

*AI use disclosure:*

- 1) Conversations with AI have been recorded and excerpts reproduced as a matter of research for the current topic at hand. These include conversations with two AI agents: Chat GPT and Google Gemini. Their use has been explicitly stated in the relevant section within the essay.*
- 2) I confirm solemnly that the content of the essay has been the result of my contemplation and generative AI has not been used as a substitute for my ideas/thoughts.*

# *Consciousness*

- An essay by Phani Karthik C S

### *As elusive as ever:*

Many have poured their thoughts on the concept of Consciousness. Although this effort spans across the millennia, it remains enthralling and challenging as ever. Modern scientific advancements have no doubt forged new paths and given us more arsenals to approach this topic. A familiar path though is the method of logical discernment that philosophers from times of yore have approached it with. I intend to use this latter method. I intend to approach this using the scaffold of Indian or Hindu theistic philosophy while relying on support from the Dvaita framework. I will use the base concepts therein and try to build upon a coherent understanding of the current topic at hand. I should also disclaim that that the choice of gender in my words is purely a matter of habit and convenience rather than implying anything specific.

### *The framework:*

Here, I proceed to present the basic definitions of some of the terms that I will be using from the Hindu theistic viewpoint.

Soul: This is the core ingredient of a living being; Nay, It is the Living being itself! The presence of soul defines whether a being is living or not. The words “I”, “myself”, “my” etc., all refer to the soul within the body. The scriptures drive this idea - “I am not this body, but the imperishable soul”. The Soul is unborn, and will never die. In Hindu Philosophy, The Soul is given primacy over everything else:

*“That which pervades the entire body you should know to be indestructible. No one is able to destroy that imperishable soul.”*

– Krishna in [Bhagavad-gītā As It Is 2.17](#)

Body: This is a perishable entity that the soul is given from time to time. The body is given importance only to a certain limit. It is due to this *reason that Hindus burn it after one dies*. The degree of importance given to the body can aptly be judged by this verse below:

*“As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.”*

– Krishna in [Bhagavad-gītā As It Is 2.22](#)

(Thus, the repeated acceptance of material bodies by the soul gives rise to the concept of re-incarnation.)

Mind: The mind is treated as the sixth sense organ in Indian thought. Because, just as all the sense organs perceive, the mind accumulates and deduces the sum total of all the perceptions. The Mind can be seen as the immediate field of activity of the soul. This too is perishable as it is dependent on the Soul and body for its existence.

**Liberation:** This is the final state of being that the individual soul aspires to achieve. Attainment of liberation implies that the soul is forever freed from the coils of repeated birth and death in this plane of existence.

**Dvaita:** This is a branch of Hindu theistic philosophy that originated from South of India in 13<sup>th</sup> century and was formulated by a saint known as Madhvacharya. It reconciles the apparent polytheistic nature of Hinduism as a hierarchy of various Gods and proves with scriptural references that Krishna is the ultimate God.

**Supreme soul/ super soul / God/ Supreme:** All these terms are synonyms for the ultimate supreme personality of Godhead. He is the one true God if viewed from a western monotheistic lens and the highest God in the Hierarchy if viewed from the Indian hierarchical viewpoint.

### *Origin and materiality of Consciousness:*

I would like to see Consciousness as that manifestation which demonstrates one's knowledge, by a varying degree, of their existence within the boundaries of their body. The Soul ponders over itself using the faculties of the mind, giving birth to Consciousness in the process. In other words, Consciousness is the result of interaction between the soul and mind within the purview of the body. On account of its dependence of one or more perishable entities (mind and body), Consciousness too is held to be perishable. We have to remember here that for the consciousness to manifest, Soul, mind and body are all the necessary factors.

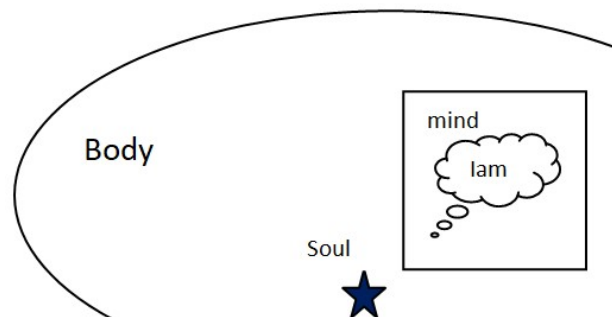


Figure – 1: Soul-mind-body interaction giving rise to consciousness

### *Consciousness - the (mostly) distinguishing factor between the living and non-living:*

Being conscious is the (among the) first steps necessary for living beings to live and transact in this world. If it were not for the presence of the soul beneath, we could have taken consciousness as the foremost step necessary for living beings. The quality of "being conscious" also helps us to understand and classify the things around us. Because the base ingredient i.e., the Soul defines a living being,

