Husserl seems to come closer to the Advaitic thought. Gurwitsch contends that consciousness is not regarded as part of the real world and as one reality among others. Consciousness can thus rightfully be characterized as absolute only to the extent that we conceive of it exclusively as a medium and, so to speak, as the theatre in which the constitution of all sorts of objects – including psychical and human realities, such as the soul, the mind, the ego, the personality, our social and historical being, and so forth – takes place. Consciousness is a common focus for both psychology and phenomenology, and yet there is a difference insofar as consciousness in psychology is accepted as one reality among others and is studied in its dependence on extra-conscious data.

- To the question, 'Can consciousness, considered in its purity, as a self-contained system of Being, as a system of Absolute Being, into which nothing can penetrate, and from which nothing can escape, be regarded as human consciousness?' (Husserl, 1913/1969, §49, p. 153), Husserl seems to reply that 'being human' is an interpretation, a meaning constituted by transcendental consciousness. In other words, 'I am human' is also a meaning and so is a constituted *noema*. In the same vein, for Advaita, transcendental consciousness *appears* as living being (*jiva*) owing to *avidyā* or nescience.
- Husserl's *noesis-noema* (subject pole-object pole) structure of experience can be compared with the *asmad-yusmad* (subject-object) structure of Śamkara. Śamkara's *asmad-yusmad* structure of experience asserts that the subject and object are opposed to each other like light and darkness. The object is superimposed (*Adhyāsa*) on the subject. In contrast, in Husserl's *noesis-noema* structure of experience, even though the subject pole and the object pole are not opposed to each other, they are the two poles of the same consciousness. However, insofar as Śamkara says that consciousness is neither the subject nor the object, the Husserlian notion of consciousness, in which the subject and object are two poles, seems to come closer to Śamkara's notion at this particular point.
- The Advaita understanding, not unlike that of transcendental phenomenology, abandons the

traditional conception of consciousness in the sense that the absolute character of consciousness is not disclosed in relation to mundane realities, as is the case with, for example, the empirical ego. It is in this sense that the Advaita attitude, like the phenomenological, may be said to stand in contrast to all the natural attitudes presupposed by traditional ontologies. The Advaita analysis is a radical departure from other traditional systems in its understanding of the foundational and absolute character of consciousness. Consciousness in Advaita is not temporal, it is not in time. Consciousness in Advaita is empty of all contents – but, for Husserl, consciousness is 'content-full'.

- In Advaita, the notion of constitution is to be located somewhere in between the idea of mere manifestation (*Prakāśa*) and the idea of creation (*srīsti*), so that the constituted (in this case, the empirical world) is neither an independently existing generality that is merely manifested by consciousness nor a subjective production.

## Conclusion

My observations so far have revealed that, while there are some differences between the perspectives of Advaita Vedānta and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl that keep room for not only further differences but also similarities, in certain other respects there is the possibility of meaningful interaction between Śamkara and Husserl. Before coming to any definite conclusion regarding points of commonality between Śamkara and Husserl, however, there is a need for further analysis of these perspectives.

There is a significant dimension in Śamkara that is absent in Husserl. Śamkara undertook his study of consciousness more for soteriological reasons than for the sake of a purely theoretical or epistemic '*Brahman* or *Ātman*' quest. Husserl, in contrast, was interested in the epistemological domain of consciousness and its certainty rather than in soteriology. For him, transcendental consciousness is disclosed after the mundane world is bracketed, and it is then shown as that which is not in time but the source of temporality; it is both streaming and standing, a point that would take it closer to the *Śākshi Caitanya* of Śamkara. Constitution for Śamkara is accorded not to consciousness as such but to the power of *avidyā* or *māyā*; the *adhyāsa* or superimposition of *māyā* in this sense has its *āvarana* (concealment) and *vikshepa* (projection) that is constitutive and dynamic and can account for the

constitution of the *samsāra* (world) and its meanings.

This observation, however, is not based on Husserl's own understanding of Śamkara's Advaita Vedānta, as the former had hardly any opportunity to study the latter. Husserl's personal relationship with the famous Indologist Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920), his colleague in the Faculty of Philosophy at Gottingen, suggests that they may have discussed Indology together (Schuhmann, 1992, p. 24). Husserl's knowledge of Vedānta may also be surmised from the collection of books he had in his library, all of which were published around 1880, containing some articles on the Vedas, Max Muller's lecture *India* and Paul Duessen's *Das System Vedānta: Nach den Brahma Sutra's des Bādarāyana* [The doctrine of Vedanta: A translation of the Brahma Sutras of Badarayana]. It is also possible that Husserl possessed these books because of his broader interest in anthropology – attested to by, for example, his discussions on the counting and numbering practices of various peoples in Chapter XII of the *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (Schuhmann, 1992, p. 24).

That Husserl, moreover, had studied Buddhism to some extent is very clear from his own words: "I have now read the greatest part of Karl Eugen Neumann's German translation of the main parts of the Holy

Writings of Buddhism" (Husserl, 1925, as cited in Schuhmann, 1992, p. 25). There is no evidence that Husserl studied any other works of the Indian tradition in his later life. His image of Indian thought seems, rather, to have been determined by those parts of Neumann's translation of the main texts of the *Suttapitaka* which he had read and commented on in a brief review (Husserl, 1925). Schuhmann points out that Husserl, in fact, not only "identified these texts with Buddhism in general", but "identified (in the traditional Schopenhauerian way) Buddhism with Indian thought as a whole". While Husserl's reading of Neumann had led to the recognition that "Indian thought moved in an important sense on the same level as his own philosophy", the fact that Indian philosophy appeared to him to be motivated by the goal of salvation, with its theories developed only in subservience to this *practical* aim, conflicted with the pursuit in European philosophy of "the goal of *pure* theory, theory for no external purposes and without any ancillary function being assigned to theory as a whole" (Schuhmann, 1992, pp. 27-32).

As Schuhmann (1992) concludes, "This, then, might be considered as a first step in determining the 'complete opposition' between European and Indian thought which Husserl had alluded to in the Neumann review."

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