



## **Advaita Vedānta and Husserl's Phenomenology<sup>1</sup>**

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In this essay, I will compare some of the basic theses of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta<sup>2</sup> and Husserl's phenomenology. The time dividing them is about 1200 years, and the two individuals belonged to two very different cultural traditions. Their intellectual backgrounds were also quite distinct. Husserl first entered philosophy by way of mathematics, which led him to focus upon the acts of mathematical thinking. At the same time, he learned from Brentano that all conscious experiences are intentional. It was both of these interests which led him to develop a theory of consciousness. Śaṅkara hailed from a tradition of religious and mystical experience, having studied with Ānanda – from whom, through Gauḍapāda, he appropriated a deep understanding of the Upaniṣadic texts, as well as a sort of idealism in which consciousness is the only metaphysical reality.

In this essay, I will not discuss Husserl's very influential philosophy of logic and mathematics, just as I will not talk about Śaṅkara's theory that the empirical world is an appearance fostered by ignorance, nor about his critique of the various other doctrines and schools of Indian philosophy. The primary focus of my investigation will be the theme of consciousness around which the two philosophies revolve. Wherever necessary, I will draw from various facets of their philosophies in order to develop, analyze, evaluate, compare, and unpack the ramifications of their conceptions of consciousness.

I have prepared this essay with two primary goals in mind: (1) to demonstrate the profound contribution of Indian thought to the theme of consciousness, and (2) to make Indian thought accessible to my readers. It would be a mistake to claim, as has often been done, that the theme of consciousness belongs essentially to modern Western philosophy, beginning with Descartes, and finally culminating in Husserl. This essay will amply demonstrate that the theme of consciousness has been central to the Indian tradition, especially the Vedāntic tradition, since the time of the Upaniṣads (roughly 1000 BCE). Notwithstanding the fact that a comparison of Śaṅkara with Husserl is not intrinsically necessary to expound either Vedānta or phenomenology, I believe

that such a comparison will help this audience gain access to some of the central concepts in Indian thought. It seems to me that when one compares the unknown with the known and the unfamiliar with the familiar, the unknown becomes known – or at least, less unknown – while the unfamiliar becomes familiar, or at least less unfamiliar.

The paper proceeds in three parts: part I provides a brief review of the central theses of Advaita Vedānta in general and the conception of consciousness in particular; part II outlines Husserl's important theses regarding the theme of consciousness; and part III sketches a movement within Husserl's thinking, which discloses the limits of intentionality and temporality, as well as of the centrality of the ego, in order to determine equivalences, if any, between the two philosophies.

## I.

I will begin with a brief review of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, one of the most widely known and influential schools of Indian philosophy. As a system of Vedānta, Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta is based upon the Upaniṣads, the *Gītā*, and the *Brahmasūtras*. On these texts, Śaṅkara wrote exegetical commentaries in which he developed his philosophical position, demonstrated that his position was in accordance with these texts, and advanced independent arguments in favor of his own position. His method of doing philosophy was typically Vedāntic. There is no lack of rational argumentation in his writings, and what may be absent has been amply compensated for by his numerous commentators and followers. The system developed over several centuries, and by the end of the 16th century, approximately 700 to 800 years after Śaṅkara, the system reached its intellectual height. So my reference to Advaita Vedānta in this paper includes not only Śaṅkara's own writings, but also the writings of his followers, especially of those belonging to what is known as the Vivaraṇa interpretation of Advaita.<sup>3</sup>

In his exegetical commentaries Śaṅkara provides a systematic account of consciousness which he largely draws from the Upaniṣads. The Sanskrit term for consciousness is "*cit*." The discussions of consciousness in the Upaniṣads arise in the context of explaining the real nature of the *ātman* or the self. In the Western philosophico-religious traditions, the term "self" generally connotes a subject, the referent of "I." *Ātman*, however, though usually translated as "self," does not refer to the "I," the empirical self. In the Upaniṣads, both "*cit*" and "*ātman*" refer to pure consciousness, a kind of trans-empirical consciousness, which not only is different from the empirical consciousness, but also forms the basis of the empirical individual. Following the literal translation of the term "*cit*" as consciousness, in this essay, I will use "self," "consciousness," "pure consciousness," "real self," and "pure self" interchangeably

to connote *ātman* or *cit*, to be distinguished from, the *jīva*, the empirical self, the I or empirical consciousness.

