

Princeton Bhakti Vedanta Institute
Subjective Evolution of Consciousness
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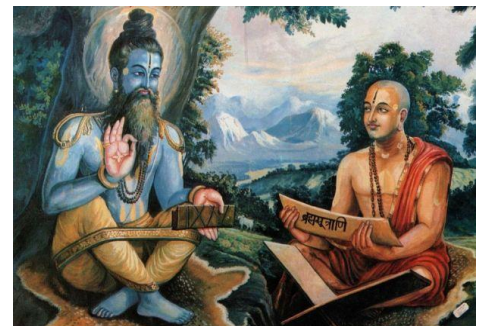
Aristotle proposed that the Absolute Truth or *theos* in its highest form was thought thinking thought [*noesis noesious noesis*]. He considered thought or the act of thinking to be what is actual. Actuality is active, and pure activity is thinking. The Absolute or Truth is pure thinking, pure actuality without any remainder or potentiality. It should be noted that Absolute thinking is quite distinct from the modern viewpoint of finite subjective thinking. At the same time, Aristotle did not have a conception of Personality associated with thinking, as was later understood by Hegel under the category of absolute being-for-itself beyond mere being-in-itself.

What does not think Aristotle considered potentiality [Greek: *dunamis*] - which is matter or the potential for being actualized or thought. In other words, matter was the potentiality of thought/actuality. Thus for the ancients, thought and being were not considered a dualism as the modern Cartesian philosophy presents, which Descartes called *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Here we have a representation of thinking substance [cognition] vs. extended substance [matter]. These opposing substances were, however, united in a third, God.

Many major philosophical changes came about since the ancients; two that will be focused on here are: (1) thinking or cognition was now conceived as substance instead of activity, and (2) an opposition was made between thinking/cognitive substance and matter as extended substance. Leaving out God, what is left is the conception that thinking cognition and extended matter [spatial material bodies] are opposed to one another in an independent manner. This, in brief, is how modern scientific philosophy came to consider things.

We find a similar dualistic philosophy represented in Samkhya in which *prakriti* or matter is distinguished from *purusha* or the non-material person.

This dualistic conception makes it difficult or impossible for the modern mindset to understand how thought or mind and matter can interact - so difficult that modern science has



neglected to answer that question and simply presumed it is only about matter that we are to be concerned. The modern scientific attitude is that somehow the problem of thought will be handled once the idea is reduced to the activity of matter, electricity, or their combination in neurons and their patterns in the brain.

When Srila Prabhupada asked his scientists in the early 70's to explain and prove that life comes from life, and that matter comes from life, using scientific knowledge it became problematic because of the dualistic nature of the philosophy that science has adopted. The role of cognition [the scientist] in science is completely neglected. However, since that time science itself has advanced to the point where it has faced one crisis after another in maintaining its dualistic philosophical stance.

As molecular biology examined the details of living cells in light of DNA and its constituent molecules, it became clear that a mechanistic understanding based on physics and chemistry was not sufficient for explaining the apparent intentional organization observed in the molecular proofreading and editing of DNA replication phenomena, and many other routine processes of maintaining the vitality of a cell.

Even the sacred cow of Darwin's theory was brought under scrutiny and subjected to crushing critique by the scientific community itself, in addition to attacks from Christian and other religious groups. Today Darwin's "tree of life" has been reduced to a tenuous bush or even a rhizomatic forest. The idea of natural selection was challenged and defeated by the neutral evolution theory of Kimura.

Subatomic Quantum mechanics, based on probability theory, presents the measurement problem by which the role of the observer becomes a necessity but remains a mystery.



Srila Prabhupada conceived the Bhaktivedanta Institute as a scientific academy not only to challenge and defeat the hegemony that modern materialistic science had on knowledge, but to present that Krishna consciousness was rational, scientific, and not merely based on pure religious sentiment.

