# Identity of Individual and Cosmic Consciousness?

## A Critique of Advaitic Apologetics

*Abstract*. The paper discusses the idea of a philosophical re-construction of some key doctrines of Advaita Vedanta. §1 delimits what philosophical apologetics could be, and introduces the advaitic doctrines of interest here. The discussion then develops systematically, i.e. focusing on conceptual and doctrinal elements and how they might be understood. Some ingredients of advaitic doctrines may connect to philosophical traditions in the Philosophy of Mind, contributing to the comprehensibility of Advaita Vedanta, whereas others are highly problematic. The concept of pure consciousness can be phenomenologically corroborated (§2), whereas identity of two consciousnesses seems hardly comprehensible (§3). The eschatological impact of the doctrines is partially evaluated as well (§4). The success of philosophical apologetics and reconstructions of Advaita Vedanta is then evaluated and denied (§5).

## §1 Apologetics

Philosophy, broadly taken, can take the role of a residue of theoretical options, notwithstanding an option being outside of current scientific theory development. Philosophy keeps theoretical options alive insofar as these can be made coherent. Even if one does not endorse such an option its mere feasibility characterizes the field of inquiry in question and may help in better understanding the strengths of currently more preferred options. The more coherent options are available the more fallback positions are available in case a currently live theory has to be abandoned. Thus, exploring the realm of coherent options is a philosophical endeavor worth pursuing.

Apologetics of the most ambitious kind try to justify by reason alone religious claims. This seems preposterous: (i) the track record of such arguments shows that either they are not sound or the premises of them are already highly religious contentious; (ii) an author has to presume that not just one religion only is true, but also that (almost) no-one has recognized this, or relevant arguments have been insufficiently circulated. Typically, apologetics aim at a reconciliation between religious claims and the demands of reasonable coherence of these claims, and between them and our knowledge of the world. If successful such apologetics show that some articles of faith can be reasonably be believed. This may be shown by expressing them more clearly or providing a model how they might be true.

Analytic Philosophy of Religion applied methods of conceptual elucidation and (formal) model building to traditional religious doctrines (like the Trinity or Incarnation) to argue that these doctrines, although seemingly incomprehensible and incoherent, can be rendered as coherent theses. One need not agree that all or even many such apologetic attempts have been successful – beyond purely verbal solutions (like 'relative identity' in the Trinity), in the vein of mediaeval apologetics in authors like Thomas Aquinas (with verbalism like the soul being 'a substantial form' etc.). Nonetheless, this type of philosophical exploration of theological options seems a valuable addition to the philosophy of religion. One may see it as continuous to rational theology. Engaging in re-constructions of this type need not express any commitment to the religious doctrines in question.

The re-construction may concern a single concept or thesis (like Transubstantiation) without its wider embedding in a religious denomination or context. So, even if Transubstantiation could be made a coherent concept/thesis, this would not imply that the whole Christian creed is, let alone that one should adopt it as religious belief.

Given this, an (almost) apologetic re-construction of some central religious concept or thesis is a worthwhile enterprise, which does not require to adopt corresponding religious beliefs. All it

wants to establish are claims that some concept can be coherently understood or claims of coherence for some religious doctrine.

In this fashion the following investigations neither express nor demand any commitment to any Hinduist or Buddhist doctrine. Even if some key advaitic doctrines can be shown to be coherent, this not commit us to believe them, let alone wider Hinduist beliefs. Those parts of these religions dealing with Karma or Reincarnation one may deem abhorrent or incomprehensible. The investigation of advaitic thought can, however, be narrowed down to exploring an option in the Philosophy of Mind – and indirectly in the Philosophy of Religion and a model of salvation or the afterlife. The key question is whether two basic conceptions of Advaita Vedanta can be made coherent – even if the adherents of Advaita do not care about coherence or deem it a rationalist distortion of the matter.

Can we understand the following two key doctrines?

(AI) The self of an individual human person is (partially) identical to the Cosmic Self.

(AP) The self of an individual human person can be preserved as self in the Cosmic Self.

Advaita Vedanta by definition endorses a non-dualism as well: immaterialism (spiritual monism). Immaterialism deviates massively from our understanding of ourselves and the world. Unless there are pressing reasons to tie (AI) and (AP) to immaterialism, one better leaves immaterialism to the side, as will be done here. The focus is on (AI) and (AP). Even if the Cosmic Self created a (real) material world, theses (AI) and (AP) could be put forth.