The most important philosophical thesis of Advaita Vedānta is that reality is one without a second (hence the name Advaita or non-dualism). This one reality, called in the Upaniṣads texts *brahman-ātman*, is not only the same as the inner self within each individual being (*jīva*) but also the stuff out of which all things are made. All differences in names and forms are mere appearances imposed upon one reality by a beginningless ignorance. Thus, there exist at least two levels in Advaita: the level of reality and the level of appearance. These two levels, argues the Advaitin, are incommensurable: when the *brahman* is known, nothing remains to be known. However, until the *brahman* realization, all knowing that takes place in the empirical world holds good. This one reality is indescribable in language, unknowable by discursive knowledge; nevertheless there are three concepts which are used to capture its nature: they are *cit* (consciousness), *sat* (existence), and *ānanda* (bliss). According to Śaṅkara these three are not different properties of reality. One may call reality existence, or consciousness, or bliss. From this it follows that *cit* or consciousness is also existence or bliss. This rather brief presentation of Śaṅkara's philosophy should suffice for my present purposes.

Let me now state some important ideas of this system with regard to *cit* or consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

(1) *Cit*, like light, is said to be self-luminous (*svaprakāśa*);<sup>5</sup> it illuminates or manifests all objects upon which it is focused. It is always the pure subject. Thus it is said to be different from all objects which are said to be *paraprakāśa*; that is, manifested by something other than themselves. In the introduction to his commentary on the *Brahmasūtras*, Śaṅkara insists that the self and the not-self, the subject and the object, are opposed to each other like light and darkness.<sup>6</sup> Consciousness by its nature, then, cannot be an object. This excludes all objectivistic (and today naturalistic) theories of consciousness. Let us remember that such objectivistic theories were also found in the Indian tradition and that Śaṅkarara considered them to be fundamentally mistaken.

(2) Śaṅkara then goes on to argue that if consciousness cannot be treated as an object,<sup>7</sup> none of the predicates that hold good of objects can be ascribed to consciousness. Being radically different from objects in general, consciousness and (any) object cannot form an *intelligible* unity of the sort "consciousness-of-an-object." Consequently, the structure of intentionality is to be regarded as unintelligible, not rationally justifiable. Not being an object, the categories that hold good of objects – for example, substance, quality, action, relation, and so on – do not apply to consciousness.

(3) Consciousness is not a phenomenon that is in space or in time. It is worth noting that consciousness not being a spatial phenomenon is generally

agreed upon by most philosophers with the exception of those who take it to be identical with the bodily states.

(4) Not being temporal, and not being an object of any sort, consciousness by its very nature cannot be an object of significant negation. For Advaita Vedānta, the expression “consciousness *is not*” is meaningless, a possible self-contradiction, while “consciousness *is*” is a tautology, because the very negation of consciousness, as in the statement “consciousness is not,” testifies to the existence of consciousness. Any object whatsoever can be significantly affirmed as well as denied. Any object can be significantly affirmed; however, with regard to any object it holds good that it might not have existed thereby making its negation also significant. However, the same cannot be said to be true of consciousness. The very saying “consciousness might not have been” necessarily implies the being of consciousness. A negation is the objective correlate of an act of negating, the latter act, like all acts, is a mode of consciousness, so that the negation (as also the supposition “consciousness might not have been”) presupposes the negating consciousness. The argument is similar to Descartes’ argument. Whereas Descartes restricts the argument to doubt (that I am doubting cannot be doubted”), the Advaitin argument is: “the act of negating consciousness is an act of consciousness, and so is incoherent.”

