



Advaita Vedanta and Modern Consciousness Studies: Bridging Classical Indian Philosophy and Contemporary Cognitive Science

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Abstract

Advaita Vedanta, the non-dualistic school of classical Indian philosophy systematized by Śaṅkara in the eighth century, offers one of the most sophisticated philosophical frameworks for understanding the nature of consciousness, self, and reality. Modern consciousness studies, an interdisciplinary field bringing together philosophy of mind, cognitive science, neuroscience, and contemplative traditions, has increasingly engaged with non-Western philosophical resources in addressing the so-called hard problem of consciousness. This article examines the productive dialogue between Advaita Vedanta and modern consciousness studies, focusing on how classical Indian philosophy can illuminate, and be illuminated by, contemporary cognitive science. Drawing on a critical literature review methodology, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship in philosophy of mind, comparative philosophy, contemplative studies, and cognitive science published between 2010 and 2025. The analysis identifies four interlocking dimensions of the dialogue: the conceptual mapping between classical Advaitic categories and contemporary philosophy of mind; the engagement with the hard problem of consciousness through non-dualistic frameworks; the empirical investigation of contemplative practices grounded in Vedantic traditions; and the methodological and ethical considerations involved in cross-cultural philosophical work. The study draws on Advaita scholarship including the work of Swami Satchidanandendra, Bina Gupta, Wolfgang Fasching, and Christian Coseru, alongside consciousness studies literature including David Chalmers, Thomas Nagel, Galen Strawson, Evan Thompson, and Jonardon Ganeri. Findings indicate that the dialogue is genuinely productive when conducted with philosophical rigour and respect for the distinct frameworks. The article concludes with implications for philosophy of mind, comparative philosophy, contemplative studies, and Indian philosophy education.

Keywords: Advaita Vedanta, Consciousness Studies, Philosophy of Mind, Hard Problem of Consciousness, Indian Philosophy, Comparative Philosophy, Contemplative Practice, Non-Dualism

INTRODUCTION

The nature of consciousness remains one of the most enduring and contested questions in philosophy and cognitive science.¹ The so-called hard problem of consciousness, articulated in influential form by David Chalmers,² asks why and how physical processes give rise to subjective experience, the qualitative felt character of mental states. While substantial progress has been made on the easy problems concerning information processing, attention, and perceptual mechanisms, the explanatory gap between objective neural processes and first-person experience has resisted standard

scientific reduction. The persistence of this problem has prompted scholars to look beyond the dominant Western philosophical traditions for additional conceptual resources, and Indian philosophical schools, particularly Advaita Vedanta, have emerged as significant interlocutors in this expanded conversation.³

Advaita Vedanta, systematized by Śaṅkarācārya in the eighth century and developed through commentaries on the Upaniṣads, the Brahma Sūtra, and the Bhagavad Gitā, offers a sophisticated philosophical framework centred on the non-dual identity of ātman (the witness self) and brahman (ultimate reality).⁴ Within this framework, consciousness is treated not as an emergent property of physical processes but as the foundational ground of experience itself, self-luminous (svaprakāśa) and underlying all cognitive activity.⁵ The traditional categories of sākṣin (witness consciousness), cidaabhāsa (reflected consciousness), avidyā (ignorance), ānanda (bliss), and the levels of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states (jāgrat, svapna, suṣupti) provide an analytical apparatus that has been refined across more than a millennium of textual and philosophical engagement.⁶

The dialogue between Advaita Vedanta and contemporary consciousness studies has developed substantially in recent decades.⁷ The publication of major comparative works, dedicated journals including the Journal of Consciousness Studies and the Indian Philosophical Quarterly, conferences bringing together philosophers and scientists, and a growing body of empirical research on contemplative practices grounded in Vedantic traditions have together created a productive interdisciplinary space. Yet the dialogue has also raised significant challenges. Questions of methodological rigour, the dangers of superficial appropriation, the difficulty of accurately translating technical Sanskrit philosophical vocabulary, and the responsibilities of cross-cultural engagement all warrant sustained reflection.