He also asked his scientists to demonstrate the scientific validity of *Srimad Bhagavatam's* conception of the cosmos. This, of course, is related to the problem of how matter comes from life. It is interesting that the *Bhagavatam* seems to present cosmogenesis partly from the dualistic Samkhya philosophical standpoint, and partly from another viewpoint

involving Brahma, which is a more unified version of a creator/created conception.

There seem to be two pivotal points in the production of the material universe from the non-material, the first is the *yoga-nidra* of Mahavishnu, and the second seems to be the *pradhana* and *mahatattva*, the latter in which the *jiva* is involved.

In the tradition of German idealism during the time of Schelling and Hegel, the idea that material nature was referred to as petrified intelligence, or sleeping spirit, was complementary to Aristotle's idea of the potentiality of thought in matter. So the *yoga-nidra* of Spirit [God] that we find in the *Bhagavatam* was also present in the West.

The idea of *pradhana* is also found in the West as the potentiality of the actual world in Aristotle's matter, or even as the ether. This idea has received importance in an unexpected form in the currently most advanced scientific field of Quantum Electrodynamics [QED]. The "quantum vacuum" is an unobservable field that contains the complete probability of the observable world. Particles are produced from this vacuum by creation and annihilation operators that excite or annul particles that appear in the observable world.

In the QED conception the world does not exist independently of an observer [operator] and it is all made of fields rather than particles. However, there is a problem in this theory for correctly accounting for gravity.

Hegel locates the potentiality of the world in the finite singular soul, which he considers to be the unmediated being of Spirit. From the Absolute Idea or Spirit, manifests what he calls its externality or Natural world with which the soul can identify as much as with its other side or spiritual world. This is similar to the idea of the *tatastha shakti* between the *bahiranga* external energy and the *antaranga shakti* spiritual energy.

A subjective evolution from the soul's indifferent unconscious state to various stages of identification with nature in different degrees through lower forms of life to human anthropology is explained in a philosophical stepwise dialectical development. In the process a differentiation of subject-object and consciousness arises along with the concept of "I" or finite rational ego.





Going further, a distinction between the rational thinking of human beings disengages from a purely immediate identification with nature to a more mediated, self-determined state of freedom in its own rationally constituted self. This subjective process proceeds further into the objective sphere where rational, social institutions are formed that correspond to its inwardly developed subjective reason, basically constructing a second nature for oneself on top of the first nature from which it began its journey.

Further development of thought leads to philosophy, religion, and art through which the Absolute Idea or Truth is reached in which the spirit soul comprehends itself as Spirit. This is not an objective evolution of bodies, but a subjective evolution of soul from an unconscious state of indifference [*tatastha shakti*], through its primitive identification with nature and finally to its true identification as free spirit.

The different attempts to comprehend the unities that appear in external nature as mechanical [solar system], chemical, biological [teleological] systems, and in internal nature as anthropological, social, political, moral and ethical principles, religious and philosophical as well as artistic endeavors - all arise from the soul's inherent tendency to establish its true spiritual nature, and a world congruent with it.

The proper conception of the body-soul relation is necessary for any scientific explanation of the relation of spirit to nature. But first it is necessary to correct the unscientific misconceptions/presuppositions of the soul that most modern viewpoints embrace. In this process it will also be important to understand the unique ontology of what it is to be a human being [anthropology] - in what ways it is similar to other biological life forms and in what ways it is different.

Among the major erroneous presuppositions is that the soul is immaterial, foreign to the body in which the human body is just like those of animals, which are composed of the same materials as stone or earth. These ideas do have some validity, which is why they have been accepted for so long, however they fail to provide any explanatory basis for the human capacity for pure thought or will ['pure' meaning without admixture of sensuous reference] or how a pure soul can interact with an extended body.