(5) A consequence of this last thesis is that consciousness is eternal, having no beginning (that is to say, has no antecedent-negation), and has no end (having no subsequent negation). Its eternality is only the other side of its not being an object: the three (eternity, non-negatibility, and not-being-an-object) imply each other. It also does not admit of any real difference, for difference is also a kind of negation, called in the Indian tradition mutual negation, as in “A is not B.” Free from difference, consciousness is one without a second; it possesses no internal differences of parts or qualities. Such is the nature of *cit*. When in ordinary parlance, as well as in ordinary behavior, we ascribe consciousness, for example, to myself, or to you, to a body, such ascriptions are deeply misleading. This is an example of what Śaṅkara calls *adhyāsa* or superimposition, which takes place when, in spite of two things being totally different, the properties of one are ascribed to the other, or when one of the things is taken to be the other.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, when we, in ordinary life, distinguish between one state of consciousness and another by saying that one state of consciousness is of a table and the other of a chair, that is also deeply misleading, for the distinction between a table and a chair, or between one object and another, does not contaminate the nature of consciousness.

To sum up: consciousness in Advaita is self-luminous, eternal, beginningless, undifferentiated, non-spatial, non-temporal, and non-intentional.

While so far I have expounded the metaphysical concept of *cit* in Advaita Vedānta, I will now give a brief account of how philosophers of this school

analyze empirical knowledge in which consciousness plays an important role. In other words, we need to examine their theory of knowledge; more specifically, their theory of perception. Though, as just noted, consciousness is not intrinsically object-directed or intentional, yet there is undoubtedly knowledge of empirical objects as in perception. In such cases of empirical cognitions, according to the Vedāntic epistemologist, Dharmarāja, the author of *Vedānta Paribhāṣā*,<sup>9</sup> a mental mode having the form of the object occurs whereby the object's prior state of unknownness is destroyed and the object is said to be known.<sup>10</sup> There are two aspects of this process which must be especially noted. In the first place, on the Advaita Vedānta view, an object before it is known is concealed by ignorance or *avidyā* which is regarded in this system as a positive entity. In the second place, empirical knowledge consists in removal of this concealment, but that would not amount to knowledge unless the mental mode itself is manifested by the self-luminous consciousness. In this role, the consciousness or *cit* in this system is called the witness-consciousness or *sākṣin*.<sup>11</sup> It is because of this role that consciousness plays in cognition, that we are aware of not-knowing something, say X, when that X is unknown, and also aware of knowing X, when that X is known. Without the function of *cit* as witness no knowledge could be possible. The following statement from *Pañcapādikāvivaraṇam* sums up this unique Advaitin thesis: "All objects are objects of witness-consciousness, either as known or as unknown."<sup>12</sup> Witness-consciousness thus is the basic presupposition of all knowing.

## II.

Now it is time that I turn to Husserl whose views, I believe, would be familiar to the readers of this journal. Husserl's views about consciousness may be stated in the following theses:

- (1) Consciousness is intentional in the sense that it is always directed toward something or the other.
- (2) The object toward which the consciousness is directed may, however, be a non-existent entity as in the case of my thinking of a unicorn. It may also be an ideal entity, as in the case of mathematical thinking about imaginary numbers. No matter what the ontological status of the object may happen to be, every act of consciousness intends its object in a certain manner and as having a certain meaning or significance.
- (3) Thus what is essential to consciousness is not that there is a real object which it intends, but that there is an intended object which is intended in a specific manner. Husserl calls the object in its specific manner of being intended "*noema*." Consciousness then is a correlation between "act and its

*noema*” (Hua III, §§88 and 98). This correlation is a many-one correlation in as much as many different acts may have the same *noema*. For example, I may think of the same thing on different occasions and in the same manner. In such cases, the acts are numerically distinct while they have the same *noema*.

(4) Intending an object always takes place, argues Husserl, within a horizon (Hua III, §81). Not only is the object perceived or cognized against the background of a context, but the perceiving itself takes place within the horizon of one’s mental life. Time, Husserl maintains, is the most comprehensive horizon within which all intentionality functions. Every intentional act occurs within the temporal flow of the subject’s consciousness (Hua III, §2).