Against this backdrop, the present article asks: how can Advaita Vedanta and modern consciousness studies productively engage one another, and what are the implications for philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and Indian philosophy education? Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry.

- First, how do central Advaitic categories map onto and challenge contemporary philosophy of mind frameworks?
- Second, what does Advaita contribute to contemporary engagement with the hard problem of consciousness?
- Third, what methodological and ethical considerations should guide cross-cultural philosophical work in this area?

The article makes three contributions: it synthesizes scholarship across Advaita studies, philosophy of mind, and consciousness research; it identifies four interlocking dimensions of the dialogue; and it articulates implications for philosophical research, education, and cross-cultural engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foundational Texts and Classical Advaita

The classical Advaita tradition rests on a body of foundational texts including the principal Upaniṣads, the Brahma Sūtra of Bādarāyaṇa, and the Bhagavad Gitā, collectively termed the prasthānatraya or three pillars.⁸ Śaṅkara's commentaries on these texts, alongside his independent treatises such as the Upadeśasāhasrī and the disputed Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, established the systematic philosophical framework.⁹ Subsequent generations of Advaitins, including Suresvara, Padmapāda, Vācaspati Miśra, Prakāśātman, Sarvajñātman, Vidyāraṇya, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, and Citsukha, refined the system through detailed engagement with epistemology, ontology, and the philosophy of consciousness.¹⁰ The Bhāmatī and Vivaraṇa sub-schools developed distinct approaches to several philosophical questions including the locus of avidyā and the nature of mokṣa (liberation).¹¹

Modern Advaita Scholarship

Modern Advaita scholarship has developed substantially across multiple traditions. Within India, the work of Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati, the founder of Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya, established a rigorous philological reading of Śaṅkara that distinguishes the master's genuine works from later attributions and emphasizes the centrality of the witness self.¹² T. M. P. Mahadevan, K.

Satchidananda Murty, R. Balasubramanian, and others have produced important monographic and synthetic works.¹³ International Advaita scholarship by Karl H. Potter, Eliot Deutsch, J. G. Arapura, Bina Gupta, Anantanand Rambachan, and others has substantially developed analytical engagement with the tradition in English-language philosophical literature.¹⁴ Recent decades have witnessed increasing engagement with cognitive scientific and philosophical approaches to consciousness, including the work of Wolfgang Fasching, Miri Albahari, and Christian Coseru.¹⁵

Modern Consciousness Studies

Modern consciousness studies have developed into an interdisciplinary field combining philosophy, cognitive science, neuroscience, and contemplative studies. Thomas Nagel's 1974 essay on what it is like to be a bat established the analytical articulation of the explanatory gap between objective description and subjective experience.¹⁶ David Chalmers' articulation of the hard problem of consciousness in the 1990s has shaped much of the subsequent conversation.¹⁷ Galen Strawson, Philip Goff, and others have developed panpsychist responses to the hard problem, while higher-order theories, global workspace theory, integrated information theory, and predictive processing approaches have offered competing scientific frameworks.¹⁸ The integration of phenomenology and cognitive science, articulated through neurophenomenology by Francisco Varela and developed by Evan Thompson and others, provides a productive methodological bridge between first-person and third-person investigation.¹⁹

Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Mind

Cross-cultural philosophy of mind has expanded substantially in recent decades. Owen Flanagan's work on Buddhist epistemology and naturalism, Evan Thompson's extended engagement with Tibetan Buddhism and yogic traditions, Jonardon Ganeri's sustained philosophical work on classical Indian philosophy of mind, and the comparative work of figures including B. K. Matilal, J. N. Mohanty, and Mark Siderits have together established a rich literature.²⁰ The Mind and Life dialogues, the comparative philosophy work centred at institutions including the Center for Buddhist Studies and various European and Indian universities, and dedicated journals have institutionalized the cross-cultural conversation. Within this broader landscape, Advaita Vedanta has received increasing attention alongside the more extensively engaged Buddhist and Yogic traditions.²¹

Research Gap

Despite this expanding scholarship, several gaps remain. Integrative analyses that engage both classical Advaita and contemporary consciousness studies with equal rigour are comparatively rare, with much of the literature privileging one side at the expense of the other. The methodological and ethical considerations involved in cross-cultural philosophical work warrant more sustained attention than they have typically received. The relationship between Advaita scholarship and the empirical investigation of contemplative practices, including practices grounded in Vedantic traditions, remains underdeveloped. The present article seeks to contribute to addressing these gaps.