We will also leave the concept of 'Cosmic Self' mostly elusive as some form of a God mind. In traditional theistic theology the mind of God is mostly beyond human comprehension, but in part has to be person-like as man is created "in God's image". With "Cosmic Self" we uncritically refer to the religiously postulated ultimate reality of a God mind, called "Brahman" or in variations "Shiva", "Vishnu" etc.

For (AI) the consciousness of an individual has to gain a foothold in a type of a part at least of the consciousness of the Cosmic Self. The candidate type of conscious state or aspect of consciousness is 'pure consciousness'. 'Pure consciousness' can be elucidated in a theory and phenomenology of human consciousness.

## §2 Pure Consciousness

'Pure' consciousness must not be understood in any ontic sense. It is not something *besides* human consciousness. Pure consciousness points to an aspect (i) that is always present in human consciousness, but which can enter center stage and (ii) can be experienced in a special type of experience.

(ad i)

The "pure" in "pure consciousness" stresses the difference to personal consciousness preoccupied with the self-narrative. The biographical self-knowledge of a person manifest itself in the individual self-narrative. This can be the focal topic of one's mental state, but mostly our mental life is transparently present at the objects of our experience and attitudes. Part of *all* these states is an accompanying immediate knowledge of consciousness (being conscious) itself. We are aware of us being aware (in states of some mental type with some content). We experience an agent and thinker of these states, who gives our mental life synchronic and diachronic unity *without* having in itself concrete content, i.e. being pure conscious agency. Conscious agency and pure consciousness thereof define what human personal life is like and can be like in attentive self-reflection.

This aspect of consciousness has been a core topic of Phenomenology and later a topic in some Analytic Philosophy of Mind as well. Pure consciousness can, thus the claim here, be understood in continuity to the Philosophy of Mind, without intervening religious claims. In addition to a proper phenomenological description the main issue will be how far this agency aspect of every conscious act can made the sole content of some conscious acts.

(ad ii)

We can focus on the mere experience of being conscious. Attending to this is the state of pure consciousness. Focusing on pure consciousness is a peculiar state of mind, often described as a kind of mystical experience. Whereas, no doubt, one may see it as an experience worth having, far from clear is whether anyone wants to be in this state all the time, if that was possible at all. All the valued content of one's life and one's self-narrative seem to be preferable content at least in the long term. (We have to revisit the value of the mere consciousness of being conscious under an eschatological perspective.)

Accounts of mystical experience have often distinguished two types of mystical experience: one experience of a global consciousness of unity with reality, and one experience of pure consciousness as (almost) de-individualized. Pure consciousness may relate to both these types of experience, but its secular elucidation should start with the second type. (The supposed experience of cosmic unity will be a topic later on, when we explore the idea of identification with the Cosmic Self.)

One may appeal to the mystical traditions in *several* religions as testimony that experiences of pure consciousness are human attainable. One has to recognize then, at the same time, that they do not wear their religious interpretation as obvious on their sleeves. This is related to the problem of identification.

If pure consciousness is part of the common denominator between individual consciousness and the Cosmic Self, this claim can cautiously be accepted to proceed with the exploration of Advaita Vedanta.

## §3 Tat Tvam Asi

Necessarily two objects cannot be identical, neither can two consciousnesses be identical. One object can be a part of another object. Can one consciousness be a part of another consciousness?

Supposedly, a consciousness cannot *merge* with another consciousness. The idea of identity in (AI) must be understood not as any form of unification, in general not with a metaphysical model of fusion.

(AI) has to be understood epistemically in a manner of *remembering*. One can realize in a situation that one has been that place before or that one has experienced that already sometime before. (AI) is often explained as 'realization' of the partial unity with the Cosmic Self: One *has always been* part of it ("Tat Tvam Asi"), but has lived in ignorance. This epistemic model circumvents the metaphysical puzzles and opens an option to make (AI) understandable. One wonders, however, *how* this realization feels, happens or comes about. And can a proper realization like (AI) ever be distinguished from narcissist megalomaniac fantasy?

The critical element of (AI) and (AP) is the idea of recognizing that oneself (a person) is – at least in part – identical to the Cosmic Consciousness. The epistemology and the ontology of (AI) and (AP) are highly problematic and cannot be neutrally (i.e. from the non-enlightened) vindicated.