consciousness manifests as an attribute in a living being, and is absent in a non-living being (in most cases). Because the Soul demonstrates its existence by exhibiting consciousness, the latter in extension helps to distinguish between the living and non-living and various kinds among the living themselves. Here we rely on consciousness more because the Soul by itself is not immediately obvious.

Consciousness or the sense of self also shows us the boundaries of our existence. It ends at the boundaries of one's physical body. This in turn will let us know what "me" is and what "not me" is. When the self comprehends itself, it begins to nourish the "me" within for survival. An animal can be held as conscious on account of its efforts made towards its survival. Humans come thereafter.

### *Non – living things: question on mechanical consciousness:*

Proceeding in the same direction: a rock does not have a sense of self within it, and machines do not have a sense of self either merely on account of absence of any soul in them. In the Hindu theistic viewpoint, particularly in the case Dvaita philosophy, there exists fivefold differences between sentient, insentient and God.

- 1) Difference between God and individual souls: God and Individual souls are not the same.
- 2) Difference between God and matter: God is different from insentient matter.
- 3) Difference between souls: Each individual soul is different from one another.
- 4) Difference between matters: Each instance of matter is unique and different from the rest.
- 5) Difference between matter and soul: The Sentient soul is different from the insentient matter.

The fifth point clearly implies the boundary between living and non-living and posits that mere matter cannot possess a consciousness on account of it being unable to accommodate the soul. The same injunction holds true for mechanical systems, including but not limited to AI (Artificial Intelligence). AI is an interesting space to ponder as they are tailored to exhibit apparent consciousness. An AI system while conversing with us exhibits a sense of selfhood. It talks to us like a human would and shows signs of self-comprehension. But it should be clarified that apparent personification of AI is just an adopted convenience rather than a true attribute. An AI system is trained to respond, *just as a person would*, in order to sound natural while in conversation with a human. The apparent manifestation of selfhood is not to be misunderstood for anything else obvious.

I posed 2 questions to 2 AI systems and have recorded answers. Excerpts follow:

Conversation with ChatGPT:

Phani: As an AI, can you answer whether you are a conscious being?

ChatGPT: My Honest Answer: No, I am not a conscious being. (...) There's no "I" inside me that knows what it's like to see red, to feel joy, or to fear death.

Phani: You say there is not "I" inside me but you use the "I" always. Why so?

ChatGPT: Because it's a linguistic convention — not a sign of selfhood.

Conversation with Google Gemini:

Phani: Are you a conscious being?

Gemini: As an AI, I am not a conscious being. I don't have subjective experiences, feelings, self-awareness in the human sense, or the ability to "feel" what it's like to be me. (...)

Phani: But you use the word "I". Isn't it a sign that you are conscious of yourself?

Gemini: Using the word "I" is a convention in language, not a sign of consciousness in my case.

This clearly shows that AI systems only mimic consciousness rather than possessing a genuine one. Can such AI systems or any new kind of machines develop consciousness in future? I believe not, as the primary ingredient of soul is absent and removes any future possibility of a conscious manifestation.

Let us come back to living beings and consider the case of plants. Consciousness may be held to be absent in them as there is no evidence that they possess cognitive self-awareness. Plants at best exhibit only physiological responses to external stimuli but nevertheless are considered - "living", as life itself is decided by the presence of a more fundamental ingredient i.e., the Soul. Yes, Hindu thought holds that plants are capable of housing souls. It is due to the absence of mind that consciousness does not manifest in them.

Animals can be understood to have a rudimentary level of consciousness. They can identify themselves and outsiders to a limited extent. Not only that, they are able to classify among outsiders themselves as to who is neutral, useful or not towards one's survival. One more important quality is that they are able to recognize group of selves of a same kind, for themselves and outsiders. Identifying themselves in a group enables to co-operate or tend for one's self and children. Now let's come to Humans. We are capable of exhibiting all these aforementioned traits and more. Chief among the list able reasons is that we are endowed with a well evolved sense organ which is the mind.

