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The luminous self: Indian theories of consciousness and their philosophical relevance today

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative philosophical investigation into three major Indian theories of consciousness, Advaita Vedānta, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, and Buddhist traditions and examines their enduring relevance to contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind, phenomenology, and cognitive science. Focusing on the motif of consciousness as "luminous," the article analyses Advaita's doctrine of non-dual self-luminous ātman, Sāṃkhya's dualistic plurality of passive puruṣas, and the Buddhist doctrine of anattā alongside the evolving concept of a luminous, non-substantial mind. Through close readings of classical texts such as the *Upaniṣads*, *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, *Yoga Sūtras*, and key Buddhist discourses, as well as modern interpretations, the study illuminates how these traditions conceptualise consciousness beyond reductionist or materialist paradigms. The article also evaluates how these models engage with or anticipate contemporary issues, including the 'Hard problem' of consciousness, panpsychism, self-illusion theories, and phenomenological accounts of subjectivity. By situating Indian philosophical insights within global discourse, the paper argues for their critical potential to transform our understanding of consciousness, subjectivity, and the self.

Keywords: Indian philosophy of consciousness; Advaita Vedānta; Sāṃkhya-Yoga; Buddhist anattā doctrine; Self-luminosity (svaprakāśa); Puruṣa and prakṛti; Luminous mind; Non-duality; Panpsychism; Phenomenology; Philosophy of mind; Witness consciousness; Ātman and Brahman; Cognitive science and selfhood

1. Introduction

Consciousness, the sheer fact of awareness and subjective experience, has been a central preoccupation of Indian philosophy for millennia. Across diverse schools of thought in the Indian tradition, Consciousness is often described through the evocative metaphor of light or luminosity. It is portrayed as that which illuminates all experiences, the inner light by which reality is known. This paper explores three pivotal Indian theories of Consciousness: Advaita Vedānta, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, and Buddhist perspectives, and examines their insights and debates in light of contemporary philosophical discussions. Each of these traditions offers a distinctive account of the "luminous self," whether understood as an eternal ātman, a plurality of puruṣas, or a process devoid of any self altogether. By comparing these viewpoints, we can appreciate the richness of Indian thought on the mind and the Self, and consider its relevance to modern philosophy of mind, phenomenology, and cognitive science.

This study commences with a detailed exposition of the Advaita Vedānta conception of consciousness as the sole, non-dual reality, self-luminous, self-evident, and ultimately identical with Brahman. Drawing from canonical sources such as the *Upaniṣads* and Śaṅkara's commentaries, this section explores the ontological and epistemological foundations of non-dual awareness. The discussion then turns to the dualist metaphysics of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition, wherein consciousness (*puruṣa*) is construed as a multiplicity of passive, immutable witnesses, ontologically distinct from the dynamic, material principle of *prakṛti*. Subsequently, the paper engages with Buddhist philosophical perspectives,

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particularly those that reject the notion of a permanent self (*ātman*) yet articulate a nuanced account of the mind's luminous nature and the stream-like continuity of conscious moments. In each case, the analysis is grounded in primary textual evidence and supported by authoritative classical and contemporary commentaries. The final section offers a comparative evaluation of these traditions, highlighting points of convergence and divergence, and situates them within contemporary philosophical debates, ranging from the 'hard problem' of consciousness in analytic philosophy to phenomenological models of self-awareness and developments in cognitive science. By adopting a rigorous yet accessible approach, the article aims to demonstrate the enduring philosophical significance of classical Indian theories of consciousness in light of ongoing global discourse.

2. Advaita Vedānta: Consciousness as Nondual and Self-Luminous

Advaita Vedānta, as systematised by Ādi Śaṅkara (8th century CE), proclaims an absolute non-dualism: reality at its deepest level is one, indivisible Consciousness, identified with Brahman, the supreme ground of being. The individual Self (ātman) is none other than this universal Consciousness. In Advaita's famous formulation, *brahma satyam jagan-mithyā, jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ* – "Brahman is the real, the world is an illusion; the jīva (individual soul) is Brahman itself, nothing else" (Śaṅkarācārya (attributed). As cited in Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 524). Consciousness (cit or Caitanya) is not a property or function of something more fundamental; it *is* the fundamental reality, infinite and without a second (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, p. 469). In this view, all multiplicity of objects and persons is an appearance or illusory superimposition (*māyā* or *avidyā*, ignorance) upon the one Consciousness, like fleeting shapes projected on the screen of an unchanging light.

A Defining feature of Advaita Vedānta is the doctrine that Consciousness is svayamprakāśa or svaprakāśa, often translated as "self-luminous" or self-revealing. Consciousness does not need anything outside itself to be known or illuminated; it is "pure light, self-luminous by its very nature", revealing all objects yet not revealed by anything else (Balasubramanian, 2011, p. 54). Śaṅkara emphasises that while we know external objects through Consciousness, Consciousness itself is not known *through* anything more fundamental; it is immediately evident in the very act of awareness (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, p. 173). One cannot objectify Consciousness as an item of knowledge because it is the ever-present subject that enables all knowledge. As Śaṅkara explains, we cannot deny our Consciousness, for even the attempt to deny it would illuminate itself. Thus, Consciousness is undeniable and self-established – it "*cannot admit its absence*," and any cognitive act already presupposes it (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, p. 173). In Advaita, the ātman (true Self) is this self-evident awareness and is "one without a second", not a part or product of the world (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, p. 176).

This idea finds its roots in the Upaniṣads, which use metaphors of light to describe the Self. For instance, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (one of the oldest Upaniṣads) records the sage Yājñavalkya teaching that when all external lights, sun, moon, fire, speech, have ceased, "the Self serves as his light. Through the light of the Self, he sits, goes out, works and returns." (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, p. 469). In other words, our Self, pure Consciousness, is the ultimate light that illumines every experience, even in the darkness of deep sleep or the stillness of meditation. Śaṅkara, in his commentary on this Upaniṣad, elaborates that the Self is that light which "illumines [the body and senses] like the external lights such as the sun, but is itself not illumined by anything else" (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, p. 469). This self-luminous Self is Brahman, infinite existence-consciousness, the single light of awareness in all beings. As Advaitins later put it, Consciousness is not only self-luminous but also svataḥ-siddha (self-established); it is the one self-valid reality that does not need proof outside itself (Deutsch, 1973, p. 32).

Advaita distinguishes Consciousness (ātman) from the mind (antaḥkaraṇa) and mental states. The mind and the body are considered part of *prakṛti* (phenomenal nature) and are jaḍa (inert or insentient). It only appears conscious because it reflects the light of ātman. Śaṅkara describes Consciousness as a "witnessing presence (sākṣin)" by which all mental cognition is revealed as known, fundamentally different from the mind and its thoughts (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, p. 451). The witness self is immutable, while thoughts come and go. When we have cognition, such as seeing a tree, Advaita would say that the mind takes the form of that tree (*vṛtti* or modification). Consciousness immediately illuminates that mental vṛtti; thus, one is aware of the tree. However, awareness never becomes an object; it shines without change. To use a classic metaphor, Consciousness is like a lamp in a room, and mental events are like coloured images passing in front of the lamp. The lamp-light makes each image visible, but does not itself become those images. In Advaita, "consciousness illumines cognitions directly with infallible certainty", yet never becomes a cognition itself (Balasubramanian, 2011, p. 67).