'Realization' is veridical: if someone realizes $\varphi$, then $\varphi$. Pointing to a realization, thus, presupposes the truth of the realized fact and cannot establish it. 'Realization' has also a dominant epistemic sense: acquaintance with a fact with a high subjective degree of evidence (subjective certainty that a fact obtains). The enlightened are said to realize the identity of individual and Cosmic Self. Given Advaita veridicality is trivial. The nature of the subjective experience of 'realization', however, stays unexplained and obscure. Not accidentally so, as someone who has become enlightened during earthly life-time has 'realized' identity to the Cosmic Self and all other individual selves (whether they know it or not). Why should this be a real, sane state, and not a psychotic delusion? This state or experience supposedly is ineffable in the ordinary sense (as before enlightenment the appropriate psychological vocabulary cannot be acquired) and must be ineffable in the strict advaitic sense (as any conceptual specification is worldly dualism and deceit/illusion). An 'enlightened one' cannot convey the enlightened state, but without an 'enlightened one' the reality of the state cannot be secured. Given this, (AI) can merely be stated, and the idea of enlightenment be pointed at. Proclaiming something to be 'indescribable' should then be the last word on the topic, the status of all following talk is problematic. [If (AI) stays problematic, so does (AP), since understanding (AP) presupposes (AI).]

If Brahman is static consciousness – assuming for a moment this being a coherent concept – and our consciousness is temporal (in temporally enduring thoughts), we cannot be identical with

the Cosmic Consciousness. It is easy to stipulate that all thought has to cease and consciousness to become static, but this exercise is unfeasible to our mind, given all science and philosophy tell us. Compare: just because someone commands us to square the circle, we cannot do it, and if he tells us he has done so but cannot give us access to this feat, we should not believe it.

Total identity to Brahman is megalomaniac and a guru who claims such – and thereby identity with us! – claims something unverifiable, ineffable, and not rationally believable. Imagine meeting someone who claims that his *consciousness* is identical to yours! If you have not noticed before, how could he?

Thus, only partial identity seems an option. The individual consciousnesses are then, so (AP), preserved, but doing nothing differently, since, by assumption of static Brahman, all thought has ceased. In their passivity (any agency had to be the processing of content) they neither interact among each other nor with Brahman. Their state resembles more being dead than being alive. The beatific vision of theism at least claims to be a state of sharing God's knowledge and bliss.

Enlightenment described as 'realization' conceptualizes it as a process or an event, i.e. not something static. If it is distinguished from falling into a stupor, one has to recognize (i) that one *has become* enlightened, in (ii) contrast to one's previous state of mind, now *remembered*.

The insistence on atemporality and absence of differentiated content in some consciousness may stem from attentive experience without the explicit presence of inner speech or reflection, but even those mentals events are durational and process non-verbalized representations of one's situation and consciousness itself, and the cognitive agent/thinker.

## §4 A Cup of Water in the Sea

Advaita Vedanta flies in the face of our manifest image of the world and ourselves. Starting from everyday experience we find no indications why this world-view should be true. One might accept it for eschatological reasons, as it was invented – according to itself 'revealed' – to serve this purpose. What are its eschatological merits? Suppose then (AI) and (AP) were true. Do they deliver on their eschatological promise and our (naive) eschatological questions?

Answering to our concern about meaning of life and death that actually *we do not exist* in ultimate reality seems both bizarre and overkill (of the seeking mind). It is claimed then that once enlightened to our ever-present freedom and everlasting existence the initial dumbfoundedness is superseded. This seems questionable:

(i) If the everlasting consciousness is without content (especially continuing content of our self-narrative) entering this state is *equivalent to death* of the self and person. Advaita says so itself. Why, however, should *we* care about this state? Everything about our individuality and idea of meaning will be lost. And being told that this is fine has the same appeal as being told that death is the end. Advaita and materialistic atheism agree on the fate of the person we are. Why then feel moved by Advaita?