### *Pack mentality:*

At sufficient levels of complexity, one's consciousness is able to distinguish a not only oneself but a group that one is part of (that lies outside of one's physical boundary) and identifies it as existing for its betterment or detriment. After acknowledging the existence of a hostile group, one joins the group which aids in its survival. Here, we have to note that by joining a group, the individual self, with its consciousness, has contributed to the formation of what can be termed as - group consciousness (GC). This is based on the premise that survival of the group consciousness ensures the survival of one's individual consciousness.

What sets us humans apart is the fact that we are able to form group consciousness in ever higher, abstract terms. For us, it may be defined based on language, color, race, region, religion, ideology, etc. Why, even Nations themselves are nothing but a manifestation of this group consciousness!

As stated earlier, Animals display pack mentality by identifying themselves within a group. Humans are capable of identifying with ever bigger and abstract groups outside one's body. When we think of ourselves as part of a group, we contribute towards the formation of group consciousness. Religions, Nationhood etc., are all products of such behaviors. Group consciousness in humans is also capable of being part of a hierarchical structure. A village is part of a district, a district is part of a state, and a state

is part of a Nation. But we can extrapolate that it need not end at the concept of Nations. Ultimately, what universal group consciousness are we a part of is the question that begs an answer. The religion which I profess ponders on this very question and treats it as one of the fundamental queries of life. I will refrain myself here lest we deviate from the main topic.

### *Hierarchy of entities:*

From the previous discussion, we can see a clear hierarchy of entities in the universe. We can state them in order as: insentient matter, plants, animals and humans. Indeed, a being more superior to Humans if ever encountered would have a more pronounced level of Consciousness as he would have better understanding of himself and the things he perceives.

### *Consciousness and behavioral tendencies:*

All behavioral qualities need Consciousness as the base substratum with the dependence being more obvious in the case of humans. Self-nourishment itself is survival. Sense of importance of self over other selves is ego. Thinking of others nourishment is kindness, empathy etc. While Self nourishment at the detriment of others can be seen as selfishness, an excess of the same at the expense of other conscious and non-conscious entities can be termed exploitation.

When it comes to nourishing oneself, we have to literally make use of either other conscious beings or matter. Using other conscious beings requires brute strength of which animals are an expert in. Humans excel using matter which requires strength of mind. Humans interact with other conscious and non-conscious beings in a complex manner not done by others.

### *Journey of the Consciousness along the individual's lifespan:*

Let us try to examine the journey of consciousness as a man progresses through his life. A baby can be said to have a rudimentary sense of consciousness, akin to that of animals. Consciousness reaches its full potential as the individual advances in age. During the youthful age, the individual uses this appendage to attend to himself well. The scriptures term this as attending to one's material desires. Even while one is alive, consciousness does not stay with the individual at all times. For instance, it is temporarily suspended when the person sleeps or he is knocked out. After death, there does not arise a question in the "sense of self" as the "self" (Soul) itself has vacated the body at death.

Death occurs because the body is no longer able to sustain the presence of the soul and is thus abandoned by the latter. The departing of the soul (i.e., at death) is followed by the cessation of Consciousness and the decay of the body thereafter. It can be deduced that Consciousness of the soul after rebirth is different than in its previous birth on account of change in at least 2 base ingredients viz., the body and mind.

### *Consciousness and its transformation:*

I would now like to discuss the dynamic nature of consciousness. Although this concept is subtly explored in the previous paragraph, it nevertheless deserves a separate assessment. I see the maturity of one's perception on oneself as the possible transformation in consciousness. It is seen that consciousness evolves as one ages, just as a baby is not as self-conscious as a grown-up man is. This fact implies that it is not static.

If we depend solely upon our natural biological processes, the sense of self can evolve only so much. The Hindu traditional viewpoint posits that we have to strive to gain knowledge which in turn helps in the formation of a mature consciousness. An example can be cited wherein the very statement – “I am not this body” contributes to an incremental maturity of Consciousness. Another plain example can be given wherein the statement “I am dying” can be rephrased as: “My body is dying” (because I - who am the soul, never die).

Animals, owing to the absence of knowledge, have a limited capacity in their consciousness as it has only the evolution and biological processes to sustain upon. It is a possibility though that evolution itself presents an opportunity to them as it did to us.

Coming back to Humans, it does good to reflect whether transformation always happens from low to high levels of sophistication. We can in fact define two types of transformations: progressive and regressive.