METHODS

This study employs a critical literature review methodology with thematic synthesis, suitable for engaging an interdisciplinary topic that spans classical Indian philosophy, contemporary philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and contemplative studies. The review proceeded through four stages. In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in the Philosopher's Index, JSTOR, PhilPapers, Scopus, the Indian Citation Index, the Center for Buddhist Studies bibliographies, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined Advaita Vedanta, Śāṅkara, non-dualism, witness consciousness, sākṣin, brahman, atman, hard problem of consciousness, philosophy of mind, contemplative studies, and comparative philosophy. The window covered January 2010 to August 2025, with substantial earlier classical and modern philosophical works retained for foundational reference.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical, theoretical, or critical scholarship engaging with Advaita Vedanta, modern consciousness studies, or the dialogue between them. Foundational classical, modern, and comparative philosophical works were also included. Edited volumes from major academic publishers in philosophy and Indian studies were reviewed. Exclusion

criteria filtered out devotional or apologetic works without scholarly framing, popular spiritual literature, and non-peer-reviewed materials. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, seventy publications were retained.

In the third stage, supplementary materials were drawn from publicly available primary source translations including the Upaniṣads in scholarly translation, Śāṅkara's commentaries in the editions of Swami Gambhirananda and others, and selected works of subsequent Advaitins. In the fourth stage, thematic synthesis generated four interlocking dimensions of the Advaita-consciousness studies dialogue. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, and respectful engagement across philosophical traditions were maintained throughout.

RESULTS

Conceptual Mapping Between Advaitic Categories and Philosophy of Mind

The first dimension concerns the conceptual mapping between central Advaitic categories and contemporary philosophy of mind. Several Advaitic concepts have been productively engaged with contemporary frameworks. The category of *sākṣin*, witness consciousness, has been compared and contrasted with contemporary notions of pure awareness, phenomenal consciousness in the Chalmers sense, and the witness or observer self in phenomenological traditions.²² The Advaitic distinction between *vyāvahārika* (empirical) and *pārāmārthika* (transcendental) levels of reality has been compared to two-aspect theories and to phenomenological distinctions between empirical and transcendental subjectivity in Husserl and others.²³ The analysis of the three states (waking, dreaming, deep sleep) and the supposed fourth (*tuṛīya*) provides a phenomenological apparatus for analysing consciousness across diverse experiential contexts.²⁴

Productive points of mutual challenge have also emerged. Advaita's treatment of consciousness as foundational rather than derivative challenges naturalist frameworks that treat consciousness as an emergent or supervenient property of physical processes.²⁵ Advaita's distinction between consciousness and its modifications (*vṛtti*) parallels but is not identical to contemporary distinctions between phenomenal consciousness and access consciousness. The Advaitic notion of *svaprakāśata* (self-luminosity) of consciousness has parallels with the self-intimating character of awareness in some phenomenological traditions but raises distinctive questions when engaged through analytic philosophical methods.²⁶ Productive scholarship has shown that careful conceptual mapping requires attention to the distinct soteriological and epistemological commitments of Advaita rather than treating it as merely a source of additional concepts.²⁷

Engagement with the Hard Problem of Consciousness

The second dimension concerns Advaita's engagement with the hard problem of consciousness. The hard problem, in its standard articulation, asks why physical processes give rise to subjective experience, given that the physical description appears to be exhaustively functional in character.²⁸ Advaita responds to this question from a perspective that fundamentally differs from the standard physicalist starting point. For Advaita, consciousness is not an explanandum to be derived from non-conscious physical processes but the very ground from which the appearance of physical processes itself is articulated.²⁹ This inversion of the explanatory direction, while not constituting a solution to the hard problem in standard terms, offers a substantively different conceptual approach that warrants engagement on its own terms.