(ii) We are missing an explanation why this personal life in the first place. In contrast to some theistic religions it isn`t even a test run or preparation for the eternal personal life ever after. We are born into ignorance and our task is to gain self-dissolution – to what merit? Why did God (Brahman) divide himself into a multitude in this way? The gap in theology resembles problems of theism to explain why God created this world with its laws and suffering instead of starting with Heaven. If explanations have to come to an end, the rational answer is that we cannot know God's plan and complete eschatological scheme. Negative Theology of any denomination leaves us with the idea of a transcendent realm and order which is inscrutable, especially concerning any plan or order with respect to persons. This is a coherent conception in the sense of a minimal fallback positions of any religious idea, which at the same time undermines proofs of a theistic God as well as refutations by theodicy arguments. If we cannot know all this, Advaita is just another religious picture with many idle wheels and details the explanatory value of which is low.

(iii) If we are identical to the Cosmic Consciousness, why should we do anything at all? We cannot lose this identity. Even if we are then (by karmic sanction) reborn, why should we care if the 'reborn' person has no psychological connection to our person?

Additionally: If Brahman is just pure static consciousness – assuming, again, this concept coherent for a moment – who keeps the Karma Bank? Like in theism the cosmic laws and his

nature are either pregiven to God/Brahman, who then is limited by something pre- or independently existing, or they are not, then God/Brahman cannot be without agency and attributes, intervening into current affairs of the world.

The preservation of an individual self has to be more than a memory within the mind of some God. And 'preservation' and 'dissolution' or 'dilution' are *incompatible* with each other (in terms of the sortal predicate of the diluted entity). A mouse is not preserved in the stomach of a cat. Even a fly swallowed in total by a frog is not preserved in the frog, but dead by being taken apart in digestion. The often-used image of a cup of water rejoining the ocean actually speaks against (AP): although the water formerly in the cup still exists, it loses its unity as amount of *that* water. (The description is already loaded and misleading in using the mass noun "water" instead of a sortal (like "person"): waters can easily merge, people cannot.)

## §5 Against Advaita Vedanta

One may read Advaita Vedanta literature on the 'path to liberation' as advice on a moral life. Practices of the 'path' build our character in a fulfilling direction. Such readings are possible for religious literature from many traditions (from the Apostolic Fathers to the World Church of Satan). They may contribute to a world ethos of the virtuous person. They are secular readings, however. All that is said could be said more clearly, say in philosophical ethics.

The defining religious character of Advaita relates to its eschatological claims, as in the cases of the other religions – and these claims have been found wanting.

Religious world views have no privilege to be exempt from scientific and philosophical scrutiny and criticism once they advance metaphysical or epistemological theses. The supposedly revealed truths are to be contrasted and compared to the best theories in science. The language employed has to be clear enough to vindicate rules of proper term employment.

In the case of Advaita Vedanta – once we leave to the side the metaphysics of immaterialism, which does not lack verification, but even an independently justifiable conception of verification – the theses concern centrally the Philosophy of Mind (foremost the conception of consciousness) and the ontology of personhood (especially the identity conditions of persons). Whereas the notion of 'pure consciousness' is in continuity to theses in Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Mind, the dissolution of the self and denial of the constitutive role of the self in personal consciousness are at least questionable, if not incomprehensible. A lot depends on the wording and proper expression of the phenomena to avoid talking past each other here, but although the Ego (cognitive agent/thinker) and the self-narrative are not always thematic or reflected upon in consciousness, the cognitive agent/thinker is an always present part of consciousness and can be immediately brought into focus. This agent/thinker identifies him-/herself with a person, the self-narrative of which can also be immediately thematized. There is *no* pure consciousness which lacks these two, and thus *pure consciousness is a state of an individual* and only functionally the same between persons, but *not the same* between different persons. What cannot be given up are the justified beliefs we have by science or any other investigations. These include our justified beliefs and experiences concerning personhood. The self-centeredness of a person should give way in character development, but the virtuous person is still a person. The self-awareness of a person in silent inner awareness still is the awareness of an individual person.

Respecting freedom of religion and being openminded concerning religious conceptions one may turn to traditions like Advaita Vedanta in order to get to know their ideas and conceptual resources. Exploring a conception, however, does not mean vindicating it. It can be found conceptually and argumentative lacking in coherence, if not comprehensibility. Advaita Vedanta

as a – self-proclaimed – 'philosophy' has to be *rejected* as lacking, especially with respect to the central doctrines of (AI) and (AP), and the ineffable corresponding conception of 'realization'.

Advaita Vedanta provides no compelling reasons – only talk – against the phenomenology and science of consciousness. The persistence of such claims is a topic for cultural history and the sociology and psychology of religion.

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