Śaṅkara and Advaita authors argue vigorously against views that treat Consciousness as dependent or secondary. For example, the Nyāya School posits that awareness of awareness arises from a second-order mental act, a kind of inner perception of the mind. Śaṅkara refuted this, pointing out the infinite regress it entails – if each cognition needed another

cognition to illuminate it, we would never finish knowing anything (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, pp. 451-453). Instead, Advaita holds that each cognition carries a flash of awareness by Consciousness's self-luminosity, so no separate "knower" thought is required. Similarly, some Buddhist philosophers, such as Dharmakīrti, proposed that cognition can apprehend an object and be implicitly self-aware, a theory known as sva-saṃvedana, or self-cognition. Śaṅkara critiqued this, too, using the analogy that "just as a knife cannot cut itself," a mental state cannot illuminate itself – only the Consciousness beyond the mind can light up the arising and passing of thoughts (Śaṅkarācārya, 1934, pp. 452-453). For Advaita, that ever-present light is the ātman, the true "I," which is not an object but the constant subject of experience. In a deep sleep, when we experience no objects or thoughts, Advaitins maintain that Consciousness still exists as the pure Self. The proof is that upon waking, one recalls, *"I knew nothing, yet I slept happily."* This post-sleep intuition, they argue, indicates that the self-aware principle persisted as a witness even in sleep, where it had no content to illuminate except its existence.

It is important to note that Advaita's identification of the Self with Brahman leads to a conception of *liberation (mokṣa)* as fundamentally a shift in knowledge: realising *"I am Brahman"* dispels the illusion of being a separate, embodied ego and thereby destroys ignorance (avidyā) and its products (suffering, rebirth). When knowledge dawns, one understands that one's Consciousness is the single, all-pervading Consciousness and that nothing has ever existed apart from it. This state is described as absolute peace and wholeness. As Śaṅkara puts it, recognising one's Consciousness as Brahman is synonymous with liberation (Śaṅkarācārya., 1934, pp. 118-120). Ending the existential suffering caused by misidentifying with the mind-body complex.

Advaita Vedānta's view of Consciousness has often been compared to Idealism or Panpsychism in Western thought. Indeed, modern scholars note that Śaṅkara's nondual Brahman pure Consciousness as the sole reality "parallels some contemporary iterations of panentheism and panpsychism, particularly top-down cosmopsychism" (Shani, 2015, pp. 389–437). The Advaitin holds that Consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous, present in all things as their inner essence, which resonates with panpsychism's claim that mind-like quality pervades nature (Chatterjee, 2019, pp. 121-124). However, Advaita's position is a radical monism that goes beyond even the distributed Consciousness of panpsychism: it asserts that there is ultimately just one Consciousness, not many; the appearance of individual minds is part of an illusion. This unique stance enables Advaita to circumvent some of the philosophical puzzles associated with panpsychism, such as the question of how many tiny consciousnesses combine into a larger one. However, it faces the challenge of explaining how one Consciousness gives rise to the appearance of a diverse world (the problem of māyā). We will revisit such comparisons in a later section. For now, we can summarise Advaita's core insight as portraying Consciousness as the self-shining absolute, the luminous Self of all and the task of philosophy and spiritual practice as realising that identity of Self and Brahman.

3. Sāṃkhya-Yoga: Dualism and the Plurality of Witness Consciousnesses

Turning from Advaita's monism, we encounter a very different model in the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition. Sāṃkhya, one of the most ancient and systematically articulated schools of Indian philosophy, traces its origins to the early centuries of the Common Era and finds its classical formulation in Īśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*. It advances a rigorously dualistic metaphysics predicated on the existence of two co-eternal and ontologically distinct principles: puruṣa (pure Consciousness or spirit) and prakṛti (primordial matter or nature). Yoga, as expounded in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* (circa 3rd century CE), essentially adopts the Sāṃkhya metaphysics but adds practical methods for achieving liberation; thus, one often speaks of the combined Sāṃkhya-Yoga view. In this view, Consciousness is not singular or all-encompassing as in Advaita, but plural and individual: puruṣas are countless, each an independent centre of Consciousness. Equally, in contrast to Advaita's conscious Brahman, prakṛti in Sāṃkhya is a non-conscious, primal energy or matter, consisting of the three guṇas (sattva, rajas, and tamas) in a state of dynamic equilibrium. The entire material world, from physical elements to the subtlest thoughts, is a transformation of prakṛti. Puruṣa, however, is beyond all guṇas and change: it is "pure consciousness devoid of attributes, qualityless, and inactive", an eternal witness (sākṣī) entirely distinct from the transformations of matter (Larson, 1979, pp. 170–175).

A classic Sāṃkhya text defines puruṣa by negating the characteristics of prakṛti. Īśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* 19 states: *"From [the contrary of] that (prakṛti) is established the existence of puruṣa, as the witness, solitary, neutral, observer, and non-agent."* (Larson, 1979, pp. 172-173). In other words, puruṣa is essentially the opposite of prakṛti: prakṛti is *jaḍa* (not conscious), active, ever-combining and producing effects, while puruṣa is conscious, utterly inactive, and an uninvolved spectator. Puruṣa is "solitary" (kevala) in the sense that each puruṣa stands alone and does not interact with or affect other puruṣas (they do not mix or merge). It is "neutral" or indifferent (mādhyastha), meaning it does not take on the qualities of the guṇas; it merely observes. It is a "non-agent" (akartṛ); all actions belong to prakṛti (nature), not to the puruṣa. However, puruṣa is the Seer (draṣṭṛ) of all that prakṛti presents: without puruṣa's presence, there would be no awareness of prakṛti's dance of phenomena.

This doctrine is often illustrated with metaphors: one famous metaphor in later commentary likens puruṣa and prakṛti to a lame man and a blind man wandering in a forest. The lame man (Consciousness) can see but cannot walk; the blind man (matter) can walk but cannot see. Alone, each is limited; together, the blind man carries the lame man on his shoulders, and thus, they move effectively – the lame man directing, the blind man walking. Similarly, puruṣa without prakṛti has sight but no world to see or instrument to see with; prakṛti without puruṣa has activity but no consciousness to illuminate or make meaning of that activity. When they conjoin, experience arises: prakṛti's evolutes (senses, mind, etc.) present a world of objects and thoughts, and puruṣa lights them up with awareness. However, crucially, Sāṃkhya insists this conjunction (*saṃyoga*) is a misidentification; puruṣa itself never truly acts or changes; it only appears as if it does when ignorant of its nature. The *Yoga Sūtra* succinctly states: *"draṣṭṛ-dṛśyayoḥ saṃyogaḥ heya-hetuḥ"* the conjunction of the Seer (puruṣa) and the seen (prakṛti) is the cause of suffering that must be overcome (Yoga Sūtra II.17). Liberation (*kaivalya*, "isolation") in Sāṃkhya-Yoga is precisely the *separation* of puruṣa from prakṛti in awareness, realising the difference between the true Self (Consciousness) and the not-self (all material and mental phenomena). When the puruṣa fully knows "I am apart from prakṛti, merely witnessing," it stops identifying with the body-mind and thus is no longer entangled in the cycles of karma, cause and effect, which belong to prakṛti.