The trajectory of a projected material body of metal can be predicted by mechanical laws of physics, but the trajectory of the flight of a living bird, for example, is not determinable in the same way by mechanical laws. This difference between living and non-living bodies is an observable phenomenon that requires scientific explanation beyond the mere laws of mechanics

or chemistry. Biology as a distinct science is becoming recognized as the mere mechanistic and chemical theories are being shown to be inadequate for explaining complex biological phenomena.

Whilst even animal behavior is not explained in purely biological terms, human behavior presents highly developed forms of life an animal possesses only in the most rudimentary ways. These observable differences require scientific explanation that modern science does not seem to address at all. This, of course, is due to the fact that scientists do not go beyond the purely material mechanical, chemical and biological conceptions of life. We can say that animals identify themselves with their world, whereas human beings try to comprehend themselves as spirit and express themselves in a world that reflects that. Thus a systematic science of the soul is necessary to bring this subject into the form of scientific knowledge.

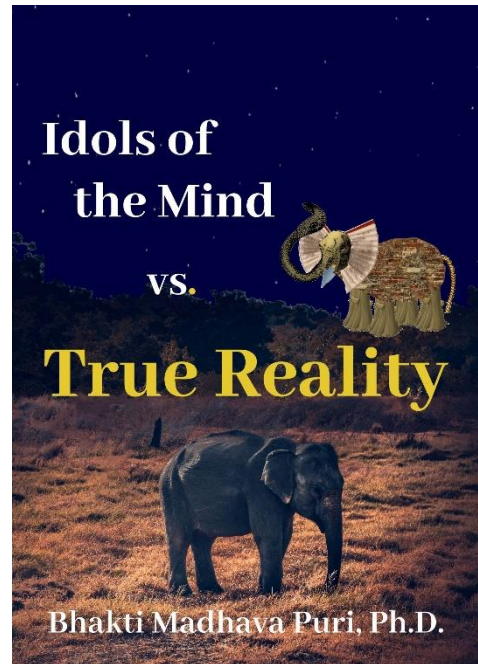
An important note about the difference between consciousness and spirit/soul may be briefly addressed here. One cannot begin an explanation of things with the fact of consciousness, as a given. Many scientists and even devotees consider consciousness as a given fact of what the *atma* is, or even what Brahman is. This is doxa or dogma, much like what modern science proposes in dealing with things as immediately given to intuition [naive realism] - what merely exists.

Vedanta explains that the process for understanding anything properly requires knowing its origin - *janmadasya yatha*. This is characteristic of archaic philosophy, and is completely lost in modern science, along with the concept of final cause/purpose, or that for which things exist.

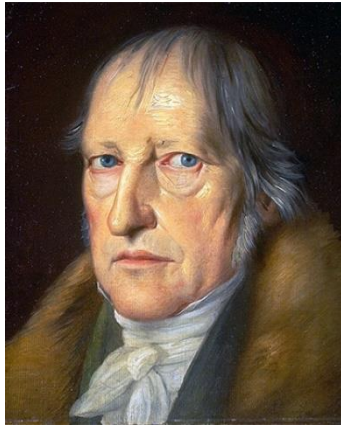
Vedanta states, that which is to be known is called Brahman - *brahma jijnasa*. And the process of knowing [*jna*] or meditation [*jigjnasa*] begins by determining its origin/birth - *janma*.

Because knowing requires consciousness, it is unlikely that we can consider Brahman to be consciousness and knowing Brahman to be based upon what it already presupposes. The Sanskrit word Brahman does not really indicate consciousness, despite the fact that many, especially abstract monists, refer to it in that way.

If we instead understand Brahman from the Sanskrit roots '*brih*' and '*man*' – as 'that foundation which expands or grows' then we are led to a conception which is based on *acintya bedhaabedha tattva* [identity in difference]. For



growth means that something posits itself as different from itself yet maintains its identity with itself.



This is how Hegel defines Spirit. Spirit posits itself as different from itself [basically a self-negation], yet reclaims this difference as identical with itself as its own determination of itself [negates the negation or is absolute negation]. This same process exists in thinking, which is the activity of positing another thought that yet remains identical within the activity of thinking.