(5) In this sense, one can say that consciousness is temporal. However, the temporality of consciousness does not consist in a succession of perishing instants. It rather consists in the now’s being surrounded by a temporal horizon such that a now is always together with its just past still retained in consciousness and the not-yet future anticipated as emerging into consciousness. Temporality of consciousness always has the structure retention-now-protection. As this structure recedes into the past, it is replaced by the new ones, in such a manner that we have a continuous flux of consciousness. Husserl was very much concerned with the problem as to how this flux comes to be constituted. I cannot go into the details of his solution of this problem, but there is no doubt that at some point he came to recognize that the flux could be presented as a flux only to a consciousness which is not a flux. He calls this consciousness the absolute time-constituting consciousness (Hua X, §34). Thus there are two levels of consciousness on Husserl’s account, the empirical consciousness which flows, and a non-empirical, absolute consciousness which paradoxically, as he puts it, is standing while flowing. This absolute consciousness, though not in time, is that in which temporality finds its origin.

(6) No account of Husserl’s theory of consciousness will be complete without reference to his famous, often misunderstood, method of *epoché* or reduction (Hua III, §§31–32). Without going into many aspects of this method, for my present purposes, the following will suffice. In order to focus upon the essence of consciousness, Husserl required that we place under brackets all considerations of the natural world which are presented in consciousness. The result is that the world, instead of preceding consciousness in its origin, is presented in consciousness without which it would be nothing. Consciousness is our access to the world – the world appears as the horizon, the context, within which other objects are given. In this sense consciousness is the origin of the world instead of the world being the origin of consciousness. Viewed in this light, the consciousness which initially appeared to be empirical, i.e., mundane and a part of nature – is seen or recognized to be transcendental without which the world and nature would be nothing.

(7) If we can thus distinguish between empirical consciousness and transcendental consciousness, we can with equal justification distinguish between the empirical ego and the transcendental ego. As a part of nature, as inhabiting my body and subject to natural causality, I am an empirical ego (shall I call it a *jīva*?). However, after the *epoché* has been exercised and it is recognized that every object in the world as well as nature (as understood in the empirical sciences) are what they are by virtue of my and our intentional life; I, as well as we, are seen as transcendental egos actively engaged in constructing and giving meaning to the world. All this no doubt gives rise to numerous problems for Husserl. Many of his closest followers found here a serious limitation to his thesis. Heidegger, for example, pointed out that the individual self or “*Dasein*” as he called it, does not stand outside the world but is essentially a being in the world and it cannot be put under brackets. For my present purpose I will not review or comment upon these types of criticisms. I find more pertinent for my purposes a thesis of Eugen Fink, who argued that Husserl’s thesis required not only two egos, the empirical and the transcendental, but also a third ego, who observes this distinction and describes them for philosophical purposes. This he calls the observing ego. In my present terminology, I would call it the witnessing-ego. The empirical ego is a part of the world. The transcendental ego constitutes the world. The observing ego or the witnessing ego is needed insofar as it observes the distinction and describes the functioning of the transcendental ego without itself taking part in that function.<sup>13</sup>

### III.

Now we are in a position to return to the main theme of this paper, i.e., a comparison between Śaṅkara and Husserl. A quick review of the central theses discussed above might lead one to conclude that, with the exception of their almost uncompromising rejection of all naturalization and objectification of consciousness and their rejection of consciousness as a spatial phenomenon, Śaṅkara and Husserl are diametrically opposed to each other. One could argue that for Śaṅkara consciousness is not intrinsically intentional; he argues that intentionality, i.e., the object directedness, is superimposed upon consciousness; whereas for Husserl intentionality is the last word about consciousness, not only of empirical consciousness but also of transcendental consciousness. Again, for Śaṅkara, consciousness is not egological; in its pristine purity, it is both without an object and without an ego to whom it could belong. Consciousness, for Husserl, on the other hand, is of an ego or belongs to an ego. For Śaṅkara, consciousness is not an act, while for Husserl, it *is* an act. Consciousness, for Śaṅkara, is not temporal, while for Husserl, it *is* temporal.