The Sāṃkhya theory of evolution details how the presence of puruṣa catalyses prakṛti's equilibrium into differentiation. At the moment of contact (for Sāṃkhya holds an eternal conjunction of puruṣa and prakṛti without beginning), prakṛti's guṇas begin to stir and interact, yielding successively the cosmic intellect (*mahat* or *buddhi*), the principle of ego (*ahaṃkāra*), and the subtle sense faculties and mind (*manas*), and eventually the gross elements of the physical world. Throughout this process, puruṣa remains a silent witness. However, without puruṣa's presence, prakṛti would have no purpose or "audience" for its manifestation; Sāṃkhya says that prakṛti evolves "for the sake of puruṣa" to offer experience to the puruṣa and ultimately to facilitate puruṣa's liberation (the famous Sāṃkhya Kārikā 56 likens prakṛti to a dancer who has performed for the puruṣa and, once seen, ceases dancing). Thus, the experience is dual: the product of an interface between unconscious nature and conscious Self. The mind (intellect, ego, etc.) belongs to nature but, when illumined by puruṣa, becomes the locus of cognition and emotion. The *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* employs another analogy, that of a crystal and a flower, to explain how Consciousness appears tainted by mental activity. Puruṣa is like a clear crystal, and the buddhi (intellect) is like a red flower placed near it; the crystal takes on a red glow, though the redness truly belongs to the flower. Likewise, puruṣa seems to be thinking, feeling, and acting, but those qualities belong to buddhi (a product of prakṛti); puruṣa itself is colourless, unaffected awareness.

Despite the multiplicity of *puruṣas*, Sāṃkhya maintains that they share the exact essential nature as pure, unchanging consciousness, differing only in terms of their individuated standpoint or locus of experience. Why posit many puruṣas at all, then? The Sāṃkhya Kārikā, particularly in verse 18, gives logical arguments: if there were only one universal puruṣa, then all beings would simultaneously undergo the same experiences of birth and death, pleasure and pain, which is not the case, since experiences are individualised (Larson, 1979, pp. 171-172). Also, a single puruṣa could not simultaneously be bound (in ignorance) and liberated (in knowledge). However, some beings are enlightened while others remain ignorant, implying different consciousness principles. Thus, the multiplicity of souls is inferred to explain the private and varied nature of subjective experience. Each puruṣa, being an independent witness, experiences a separate stream of prakṛti's evolutes (one mind-body complex per puruṣa). In modern terms, Sāṃkhya's model anticipates a mind-body dualism similar to Descartes' substance dualism, but with *multiple Cartesian egos rather than a single* world-soul. Puruṣa is non-material and indivisible, similar to Descartes' res cogitans, and prakṛti is extended and mechanistic, akin to res extensa. A key difference, however, is that Sāṃkhya's puruṣa is inactive and has no will or agency; even the Cartesian mind has thoughts and volitions.

In contrast, the Sāṃkhya puruṣa is more akin to a passive light of awareness. Agency and doership in Sāṃkhya are assigned to the ego function of prakṛti (ahaṃkāra, the sense of "I" appropriating actions). In a sense, Sāṃkhya divides what we usually call the mind into two: a material mind (including intellect and ego) that performs cognition and scheming as part of nature, and a *conscious* principle that knows. This is why Sāṃkhya-Yoga can say that thoughts and perceptions occur in the mind but are "seen" by the puruṣa. Patañjali calls the puruṣa *dṛśṭā*, "the Seer," and states that though pure, it appears to take on the colouration of the mind's contents (just like that crystal/flower analogy) (Yoga Sūtra II.20). The entire discipline of Yoga meditation, ethical restraint, etc. – is aimed at quieting and purifying the mind (*citta-vṛtti nirodhaḥ*, "cessation of the turnings of thought" per Yoga Sūtra I.2) so that the puruṣa can abide in its proper form as pure witness, no longer misidentifying with the thought-waves (I.3). When the mind is stilled, the distinction between the luminous puruṣa and the inertia of prakṛti becomes evident, and the puruṣa realises itself as forever free.

In summary, the Sāṃkhya-Yoga view portrays Consciousness as *plural, passive, and transcendent*. The Self is not an all-embracing Absolute Consciousness (as Advaita holds) but one of innumerable points of pure awareness. However, like Advaita, Sāṃkhya insists that Consciousness is fundamentally different from matter and cannot arise out of matter. In Sāṃkhya's polemics against the materialist (Cārvāka) philosophers, they argued that unconscious prakṛti could not

magically produce sentience any more than a blind person could start seeing. Consciousness must come from a conscious principle. This resonates with specific arguments in contemporary philosophy of mind: the “Hard problem” of Consciousness (why and how physical processes produce subjective experience) might, in Sāṃkhya's terms, be answered by saying physical processes *never* produce it. Consciousness was "there" all along as puruṣa. However, unlike Advaita, Sāṃkhya stops short of declaring one universal Consciousness. It preserves a duality between matter and Consciousness and between each Consciousness and others. This has the consequence that Sāṃkhya does not consider liberation (mokṣa or kaivalya) to be a union or merging into one. Instead, it is an isolation of the puruṣa in its nature, merely an end to puruṣa's entanglement with prakṛti's drama. Each puruṣa achieves kaivalya on its own. In the liberated state, prakṛti (for that puruṣa) withdraws, having no purpose left, and the puruṣa abides eternally in peace as pure awareness, *"like a king who has withdrawn from the bustle of his province"* to use an Sāṃkhyan simile.