A plant grows by duplicating itself at the mitochondrial level [mitosis] yet the duplicate remains identical with the original plant throughout this differentiation and integration process.

Matter, like a crystal, grows by accumulation of matter outside itself, not by organic self-differentiation and integration. It is a mechanical process in which arbitrary changes/replacements of the contingently assembled parts does not change the overall whole.

Thus Brahman is better identified as Spirit, as long as we can specify in some determinate way what we mean by 'spirit.' Hegel provides a determinate way to do this and thus it becomes a scientific term, and not merely some vague belief of faith.

To understand consciousness requires knowledge of its fundamental nature, and how it comes about. Because of its structure as a subject-object relation it is basically dualistic, and this makes it problematic. Consciousness relates itself to its object yet maintains its difference from its object with itself being subjective. The relation of the object to consciousness is called knowing. But this whole process remains vague and impossible for understanding to grasp in this form.

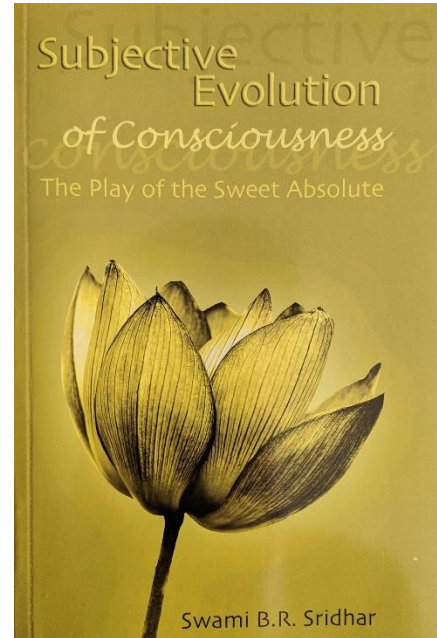
Understanding consciousness as an **act** of relating and distinguishing itself, rather than a fact, in which subject and object are constituent moments of that process, raises the problem to another level, in which the foundation of consciousness is located in a dynamic organic system, closer to the idea of spirit.

It must also be emphasized that real difference is required in the negative activity of spirit or else identity would not be meaningful. Singular and plural are both needed to signify either. Advaita is not mere oneness but the negation of duality, which itself is a negative relation. Thus *advaya jnana* is understood as absolute negativity.

Understanding the history of ideas helps to recognize how we arrived at the philosophical stance we accept today. The study and explanation of the subjective evolution of the soul [or

consciousness at the appropriate level of development] and its objective manifestation is the current service with which the Princeton Bhakti Vedanta Institute is primarily involved. The loving devotional development of the spirit soul is also studied in the light of the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, *Brihad Bhagavatamrita*, and *Ramananda Samvad*.

In his book, *Subjective Evolution of Consciousness*, Srila B. R. Sridhara Maharaja considers that Hegel's teachings provide a philosophical foundation for Gaudiya Siddhanta, of course, not including the conception of *rasa*. Hegel was a student of Plato and Aristotle, and the acceptance of that preceptorial line in Western philosophy is recognized by Srila Bhaktivinod Thakur in *The Bhagavata: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics and Its Theology*, pg. 10-11, where he writes:



“Subjects of philosophy and theology are like the peaks of large towering and inaccessible mountains standing in the midst of our planet inviting attention and investigation. Thinkers and men of deep speculation take their observations through the instruments of reason and consciousness. [...] Plato looked at the peak of the spiritual question from the West and Vyasa made the observation from the East. [...] Their words and expressions are different, but their import is the same. They tried to find out the absolute religion and their laborers were crowned with success, for God gives all that He has to his children if they want to have it. It requires a candid, generous, pious, and holy heart to feel the beauties of their conclusions.”

By the grace of Sri Guru, Gauranga, and Vaishnavas we pray that they may be pleased with our humble attempts of service.

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