Let me elaborate on these contrasts in depth to assess whether they are as profound as they appear at a quick glance – for it seems that Husserl’s philosophical position actually allows for a certain reading that is not as restrictive as the above remarks suggest. I will explain this point in the context of Husserl’s conceptions of intentionality, ego, and temporality.

While it is true that at the level of such acts as perceiving, thinking, believing, hoping, and desiring, consciousness is always intentional, Husserl also came to hold that these intentional acts themselves are constituted within the flow of inner time-consciousness. This flow, at its most elementary level of the *now* with its retention and protention, is not itself intentional.<sup>14</sup> Intentionality is constituted within the flow of time but that flow in itself is not intentional. Besides this, as stated earlier, Husserl also recognized a level of consciousness, which he called “absolute time constituting consciousness,” in which the flow as a flow comes to be constituted. This absolute consciousness, which he often describes as pure “living present,” is not intentional. Thus it would seem that Husserl’s philosophy gradually comes to limit the intentionality thesis by positing a non-intentional dimension of consciousness that underlies intentionality and makes it possible.

It is important to note in this context that even with the recognition of a non-intentional dimension of consciousness, Husserl’s philosophy will still be different from that of Śaṅkara’s philosophy. On Śaṅkara’s view, as stated earlier, intentionality is a mere appearance superimposed upon non-intentional consciousness. In phenomenology, such a view would not only be inadmissible but would also be regarded as a purely metaphysical thesis without any warrant within experience. Given the limits of the phenomenological method, the utmost that one could maintain would be to argue that intentionality is constituted on the basis of a non-intentional consciousness, thereby making a phenomenologist aware of the limit of his phenomenological method. Since the method is based upon a respect for ordinary experience, it cannot make room for a wholesale devaluation of the categories of ordinary experience by regarding them as mere appearances. One can only do that by appealing to some experience, where ordinary experience would itself stand devalued. Śaṅkara, indeed the Vedāntic tradition as a whole, made use of the testimony of such an experience, a kind of mystic experience of the undifferentiated oneness of being in which all intentional consciousness can only be rejected as false appearance.

With regard to the presence of the ego in consciousness, we know Husserl recognized the ego as the point of origin, the subjective pole of intentional acts (Hua III, §37; Hua I, §§30–37). But, as is well known, this thesis was subjected to criticism by many of Husserl’s followers. I will only mention two of them, who sought to develop a non-egological theory of consciousness almost entirely on Husserlian lines. They are Sartre and Aaron Gurwitsch.<sup>15</sup> Both of them hold that the pre-reflective consciousness has no place for an



ego; it is rather wholly and entirely directed toward the world. The ego emerges only when pre-reflective consciousness is objectified in reflection. The testimony of pre-reflective consciousness of perceiving a thing on a table would be “that is a table.” In this description, “I” does not appear. The “I” emerges in the reflective judgement “I see that table.” Dagfinn Føllesdal compares this situation to the light in a refrigerator. The light pops up when you open it, but it is not there when the door is closed.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, it is reflection that constitutes the ego. Thus, on such a non-egological theory, consciousness is not owned by an ego; the ego, on the other hand, is another object which is constituted within the flow of consciousness by acts of reflection. Husserl draws our attention to this thesis in his numerous accounts regarding how consciousness from its original temporal flux becomes unified and centered in an ego, which would still be different from the Advaita position that the ego is nothing but the universal consciousness limited by particular psycho-physical adjuncts. The resulting Husserlian position would seem to be closer to the Buddhist view that the self is really a series of psycho-physical events unified by a sense of “I” but mistakenly interpreted as belonging to an unchanging spiritual substance or soul.

Again, on the issue of the temporality of consciousness, Husserl and the Advaita Vedāntin seem to stand at opposite ends. Whereas for the German phenomenologist, consciousness, even when purified by the *epoché*, is still incurably temporal insofar as it is a flux, though not a flux of perishing instants; for the Advaitic tradition, on the other hand, consciousness is beyond time, flux, even change, which characterize the realm of objects. It is indeed true that the Buddhists are closer to phenomenologists in this regard.