To an outside observer, the difference between Advaita and Sāṃkhya on the Self might appear subtle – both speak of an invariant conscious Self distinct from the body-mind. Indeed, Advaita texts sometimes borrow Sāṃkhya terminology, such as puruṣa and prakṛti, for didactic purposes. However, philosophically, the divergence is deep: Advaita's Self is the one Brahman (the only reality), whereas Sāṃkhya's puruṣa is *one reality among two* and one puruṣa among many. Advaita asserts that the world is ultimately mithyā (not real), and the individual mind is merely a transient appearance in Brahman; Sāṃkhya posits that the world and mind are real evolutes of prakṛti and remain eternally alongside puruṣa. These differences lead to distinct debates: Advaita has to explain *why* the one Consciousness *appears* as many (its answer: ignorance), while Sāṃkhya has to explain how multiple consciousnesses can each witness the *same* prakṛti world or interact (their answer: puruṣas do not interact, they concurrently witness similar prakṛti unfoldments – a bit akin to parallel universes that happen to be coordinated). Both systems, however, are committed to the idea that Consciousness is irreducible to matter. In an era where physicalist neuroscience might claim to "explain consciousness" purely via brain activity, Sāṃkhya-Yoga would stand in firm opposition, much like Advaita, asserting a dualistic ontology: mind and brain (buddhi and body) are material, but the *spark* of awareness comes from puruṣa and cannot be explained away. We will later see how these insights compare to modern arguments for dualism or panpsychism in the philosophy of mind.

4. Buddhist Perspectives: The Luminous Mind and the Anattā Doctrine

In Buddhist philosophy, we encounter the most radical challenge to the notion of a self. The Buddha's teaching of anattā (Pāli; Skt. *anātman*), the doctrine of "not-self," denies the existence of a permanent, unchanging self or soul at the core of a person. Instead, a person is understood as a composite of ever-changing aggregates (skandhas): form (body), feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and Consciousness (vijñāna). Each of these aggregates is impermanent (*anicca*) and not Self (*anattā*); thus, what we call "I" is just a convenient label for a flux of phenomena. The Buddha famously said that one should regard any experience – *"whether past, future, or present; internal or external; gross or subtle…"* – as *"This is not mine, not me, not myself."* (Bodhi, 2000, p. 901). In the *Anattā-lakkhaṇa Sutta*, he systematically goes through body, feeling, perception, mental fabrications, and Consciousness and has his disciples acknowledge each: *"This is not self."* As a metaphysical substance or ego, the Self is absent; what we call a person is a psychophysical process devoid of any eternal core. This perspective represents a significant departure from the Upaniṣadic and Ātman theories, as well as from Sāṃkhya's concept of puruṣa.

Does that mean Buddhism denies Consciousness? Not at all – Buddhism offers detailed analyses of Consciousness, but it treats Consciousness as an impermanent, conditioned phenomenon rather than an independent Self. In early Buddhist thought, as recorded in the Pāli Canon and elaborated in the Abhidharma of various schools, Consciousness (vijñāṇa) is one of the five aggregates and is defined in relational terms: it is always consciousness of something (a sensory or mental object), arising and ceasing contingent upon conditions. For example, seeing arises depending on the eye and a visible form, and hearing arises in the ear and with sound, etc. Buddhism thus has a fundamentally intentional view of conscious episodes, where each conscious moment is associated with an object. There is no consciousness in general apart from particular momentary consciousness tied to sense faculties or mental events. Importantly, each moment of Consciousness is said to arise and pass away rapidly, giving rise to the idea of a stream of Consciousness rather than a static entity. The continuity of personality is explained by causal relations (especially karmic causation) across these momentary mental events rather than by an enduring soul. In a striking analogy, the Buddha likened a person to a flame: the "same" flame is a series of new flames each moment, with causal influence connecting them, but nothing solid passing from one to the next. Likewise, the "mind" or "consciousness" is a continuum (*santāna*) of evanescent events. This view is sometimes referred to as mindstream or citta-santāna in later texts. Thus, Buddhist philosophers could speak of one's Consciousness continuing after death and taking rebirth without invoking a permanent soul; it is the causal continuum of mental energy that flows on, carrying karmic imprints, not an immutable ātman.

Given this denial of self, *what is it that knows or illuminates experience in Buddhism?* Some critics in India, such as Advaitins and Naiyāyikas, argued that Buddhism falls into a logical inconsistency: if there is no self, then who is the knower of cognitive events? Buddhism responded by revising the very concept of a knower. Instead of a substance-self that knows, knowing is simply an event that occurs when conditions are present. The early Buddhist Abhidharma held that conscious awareness (*citta*) arises dependently and also has the quality of being personally inaccessible. There is no *separate* witness apart from the moment of knowing itself. In technical terms, some Buddhist schools (especially the Yogācāra or *Cittamātra* "mind-only" school and the epistemologists like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti) developed the idea of svasamvedana or sva-prakāśa (yes, they used the same term *svaprakāśa*!) – meaning that Consciousness is reflexively aware of itself in the act of being aware of an object. This concept bears resemblance to Advaita's notion of the self-luminosity of Consciousness, and indeed, later Indian debates found the Buddhists and Advaitins aligned, opposing the Nyāya position that denied self-cognition. The difference, however, is that Buddhist theorists of self-awareness did not reify an independent Self behind the awareness; they considered each moment of cognition to have a dual aspect – it illuminates its object and, just by that fact, illuminates itself (like a lamp that not only lights up objects but, in lighting them, shows its shining). Śaṅkara criticised this Buddhist model, as we saw, but it indicates that not all Buddhist thought treated Consciousness as entirely *other*-illuminated; some granted it an intrinsic luminosity, only they located that luminosity in *each transient mental state* rather than in an overarching ātman (Williams, 2009, pp. 89-92).

To navigate the Buddhist perspective, it helps to recognise that Buddhism differentiates two senses of "consciousness": one is the ordinary stream of cognitive consciousnesses (which is not-self and ever-changing), and the other is a kind of fundamental luminosity or clarity of mind that is often mentioned in the texts as an underlying quality. The Buddha is recorded in a short Pāli text (*Anguttara Nikāya* 1.49-52) to have said: "Pabhassaram idaṃ cittaṃ… – *Luminous, monks, is this mind, and adventitious defilements defile it; luminous is this mind, and it is freed from adventitious defilements."* (Bodhi, 2012, pp. 117-118). This famous passage – *"Luminous is the mind"* (pabhassaraṃ cittaṃ) – was interpreted by later Buddhist commentators to mean that the *fundamental nature* of the mind is clarity and knowing. However, this nature is ordinarily obscured by defilements (unwholesome thoughts, ignorance, etc.) that are "incoming" or superficial accretions. When those are purified, the mind's luminosity can shine forth fully. It is crucial to note that the Buddha's statement was not positing an eternal soul; he did not say "the self is luminous" – he still spoke of mind (*citta*) and, in other places, made clear that *even Consciousness, when grasped, at as 'I' or 'mine,' should be seen as not-self* (Bodhi, 2012, pp. 117-118). However, this notion of an underlying luminosity provided Buddhist thinkers with a way to discuss what is innately aware and pure in the mind without compromising the concept of anattā.