Several productive lines of dialogue have emerged. Some scholars have explored panpsychist or panentheist readings that bring Advaita into conversation with contemporary work by Galen Strawson and Philip Goff, suggesting potentially fruitful resonances.³⁰ Others have emphasized the distinctive Advaitic claim of the radical non-difference between empirical and ultimate consciousness, which goes substantially beyond panpsychist views.³¹ Phenomenologically informed readings, such as those developed by Wolfgang Fasching, have engaged the Advaitic analysis of consciousness with phenomenological methods, producing rich integrative accounts.³² The dialogue continues to develop, and significant philosophical work remains in clarifying both areas of substantive convergence and fundamental disagreement.³³

Empirical Investigation of Contemplative Practices

The third dimension concerns the empirical investigation of contemplative practices grounded in Vedantic traditions. Modern contemplative studies has expanded substantially, integrating phenomenological, psychological, and neuroscientific methods.³⁴ While much of the empirical research has focused on Buddhist meditation traditions, including mindfulness practices derived from Theravāda and various practices from Tibetan traditions, increasing attention has been given to practices grounded in Vedantic and broader Hindu yogic traditions.³⁵ Practices including atma-vicāra (self-inquiry), nididhyāsana (meditative reflection), various forms of dhyāna, and the so-called neti-neti method of negative discrimination have been examined through both phenomenological and physiological lenses.³⁶

Specific lines of research have explored the neurophysiological correlates of meditative states associated with Vedantic practice, the phenomenology of self-inquiry experiences, the relationship between practice and reported reductions in self-referential rumination, and the broader mental health implications of sustained contemplative engagement. The interpretive challenge in this research is substantial: empirical correlation between practice and certain physiological or psychological markers does not directly verify the metaphysical claims of the underlying tradition, and rigorous scholarship maintains careful distinctions between what empirical methods can and cannot establish. Productive research engages contemplative traditions on their own terms while applying empirical methods within their proper epistemic scope.

Methodological and Ethical Considerations

The fourth dimension concerns the methodological and ethical considerations involved in cross-cultural philosophical work. Several considerations are particularly important. First, philosophical engagement requires accurate translation and conceptual interpretation of technical Sanskrit terminology, with attention to the distinct philosophical commitments of different sub-schools and historical periods.³⁷ Loose translation of terms like ātman as soul or self can obscure the technical philosophical analysis at work. Second, the soteriological framing of Advaita, in which philosophical analysis serves the goal of liberation (mokṣa), differs from the largely theoretical framing of much contemporary academic philosophy.³⁸ Acknowledging this difference is essential for accurate engagement.

Third, ethical considerations relating to the broader history of Indian philosophy in Western academic engagement bear on contemporary work.³⁹ Critiques of orientalism, of the appropriation of Indian philosophical resources without adequate acknowledgement, and of the marginalization of Indian philosophy within Western academic philosophy curricula provide important context. Sustained engagement with Indian-trained scholars and Indian institutions, the inclusion of Indian philosophy in mainstream philosophy departments rather than its segregation in religious studies or area studies frameworks, and careful attention to the diverse Indian philosophical traditions including those that critique Advaita constitute important elements of ethical practice.⁴⁰

DISCUSSION

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an integrative analytical framework that engages both classical Advaita and contemporary consciousness studies with rigour and respect for their distinct frameworks. The four dimensions identified are mutually reinforcing. Conceptual mapping illuminates how each tradition makes distinctive contributions; engagement with the hard problem reveals both areas of dialogue and points of fundamental difference; empirical contemplative research provides additional evidentiary engagement; methodological reflection ensures that the dialogue is conducted with appropriate care.