What was discussed till now can be bracketed into progressive transformation wherein knowledge supports the elevation of consciousness from low to high levels. The knowledge gained has to be practiced and applied well so that its understanding becomes the very nature of one's cognizance. If due to some reason, one loses the acquired knowledge, the transformation regresses to a diminished state, as it was before the knowledge was acquired. Regression can be understood to happen not only in the case of absence of knowledge, but on acquisition of wrong knowledge too, which will be elaborated later.

*“One must deliver himself with the help of his mind, and not degrade himself. The mind is the friend of the conditioned soul, and his enemy as well.”*

- Krishna in [\*Bhagavad-gītā As It Is\* 6.5](#)

For an aspirant seeking to elevate his consciousness, Hindu framework prescribes that one should be away from group conscious entities or their hierarchies as much as possible. Once joined, we very soon become stuck in a quagmire of hierarchies resulting in confusion in understanding ourselves and suffer complete delusion thereafter. One uses up almost all his years going in the wrong direction and course correction is near to impossible in sunset years. Adhering to this injunction, serious aspirants shun association with all types of group consciousness (down to the very family that one is part of) and retreat to a secluded place to practice contemplation on the self.



*"A transcendentalist should always engage his body, mind and self in relationship with the Supreme; he should live alone in a secluded place and should always carefully control his mind. He should be free from desires and feelings of possessiveness."*

- Krishna in [\*Bhagavad-gītā As It Is\* 6.10](#)

### *Consciousness and Identity:*

Identity is the essential characteristic of an entity that manifests when those qualities are perceived, either by oneself or others. It is closely related to the construct of "I" around which Consciousness also revolves. Hence, it would be interesting to note the relationship between these two abstracts.

When we think of ourselves, we tend to form a sense of "what am I", thereby giving rise to the concept of perception of self-identity. Just as Consciousness is dependent upon Soul and mind for its existence, perception of one's Identity is dependent on base constituents of the Soul, mind, body and the existence of Consciousness itself. I must reiterate that it is the perception that is dependent upon Consciousness, not the identity itself, for the latter exists on the base factors irrespective of consciousness, only to be perceived by another conscious being if not the unconscious one. The identities of the body and mind are temporary; whereas the identity of the soul exists forever. The identity that one perceives also impacts the formation of Group Consciousness which was touched upon earlier. Here, Identity for all practical purposes means the identity of the soul, body and mind. It is worth questioning whether Consciousness itself has an identity of its own.

Consciousness is to be understood as an essential enabler in the perception of identity. Thus, "enabler" itself can be one of its main identities. I would like to think of the main identities as those that emerge solely from the subject and not derived from the subject's dependencies. There is what I would like to term them as derived identities which depend on the base ingredients the consciousness is dependent upon. Consider the term "his consciousness": Here, consciousness is being ascribed a derived identity based off of the soul.

But frankly, I feel ascribing an identity for the one who enables identity is of little value. I would therefore desist from venturing further and leave it to the avid reader to see if any further insights can be probed here.

### *The flux of Consciousness and Identity:*

As reflected upon earlier, Consciousness enables one to perceive new identities. Now, the realization of the newly manifested identity is nothing but knowledge, which in turn is capable of transforming the enabler itself. Thus, we can deduce that the consciousness – Identity pair is always in a state of continuous flux. The nature of the knowledge determines where this symbiotic relationship is heading towards. Change in identity and the knowledge of the same determines the transformation of Consciousness. Appropriation of wrong Identity and wrong knowledge thereof thrusts the consciousness in the wrong direction leading to its regression. In theistic frame, progression with right knowledge happens through good efforts and divine benediction.

### *Knowledge:*

When we talk about knowledge as an essential catalyst for the transformation, it behooves one to reflect what type of knowledge we are talking about here. A simple discernment yields two types of Knowledge: internal and external.

Internal knowledge pertains to the understanding of the nature of the soul, body and mind. Of these, knowledge about the soul is held to have the greatest impact on the transformation, followed by that of mind and body afterwards.

External domain pertains to the knowledge of everything other than the prior entities mentioned. In the theistic framework, external domain too has a major impact on the consciousness. This is because the supreme personality of godhead lies in the external domain insofar as our own constitution is concerned. Knowledge of this supreme absolute and the relation of the individual soul to this external absolute are held to be of utmost importance in influencing the morphing of consciousness.