The Theravāda Abhidhamma and commentators like Buddhaghosa understood the "luminous mind" as referring to the bhavaṅga, a subliminal life-continuum of mind that is itself ethically neutral and can be bright or clean when not interrupted by defilements. In meditation, as one purifies the mind, one experiences increasingly this clarity. The Mahāsāṅghika School, an early Indian Buddhist school, even asserted that the mind's nature (cittasvabhāva) is fundamentally pure (prakṛti-pariśuddha), only defiled by adventitious impurities. Later, Mahāyāna Buddhism further developed the idea with concepts like buddha-dhātu or tathāgatagarbha (Buddha-nature), which is described as an innate, pure consciousness present in all beings. Some Mahāyāna sūtras boldly say, "Each sentient being *is* Buddha by nature." One text declares: *"The mind is naturally luminous and pure; defilements are only adventitious."* On the face of it, such statements sound very close to the Upaniṣadic idea of an authentic self that is pure and stainless, covered by ignorance. Indeed, historically, Buddhist scholars had to carefully explain that the Buddha-nature is not a self in disguise, but rather a potential for enlightenment or a way of discussing *śūnyatā* (emptiness) in favourable terms. Mahāyāna philosophy, especially Mādhyamika, as championed by Nāgārjuna, insisted that all phenomena, including Nirvana and Buddha-nature, are empty of inherent essence (śūnya). Thus, there is no eternal consciousness-substance here, only the empty luminosity inseparable from emptiness. *"In Mahāyāna sources, the luminous mind is identified with ultimate reality understood as emptiness, and with the buddha-nature and qualities,"* notes one scholar,undv.org. This is a nuanced point: Buddhism's "ultimate mind" is not a being or entity but the *thusness* of mind when free of obscuration – emptiness, openness, clarity.

Yogācāra (Cittamātra) Buddhism, which emerged around the 4th century CE in India, further emphasised the centrality of consciousness by proposing that "mind-only" is the true nature of experience. Yogācāra philosophers, such as Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, taught that what we perceive as an external world is a construction of Consciousness; there is no duality of subject versus object in ultimate terms, only a flow of mental representations. They introduced the concept of ālaya-vijñāna (storehouse consciousness), a deep, subliminal reservoir of Consciousness that stores karmic seeds and sustains the continuity of the individual. The ālaya-vijñāna, sometimes called *citta-santāna* (mindstream), is the basis for the other active forms of Consciousness that arise (the six sense consciousnesses, etc., termed *pravṛtti-vijñāna*). One can think of ālaya as the background consciousness that is always present, though commonly unnoticed – it underlies dreams, deep sleep, and so on, somewhat akin to what Hindu traditions might call the sūkṣma śarīra (subtle body-mind) that continues in sleep. The Yogācāra texts describe the ālaya-vijñāna as having the nature of knowing. When purified,

it becomes the "immaculate consciousness" (amalavijñāna), which is equal to the wisdom of a Buddha. Thus, even in a system that officially denies a self, we see something very close to the idea of a luminous foundational consciousness. The difference is essentially one of terminology and metaphysical commitment: Yogācāra will say, "In the basis (ālaya) the mind is originally pure and luminous," but will not call it ātman or Brahman and will emphasise that realising its nature involves seeing through the illusion of ego and object duality.

Given these complex developments, what can we identify as the core Buddhist theory of Consciousness? At a minimum, Buddhism treats ordinary Consciousness as *conditioned, momentary, and not the Self*. It is an evolving process, not a static thing. The Buddha likened Consciousness to a magic show – insubstantial and deceptive. However, Buddhism also preserves the intuition that there is a qualitative feature of knowing present – the luminosity of awareness – which remains in enlightenment when disentangled from the illusion of self. Some contemporary scholars suggest that advanced Buddhist meditation involves recognising awareness in a way unlike Advaita's self-realisation, but without the ontological assertion, "This awareness is the universal Self." Instead, the Buddhist adept would rest in the empty cognisance of mind. Tibetan Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā practices explicitly speak of recognising the *"clear light mind"* or *"rigpa"* (pure awareness) as the goal of practice, sounding much like Upaniṣadic statements, albeit within a different framework.

Comparative note: It is fascinating that despite Buddhism's official denial of any eternal Self, in practical and phenomenological terms, Buddhist discussions of a purified or luminous mind come very close to what non-Buddhist traditions describe as ātman. This did not go unnoticed historically. Vedāntins often accused Buddhism of being "crypto-ātman" when it posits something like Buddha nature. Conversely, Buddhist scholars accused Hindus of clinging to a concept out of attachment. However, there were also attempts at reconciliation: some modern interpreters (like the Theosophist Edouard Schuré or even some early Buddhist modernisers) speculated that the Buddha did accept a kind of transcendental Self but refused to discuss it to avoid clinging – these views, however, are not widely supported by textual evidence (Collins, 1982, pp. 82-93). The mainstream stance is that Buddhism diverges from the Self theorists and offers an alternative: the continuity of personality is carried by karma and consciousness stream without an unchanging identity. Where Hindus speak of realising the true Self, Buddhists speak of realising no-self (naiḥātmyam), which paradoxically results in a similar liberation from ego and suffering.

Regarding the philosophy of mind, Buddhism anticipated many insights from Hume and the empiricist bundle theory of the Self. In the 18th century, David Hume wrote that when he looks within, he finds no self, only a bundle of perceptions—a view remarkably close to Buddhism's analysis of the five aggregates. Hume famously said: *"I never can catch myself at any time without a perception; never observe anything but the perception."* This aligns with the notion that the idea of a self is a fiction imposed on the flow of conscious events. Buddhism also, in effect, held a form of phenomenalism: only mental and physical events exist, not the substrata we imagine behind them. Modern cognitive science often speaks of the Self as a constructed narrative or *"virtual centre of narrative gravity"* (to use Daniel Dennett's term) rather than a substantive entity. In these respects, Buddhism can be seen as a precursor to the no-self theories in contemporary philosophy and science (Thompson, 2015, pp. 23-56) The Buddhist meditative tradition offers a method for empirically investigating this. Through mindfulness, one observes experiences arising and passing without identifying with them, eventually seeing the absence of any fixed owner or observer beyond the process of observing itself. Some neuroscientists and philosophers, such as Thomas Metzinger and Anil Seth, have echoed the idea that the sense of self is a kind of illusion or brain-generated construct. This position aligns quite closely with Buddhist philosophy. Indeed, as one recent commentator puts it, *"Eastern Buddhist traditions of suitable mindfulness have long studied the paradox that we experience a unitary controlling self, yet upon investigation find only processes"*, thus offering a middle way between naive substantialism and the denial of experienced reality (Thompson, 2015, p. 42).

On the other hand, Buddhism's notion of the mind's luminosity resonates with Western phenomenological ideas of pre-reflective awareness. Phenomenologists like Husserl and Sartre noted that Consciousness is intrinsically aware of itself in each moment (not as an object, but as a condition of experience). Sartre, in particular, wrote that Consciousness is "filled with itself" and is nothing but the revealing of phenomena – he even described Consciousness as *"a light that illuminates itself and illuminates things"*. We see a parallel in Sartre's description of Consciousness as *"nothingness"* that is yet luminous, which, as one Vedānta scholar notes, essentially states the same thing as "consciousness is pure light revealing objects"(pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). Remarkably, Sartre's *égologie* (no ego theory) and Buddhism both understand Consciousness as contentlessness, self-awareness, and clarity without a self-thing. Phenomenologist Dan Zahavi has compared Buddhist mindful insight and phenomenological reduction. In both cases, the *Self-discovered* is not a thing but the *open, illuminated space of experience itself*. Thus, even in denying Self, Buddhist thought converges with others in affirming that there is something irreducible about the first-person presence of Consciousness, a presence that, in Buddhism, is impersonal but precious.