With all his emphasis on time, Husserl nevertheless held that the purified transcendental consciousness, though not in time, is the origin of time. Objective time in which natural and historical events take place falls under the *epoché*. He sought to determine how consciousness in its innermost self-experience is structured. For him, even here there is a flux, not change. But he continues to ask: How can something be experienced as a flux, if that experience itself is a flux? The answer toward which he moves, as stated earlier, is that a flux can be presented as a flux only to a consciousness which comprehends the flux as a whole. We then come to recognize that there is a dimension of consciousness which is not a flux or which is, as he puts it, “standing while streaming.” The metaphor is interesting. The “streaming absolute consciousness,”<sup>17</sup> as he calls it (the dimension of standing while streaming), is neither a substance which remains permanent (keeping in mind that neither is Śaṅkara’s *cit* a substance) nor is it a container which holds the flux within it. If it is standing, then it is not moving; this not-moving is nothing but another aspect of the moving. So the thesis does not amount to positing two levels of reality; it is not an ontological thesis, but a phenomenological thesis with regard to the way time is experienced at different levels. Using

Husserlian metaphor, the Vedāntic *cit* may then be said to be standing but not streaming. It is indeed difficult to use a proper metaphor for the Vedāntic *cit*. While the Buddhists use the metaphor of space for *nirvāṇa*, the Vedāntins more often use the metaphor of light, though the metaphor of space was not entirely lacking. In the context of discussing the question of the relation between the individual and the universal consciousness, the Advaitins often use the metaphor of space and point out how one space appears to be many owing to various limiting factors.<sup>18</sup> If the *jīva* and the *ātman* are fundamentally one, then one could venture the suggestion that while the *jīva*-consciousness is continually moving, streaming (caught up in *samsāra*, which in the Indian tradition goes from this life to the next), the *ātman*-consciousness is a standing, unmoving, and unindividuated or undifferentiated dimension of the *jīva*-consciousness. There is a tendency among writers on Vedānta to separate the *jīva* and the *ātman* ontologically which may indeed be a mistake in view of Śaṅkara's explicit statement that the *jīva* is non-different from the *brahman*. This would suggest that the unmoving, undifferentiated unindividuated consciousness, for which all flux, stream, motion, and change are but possible objects, lies at the deepest recesses of the *jīva*-consciousness. While the Upaniṣads show us a path which one can follow to reach this depth – the main stages in the path being waking, dreaming, deep dreamless sleep, and the beyond – Husserl struggles with time consciousness, and shows another path by following which one begins to make sense of the thesis which originally might have seemed to be inaccessible to a phenomenological disclosure. Thus, though Husserlian phenomenology still remains at some distance from Advaita Vedānta phenomenology, we begin to realize that that distance is not as great as we initially thought it to be.

I next wish to address certain key aspects of the Advaitic theory of consciousness in order to seek certain equivalents in Husserl's phenomenology. To be specific, I will explore further the concepts of ignorance, witness-consciousness, *mokṣa*, and bliss. I will begin with the concept of ignorance, which permeates the entire Vedāntic thinking.

A cognition, as stated earlier, has the specific function of manifesting, disclosing, or bringing to light its object. Before an object is known, it *was* unknown, i.e., concealed by ignorance. A cognition performs the function of unconcealing the object by destroying the ignorance which concealed it, thereby making the object known. A cognitive state cannot manifest anything. Its efficacy extends only up to removing ignorance. Consciousness manifests the object (directly) by manifesting that cognitive state and making knowledge possible. The Advaitins point out that the Naiyāyikas (another school of Indian philosophy) cannot explain how the cognition is known, without falling victim to a vicious regress. If reflective cognition (*anuvyavasāya*) is to manifest the pre-reflective cognition, then the former itself needs to be known by another reflective knowledge.<sup>19</sup> To avoid such an infinite regress, a cognition, as soon as it comes

into being, must be manifested by the ever-present witness-consciousness. Such an ever-present witness-consciousness explains the possibility of pre-reflective, non-positing, non-thetic awareness of cognition, and so the awareness of the object of that cognition. We have thus a simpler theory.