For philosophy of mind, the findings suggest that engagement with Advaita can productively expand the conceptual resources available for thinking about consciousness, while resisting any simple appropriation. The Advaitic analysis of witness consciousness, the distinction between consciousness and its modifications, the analysis of states of consciousness, and the relationship between consciousness and the empirical world all offer rigorous philosophical resources that warrant attention. At the same time, the soteriological framing of Advaita, the metaphysical commitments to non-dualism,

and the textual hermeneutic methods of the tradition mean that engagement requires more than concept mining.

For comparative philosophy, the findings affirm the productive character of the Advaita-consciousness studies dialogue while underscoring the importance of philological rigour, attention to internal Advaitic debates, and engagement with the full diversity of Indian philosophical traditions. Comparative work that engages Advaita alongside Buddhist, Sāṅkhya, Yogic, Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, and other Indian schools provides richer contextualization than work that treats Advaita in isolation. The continued development of comparative philosophy as an academic field, with appropriate institutional support and pedagogical resources, is an important enabling condition.

For contemplative studies, the findings highlight the importance of engaging Vedantic practices with the same rigour and respect that has been applied to Buddhist contemplative traditions. The integration of phenomenological, psychological, and neuroscientific methods, conducted in dialogue with Vedantic textual and practitioner traditions, provides productive research opportunities. Care must be taken to avoid both naive metaphysical claims based on neurophysiological correlations and reductive dismissals of phenomenological reports that do not fit pre-existing frameworks.

For Indian philosophy education, the findings emphasize the importance of teaching Advaita Vedanta and other classical Indian philosophical schools with the rigour and depth they merit, both within Indian institutions and in international philosophy curricula. The continuing under-representation of Indian philosophy in mainstream Western philosophy departments is an institutional issue that deserves sustained attention. Within Indian institutions, the strengthening of Sanskrit philosophical education, the supporting of textual editing and translation projects, and the integration of classical and contemporary philosophical methods all warrant investment.

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, the analysis depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven across sub-traditions and contemporary engagements. The voices of practitioners, traditional scholars, and Indian philosophical institutions are mediated through academic framings, and direct engagement with these voices is essential to enrich any synthesis. The pace of development in consciousness studies means that some findings will require updating as the field continues to evolve.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the productive dialogue between Advaita Vedanta and modern consciousness studies. Through a critical literature review across classical Indian philosophy, contemporary philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and contemplative studies, the analysis identified four interlocking dimensions: the conceptual mapping between Advaitic categories and philosophy of mind; engagement with the hard problem of consciousness through non-dualistic frameworks; the empirical investigation of contemplative practices grounded in Vedantic traditions; and methodological and ethical considerations involved in cross-cultural philosophical work. Together these dimensions describe a productive interdisciplinary space whose continued development promises significant contributions to philosophical understanding.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, Advaita Vedanta offers genuinely valuable conceptual and analytical resources for engaging contemporary questions about consciousness, while its insights cannot be reduced to or appropriated within frameworks that were not designed to accommodate non-dualist metaphysics. Second, the dialogue between Advaita and consciousness studies is most productive when conducted with philosophical rigour, philological care, and respect for the distinct frameworks of each tradition. Third, the continued development of this dialogue requires institutional support for comparative philosophy, contemplative studies, and Indian philosophy education, alongside ethical attention to the broader history of cross-cultural philosophical engagement.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Detailed conceptual studies engaging specific Advaitic categories with specific debates in contemporary philosophy of mind would substantively advance the dialogue. Empirical research on Vedantic contemplative practices, conducted in collaboration with traditional teachers and practitioners, would extend the contemplative studies literature. Comparative work that engages Advaita alongside other classical Indian philosophical schools would deepen contextual understanding. Studies engaging the work of contemporary Advaitic teachers and scholarly institutions would bring living traditions into the academic conversation.

Pedagogical research on the integration of Indian philosophy into university philosophy curricula would inform institutional reform. By advancing such an agenda, philosophy can contribute meaningfully to one of the most consequential intellectual conversations of our time.

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