5. Comparative Analysis and Contemporary Relevance

Having outlined Advaita Vedānta, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, and Buddhist views, we can now compare their key ideas and examine how these ancient theories speak to today's philosophical concerns.

Self or No-Self: The starkest contrast lies between the Upaniṣadic/Advaitic affirmation of an eternal Self (as pure Consciousness) and Buddhism's doctrine of anattā. Advaita Vedānta asserts that the Self (ātman) exists and is the ultimate reality, known as Brahman. In contrast, Buddhism holds that any belief in a self is a cognitive error, a grasping at a non-existent entity. Sāṃkhya-Yoga occupies a middle position: it accepts permanent conscious selves (puruṣas), but they are many and isolated, rather than being one all-unifying Self. Regarding subjective philosophy, Advaita provides the individual with a grand identity – *tat tvam asi* ("That Thou Art") – promising that the core of your Consciousness is the infinite ground of the universe. Sāṃkhya promises individual liberation – your Consciousness can disentangle from matter and stand in its glory, but it does not become or recognise itself as one with all. Buddhism offers liberation through selflessness – the realisation that there is no owner of experiences, ironically leading to a state of freedom (nirvana) where one is not annihilated but instead sees through the illusion of the "I" and thereby ceases craving and suffering. The divergence is evident: Advaita's path is *ātma-jñāna* (knowledge of the Self), and Buddhism's is *anātma-bodha* (knowledge of no self).

However, experientially, descriptions of the highest states in these traditions show intriguing similarities. The Advaitin sage, liberated by the Self, sees the Self in all beings and has no egoistic attachment; similarly, the Arhat or Buddha of Buddhism has eliminated the notion "I am" and thus is also free from attachment. Both exude compassion; in Advaita, seeing others as one's Self naturally leads to compassion, and in Buddhism, the concepts of no-self and interdependence likewise foster compassion. Some modern scholars, such as David Loy, have argued that the apparent opposition (Self vs. no-self) may be more a matter of semantic or methodological difference than a truly substantial one. The Advaitin could say, "Our ātman is not a *personal* ego; it is 'no-self' in the sense of no individual personality, but yes-self in the sense of universal awareness." The Buddhist could say, "We do not reify any awareness, but in practice, the continuum of awareness, when purified, is boundless and can be called the dharmakāya (the truth-body of the Buddha) or even the *Buddha-nature,* which functionally is akin to Brahman." These rapprochements remain controversial – traditionalists on each side often resist them – but they highlight that, at the level of phenomenological experience, advanced meditation or enlightenment may converge on a similar *nondual* consciousness. Indeed, late Indian Buddhism (e.g. certain Yogācāra-Mādhyamika syncretic schools in Nalanda) explicitly used the term "nondual knowledge" (advaya-jñāna) to describe enlightened awareness, meaning an awareness with no subject-object split. This is virtually identical in phrasing to Advaita's claim that in the highest realization, the distinction of knower, knowing, and known disappears in the nondual self. The difference is that Advaita firmly ontologises nondual awareness as Brahman, while Buddhism keeps it as an ineffable *experience* or *wisdom* without metaphysical commitment.

Nature of Consciousness: All three traditions agree that, in ordinary experience, Consciousness seems tied to mental activity and material embodiment, but they locate the source of awareness differently. Advaita and Sāṃkhya-Yoga insist that matter (prakṛti), including the mind, is insentient by itself – thus, they both *reject any purely materialist explanation of Consciousness*. For them, Consciousness must come from a non-material principle: Brahman/ātman in Advaita, puruṣa(s) in Sāṃkhya. In contrast, Buddhism does not have a single answer to the source of Consciousness, since everything is dependently originated. Consciousness arises from conditions such as the sense organs and objects; there is no static source, but rather an ongoing process. However, later Buddhist thought, with the concept of Alaya-vijñāna, effectively posits a *continuing source* (the store consciousness) for the arising of momentary Consciousness. Still, stored Consciousness is not an unconditioned eternal principle; it is also said to cease upon enlightenment. So Buddhism is unique in not asserting a fundamental *ontological consciousness* underlying reality – ultimately, even Consciousness is not fundamental; emptiness is. (And emptiness is not a thing but the way things are.)

Interestingly, in modern debates, physicalism vs. dualism echoes these classical divisions. Advaita is akin to idealism, where the mind or Consciousness is considered the fundamental reality, and matter is secondary or illusory. Sāṃkhya is characterised by apparent dualism, where mind and matter are considered two distinct realities. Buddhism's no-self perspective, coupled with the concept of emptiness, can be seen as a form of phenomenalism or process ontology, where only phenomena in flux exist, with no fixed substances at all. Contemporary philosophy of mind has primarily been dominated by physicalism (the view that only matter is fundamental, and the mind emerges from it), which none of these Indian schools would accept – they would either invert it (arguing that the mind is fundamental) or dissolve the substance dichotomy in favour of a stream of events.

However, Western philosophy is witnessing renewed openness to non-physicalist views. The "hard problem of consciousness," articulated by David Chalmers (1996), asks why physical processes produce subjective experience and

has led some philosophers to consider that Consciousness might be a fundamental element of reality, not derivable from physics. This is a renaissance of panpsychism or related views. Galen Strawson has argued that since we know Consciousness certainly exists (as Descartes said, we cannot doubt the existence of the experience itself), and we have no explanation for it in our science, we may have to acknowledge that some form of mental being is ubiquitous. Thomas Nagel, in his famous essay *"What is it like to be a bat?"* (1974), pointed out that subjective experience has an irreducible quality (the "what-it-is-like") that science fails to capture. These concerns echo Advaita's point: *Consciousness is self-evident and cannot be explained away by anything else* (Deutsch, 1973, pp. 40-45). Indeed, recent scholarly work explicitly compares Advaita Vedānta to modern panpsychism. One researcher notes: "Advaita shares obvious similarities with a panpsychist ontology: It posits consciousness as a fundamental feature of reality" (Goff, 2017, pp. 198-202). Another notes that Śaṅkara's view of the universe as pervaded by one Consciousness parallels contemporary cosmopsychism— the idea that the universe as a whole is conscious, and individual minds are aspects of it (Goff, 2017, pp. 211-213). These convergences suggest that ancient Indian ideas can enrich today's debates. If one is considering panpsychism or dualism, Sāṃkhya's thoroughly worked-out dualist cosmology or Advaita's absolute idealism provide philosophically sophisticated models to engage with. They have already thought through issues like: if Consciousness is fundamental, how do many consciousnesses relate (Sāṃkhya's solution: they do not interact, just witness; Advaita's: they are one); how does Consciousness connect to brain or body (Advaita: via superimposition and reflection; Sāṃkhya: via proximity and mistaken identification, etc.). These may inspire new ways to frame the problems in analytic philosophy.