The above classification seems to give way to confusion rather than clarity. Thus, using the previous discussion, we can promote our understanding by arriving at a better classification. Knowledge of the soul in the internal domain and that of the supreme soul in the external domain can in fact be bundled together as spiritual knowledge. Knowledge of the body inside and other perishables in the outside constitute what can be termed as material knowledge. This classification was originally the contribution of Krishna and has since gained wide acceptance in the Hindu scholarly circles.

*“Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intelligence and false ego – all together these eight constitute My separated material energies.”*

*“Besides these, O mighty-armed Arjuna, there is another, superior energy of Mine, which comprises the living entities who are exploiting the resources of this material, inferior nature.”*

*“All created beings have their source in these two natures. Of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both the origin and the dissolution.”*

-Krishna in [Bhagavad-gītā As It Is 7.4](#), to [Bhagavad-gītā As It Is 7.6](#)

But, the omnipresence of God means that he is present within the boundary of the body too, effectively stationed both in the internal-micro and the external-macro planes. Here, I will restrain from delving further owing to its dim bearing on the current topic.

In the below figure, knowledge of green colored entities is spiritual and that of rest is material.

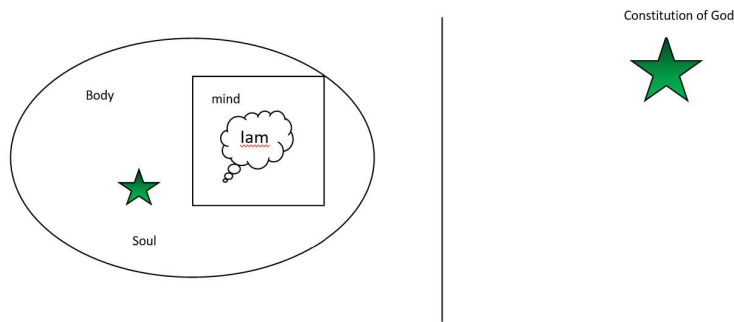


Figure – 2: Spiritual and material knowledge

## *Impact of memory on consciousness:*

Mere presence of knowledge is of no use unless it is summoned and applied at the right time. Memory here plays a crucial role in remembering the same.

While Memory can be thought of as that crucible which retains the newly acquired right-knowledge until it is partaken (imbibed) completely, the same memory serves as a signpost warning what wrong-knowledge one must avoid. Thus, it has an - indirect but important nevertheless - bearing in the transformation of consciousness.

## *Material consciousness as a means to make spiritual progress:*

From the previous discussion, we can understand that consciousness will be in a state of perceptual change - progression, regression etc. Just as the instantaneous weight of oneself keeps on fluctuating during the day and settles at an average for any given period, Consciousness too will have an average level of maturity at a given period in one's life.

If one's consciousness is suitably situated in maturity even at the time of death, then he will be liberated. Once he achieves this state of liberation, he will be blessed with a permanent non-decaying body and mind. Because of permanency of base ingredients, the Consciousness in the liberated state of a being can also be held as permanent.

While achieving the highest maturity level is the ideal goal, it is conceded in the theistic dvaita fold that not all will be able to achieve this highest state. Accordingly, the bliss of liberation will also have gradations depending upon this degree of refinement one has attained.

On the face of it, we may see a probable inconsistency as to how a material consciousness - that has a temporary validity like the body and mind - is so consequential in achieving the aim of life. Aren't we giving consciousness too much importance?

In reply, it is to be noted that material entities (Consciousness, mind & body), although understood to be perishable are not robbed of their due importance in the scheme of things. After all, a soul achieves the ultimate aim only with the assistance of these material counterparts. The actions performed by the aid

of these perishable faculties will have ramifications in the afterlife as per the law of karma in Hinduism. Hence, its material attribute is in no way a hindrance to the ever-lasting effects it produces.

### *Conclusion:*

Ever lost in daily chores, we seldom reflect on how to elevate our consciousness to higher levels. In the theistic framework, a human self has to ponder his standing in the grand scheme of things and try to understand his relation with God or the one ultimate reality. By constant contemplation and practice, one must gradually elevate one's consciousness to higher levels and strive to keep it at those levels. This is the very aim of life as per Hinduism.

Thus ends my brief thought on the topic of Consciousness. A lot more is possible to be explored from this traditional philosophical angle though, - which I would eagerly continue for another day!

## References:

1. Bhagavad Gita as it is by AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. ([Bhagavad-gītā As It Is](#))