For instance, the combination problem in panpsychism (how micro-consciousnesses combine into the unitary Consciousness we each have) is reminiscent of Sāṃkhya's challenge of explaining the unity of experience from many puruṣas or Advaita's challenge of explaining the appearance of plurality from one Consciousness. Advaita solves the combination by denying plurality at the ultimate level (so there is nothing to combine, only one all along). In contrast, Sāṃkhya solves it by asserting that each "unit" of Consciousness experiences only its slice (so no combination occurs – each puruṣa stays separate). Neither is directly translatable to the modern context of panpsychism (which assumes spatiotemporal parts), but they present logically extreme options that sharpen the question. Contemporary analytic philosophers have also considered cosmopsychism (the cosmos has one Consciousness that fragments into ours), which is strikingly similar to Advaita's Brahman/ātman view, as noted by scholars (Goff, 2017, pp. 211-218). Perhaps engaging with Advaita might help address questions like: How can one cosmic Consciousness seem like many? Advaita's answer lies in māyā (the power of illusion), which creates separate mind-bodies and reflects the one Consciousness in each mind, much like a single sun reflected as many suns in different pots of water. Some philosophers (e.g., Bernardo Kastrup) have employed a "multiple dreams in one mind" analogy for cosmopsychism that is deeply rooted in the spirit of Advaita.

Regarding phenomenology and first-person description, Indian philosophies also have significant contributions to make. The concept of witness-consciousness (sākṣin) in Advaita and Yoga is analogous to the transcendental ego or pure witness in phenomenology. Miri Albahari, a contemporary philosopher, has developed a model called the Witness-Consciousness theory of no-self, drawing from Buddhism and Advaita, which posits a witness that is not an individual self but a "bare consciousness" that underlies experience (Albahari, 2006). Albahari argues that this is consistent with Buddhist anattā: the witness is not a personal self, but rather the phenomenological fact of witnessing. Interestingly, she and others use the term 'Witness' much as Yoga and Advaita do, showing cross-fertilisation of ideas. Likewise, the notion of pre-reflective self-awareness, developed by phenomenologists, that each conscious experience has an implicit self-awareness, resonates with svaprakāśa theories in Indian philosophy, such as Advaita and Yogācāra. Recent dialogues between phenomenologists and Buddhists, facilitated through the Mind & Life Institute and involving thinkers such as Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and the Dalai Lama, have highlighted these parallels. Evan Thompson, for example, in *"Waking, Dreaming, Being"* (2015), explicitly discusses how Hindu and Buddhist ideas of Consciousness (like dreamless sleep awareness in Advaita and the no-self view in Buddhism) can inform cognitive science. In a 2020 article, Thompson even analyses dreamless sleep in the light of Advaita and modern neuroscience, probing whether a contentless consciousness in deep sleep is plausible – a clear case where Advaita's claim (that Consciousness persists without objects in deep sleep) is being examined in contemporary research (Thompson, 2020, pp. 712-733).

Meanwhile, cognitive science and psychology have taken much interest in mindfulness meditation, which has its roots in Buddhist practices of observing the stream of Consciousness non-judgmentally. This has led to empirical studies on how training attention and reducing attachment to an idea of Self (as done in meditation) can alter brain activity, increase well-being, and give insight into the mind's workings. Some researchers suggest that long-term meditation can even alter the "default mode network" of the brain, which is associated with self-referential thinking, potentially correlating with the Buddhist notion of dissolving a habitual self-focus. Thus, the anattā doctrine finds practical validation: learning to *experience* the mind without the overlay of "me and mine" has measurable effects and benefits. On the other hand, the Advaitic practice of self-inquiry (ātma-vicāra, as taught in modern times by Ramana Maharshi,

for instance), where one constantly inquires, "Who am I?" and seeks the witness beyond thoughts, can also be viewed as a phenomenological exercise that could be studied scientifically. Some scientists have begun to examine reports of nondual awareness in meditation, where the subject-object dichotomy dissolves. These are precisely the experiences Advaita and certain Tibetan Buddhist practices train for. By providing structured techniques and theoretical frameworks, Indian traditions offer a rich source of material for scientific investigation into Consciousness.

Finally, on the ethical and existential fronts, these Indian theories address the alleviation of suffering, a theme of increasing interest in interdisciplinary fields, such as the dialogue between psychology, neuroscience, and contemplative traditions. Sāṃkhya-Yoga and Buddhism are expressly soteriological; they present their analysis of Consciousness to help end suffering (Sāṃkhya through knowledge of puruṣa versus prakṛti, Buddhism through the realisation of anattā and impermanence). Advaita also views ignorance of our true nature as the root of suffering. Taking oneself to be the limited body-mind causes fear of death, etc., whereas knowing oneself to be the immortal Brahman removes fundamental fear. Modern therapy and psychiatry, while not adopting these metaphysics, have found some practices (like mindfulness or the cultivation of a witnessing attitude) extremely useful in treating stress, depression, trauma (e.g. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which explicitly uses the idea of observing thoughts as separate from "you"). The philosophical insight that thoughts are *not the Self and that there is a space of awareness that can observe them without being entangled has become a therapeutic technique – essentially a secular application of the concept of luminous, detached consciousness*. One could argue that in making these practical inroads, Indian philosophies of Consciousness have demonstrated a kind of timeless relevance: they not only anticipated many theoretical issues about the mind but also offered *experiential methods* to transform one's relationship with one's mind.

6. Relevance to Analytic Philosophy and Cognitive Science

To summarise the contemporary relevance more directly:

- **Philosophy of Mind:** Indian theories, particularly Advaita and Sāṃkhya, bolster non-materialist perspectives. They present Consciousness as fundamental, aligning with panpsychist and dualist options that are being reconsidered by philosophers dissatisfied with strict materialism. They also raise unique solutions (e.g., Advaita's one-consciousness view as a form of cosmic idealism and Sāṃkhya's many-consciousness view as a pluralistic dualism). These can inspire analytic models that transcend the usual Cartesian dualism versus materialism dichotomy. The rigorous logical debate in classical India, as seen in Śaṅkara's refutations and Buddhist rejoinders, can enrich contemporary arguments. For instance, Śaṅkara's refutation of higher-order awareness theories(plato.stanford.edu) prefigures arguments against those theories in modern philosophy, which also grapple with regress problems.
- **Phenomenology:** The fine-grained introspective analyses of experience in Yoga and Buddhism complement Western phenomenological methods. Phenomenology emphasises how things are given to Consciousness; Buddhist mindfulness provides a trained way of attending to the givenness of experience (noting phenomena without ego). This practical know-how can deepen phenomenological insights. Conversely, phenomenology's conceptual tools, such as distinguishing between pre-reflective self-awareness and reflective self-objectification, help articulate what Indian sages encountered in meditation. There is an ongoing dialogue in journals and conferences (often under headings like "East-West phenomenology"), building on this Neuroscience & Psychology**:** By engaging with states such as deep meditation, trance, and lucid dreaming, as described in Indian texts, scientists can explore the range of conscious states beyond the ordinary waking state, which was already a preoccupation in the Upaniṣads and Yoga. For example, the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* delineates waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and a fourth transcendent state (turīya), a scheme that some consciousness researchers reference when discussing whether awareness is present during deep sleep, a topic of considerable interest now. The Yoga Sūtra systematically discuss attention and its transformations, which is pertinent to the cognitive psychology of attention.
- **Ethics and Consciousness:** The Indian idea that realising the true nature of Consciousness leads to compassion and non-violence (ahimsā) suggests a link between the ontology of mind and ethics. If one sees all beings as one's Self (Advaita) or sees that clinging to self is the cause of suffering (Buddhism), the ethical implication is profound care for others. This connection between understanding Consciousness and achieving ethical transformation is an area where philosophy of mind and moral philosophy can meet, and Indian traditions provide case studies of philosophies where that link is explicit.

In our age of disciplinary fragmentation, these holistic approaches where metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, and ethics interweave remind us that Consciousness is not just a theoretical puzzle but *central to the human condition*. Indian philosophers never studied Consciousness in a vacuum; they always sought the truth that leads to freedom. As Western

thought about Consciousness matures, moving beyond crude physicalism, it may increasingly appreciate the sophistication of these prior inquiries.

7. Conclusion

The Indian philosophical landscape presents a diverse range of views on Consciousness, from the resplendent Ātman = Brahman of Advaita Vedānta to the multiple puruṣas shining like discrete stars in the sky of Sāṃkhya, to the flickering stream of momentary Consciousness with no-self at its core in Buddhism. We have seen how Advaita posits an ultimate Luminous Self, self-effulgent and unitary, as the foundation of reality (Śaṅkarācārya, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Madhavananda. where the Self is described as self-luminous, indivisible, and the only reality. We have contrasted this with the Sāṃkhya-Yoga model of a plurality of luminous selves (puruṣas), each an untouched witness amid the permutations of nature. We have explored the Buddhist vision in which all assumed selves dissolve, yet a certain luminosity of mind remains, serving as the ground for wisdom and compassion(Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *the Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*, where the Buddha describes the mind as "luminous, defiled by adventitious defilements.")

Philosophically, these systems engage in an implicit conversation about the relationship between Consciousness, identity, and the world. Advaita and Sāṃkhya agree that Consciousness is fundamentally distinct from the material world but disagree on whether it is singular, plural, universal, or individual. Buddhism flips the script by denying the existence of any metaphysically independent consciousness, yet in doing so, it examines Consciousness with perhaps even greater granularity, detailing its momentary structure and conditions. Each tradition also had to address experiential evidence. For example, the Upaniṣadic seers took the continuity of awareness (even in deep sleep and in mystical states) as evidence of the Self. At the same time, the Buddhists used experiences like the disappearance of the Self in meditation as confirmation that the Self is an illusion.

When placed in dialogue with contemporary thought, these theories remain highly relevant. The problem of Consciousness's place in nature, still unresolved in science, was tackled head-on by Indian sages, who resolved it by elevating Consciousness to a primary status (Advaita, Sāṃkhya) or reconceptualising the Self, thereby reframing the problem (Buddhism). The Indian concept of Consciousness as self-knowing light anticipates modern intuitions that there is an irreducible subjective aspect to reality. The Buddhist analysis of personal identity as a construct parallels findings in psychology about the narrative Self. Moreover, the methodologies developed, including logical analysis, introspection through meditation, and ethical cultivation, offer valuable tools for interdisciplinary study.

In conclusion, the Indian philosophies of Consciousness demonstrate a profound integration of metaphysical insight and practical wisdom. They invite us to ponder questions such as: Is Consciousness one or many? How does it relate to the material world? What is the Self, or is there one at all? Moreover, crucially, they tie the answers to these questions to the pursuit of human flourishing and liberation from suffering. In an era when the study of Consciousness is often compartmentalised into cognitive science, analytic philosophy, or spirituality, the Indian traditions remind us of a more holistic approach. They challenge today's thinkers to broaden the conceptual framework and not shy away from the possibility that Consciousness might be more fundamental than conventionally assumed. Whether one accepts the doctrine of a Luminous Self in the Advaitic sense or not, engaging with these ideas can illuminate new paths in our understanding of the mind. The luminous Self of Indian thought interpreted in various ways across traditions continues to shine in the global philosophical discourse, inspiring fresh dialogue between ancient wisdom and modern knowledge.

Compliance with ethical standards

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this publication.

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[1] Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad – in particular, Yājñavalkya's teachings on the Self as light (Chapter 4, Brahmana 3). See Swami Madhavananda (trans.), Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (Advaita Ashrama, 1934).

[2] Gaudapāda's Māṇḍūkya Kārikā, an early Advaita text, discusses the illusory nature of duality and the sole reality of Consciousness (see Kārikā III.31-48 for the "ājāti vāda" and the concept of Consciousness).

[3] Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra and Śrīmālādevī Sūtra, Mahāyāna texts on Buddha-nature – discuss the luminous mind (prabhāsvara citta) and Tathāgatagarbha (see Suzuki's translation of Laṅkāvatāra, and Sallie B. King on Śrīmālādevī).

[4] Majjhima Nikāya I. (130). (Anattā-lakkhaṇa Sutta) – Buddha's discourse on the not-self characteristic: "This is not mine, not myself" (trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in Connected Discourses).

[5] Pāli Canon, Anguttara Nikāya I.49-52 (Pabhassara Sutta) – "Luminous is the mind…" Buddha's statement on the luminosity and defilement of mind (trans. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 1995).

[6] Sāṁkhya Kārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa – classical verses on Sāṁkhya metaphysics. Verse 19 defines puruṣa as "witness, solitary, neutral, observer, ". (For translation and commentary, see Gerald J. Larson, Classical Sāṁkhya.)

[7] Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali – especially sūtras II.17–20 on the conjunction of Seer and seen, and I.2–3 on the nature of pure awareness when mental fluctuations cease. (Translations by Edwin Bryant (2009) or Swami Vivekananda).

[8] Śaṅkara's Commentaries: e.g. Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya II.3.7 (on the impossibility of Consciousness being denied); Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya IV.3 (on Self as light). (Translations: Swami Gambhirananda, or George Thibaut for Brahma Sutra).

[9] Śaṅkarācārya. (Trans. Swami Madhavananda). (1934). Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya (p. 469). Advaita Ashrama.

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