The conception of the witness-consciousness, it would seem, consists of two different but inter-connected ideas. On the one hand, there is the general notion present in Vedānta that consciousness is self-luminous<sup>20</sup> and manifests all objects. In contrast, objects, whatever they may be, cannot manifest themselves. The other component is that the self-luminous consciousness must play a role within every empirical cognition such that without its presence we would not know what we know, nor would we know what we do not know. As is well known, every empirical cognition, such as the perception of a physical object, involves mental and physical processes that establish a contact between the knowing subject and the known object. But none of these would amount to knowledge unless there were the witness-consciousness illuminating these processes and their accomplishments without needing any intervention from additional processes. In other words, an object, for example, a table before me, cannot be perceived unless my visual sense organ, as well as my inner sense known as *antaḥkaraṇa*, are in contact with the object. However, the processes themselves are directly manifested by the witness-consciousness without needing any further mediation. The Vedāntins, as is well known, recognize such unmediated awareness in the case of three kinds of entities: the mental modifications involved in empirical cognitions, states of pleasure and pain, and ignorance. In each of the three, they argue, to require further mediation by mental processes is redundant; it would involve infinite regress. They are directly manifested by the witness-consciousness.

Thus, for the Vedāntins, knowing is always a conquest over not knowing, as light conquers darkness. A phenomenologist looks at it differently. For him, knowing is actualizing a possibility; what I focus upon now was vaguely anticipated on the horizon and now that anticipation is rendered actual. For the Vedāntin knowing is bringing to light what was before shrouded in darkness. Ignorance for her is not simply an absence of knowledge; it is a positive force which at the same time conceals while projecting a false appearance. A Vedāntin, however, as a good phenomenologist, wants to bring the phenomenon of not-knowing within the range of conscious awareness, if not of explicit knowledge. When I say “I do not know X,” the Vedāntin claims that this statement expresses and testifies to an awareness of not-knowing. This awareness is none other than our old friend witness-consciousness.

What is Husserl’s view in this regard? It is not quite clear whether Husserl believed in the self-luminosity of consciousness. He certainly held that every consciousness can be reflected upon, whereby it becomes the object of a reflective act,<sup>21</sup> a thesis that sounds very much like the Naiyāyikas *anuvyavasāya*. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that Husserl also argues that prior

to this reflection, there is a pre-reflective awareness of it,<sup>22</sup> which would be a sort of self-luminosity. So it seems to me to be safe to say that Husserl combines both the self-luminosity and *anuvyavasāya* concepts – at two different levels.

The difficulty arises elsewhere. Since Husserl also believes that consciousness, as transcendental, constitutes the world, we are left wondering whether he would accept any witness-consciousness which merely manifests but does not constitute. Here Fink's reading of Husserl is helpful. Empirical ego finds the world to which it itself belongs. Transcendental ego constitutes the world. But if phenomenology is to be possible as a description of the constitutive function of the transcendental ego, there must be an ego which merely observes and describes, but does not itself constitute. The observing ego – Fink's third ego – is like Advaita's witness-consciousness.

Once again, we must keep in mind that the Advaitin's witness-consciousness is ever-present, making every cognition possible. Husserl's and Fink's phenomenological ego, on the other hand, begins to function with the *epoché* after the empirical and the transcendental egos are distinguished, and the philosopher sets out to describe the constitutive function of the transcendental ego.

While Husserl devotes a lot of his attention and philosophical acumen to describing in detail how things come to, as he puts it, "givenness," he does not attend to what is there prior to their being known. It is this latter question which leads us to the Vedāntic idea of ignorance. Husserl uses the concepts of horizon and anonymity to discuss the status of things prior to their emerging in the focus of consciousness. Beyond the focus of consciousness there are the surrounding horizons which extend into the farthest limits of knowability, and reflective consciousness can pursue them, make them explicit, by bringing them into focus. Thus, whereas for the Vedāntin, knowing is always a conquest over not knowing, the phenomenologist looks at it differently, because for him knowing is actualizing a possibility; it amounts to focusing upon what was vaguely anticipated in the horizon and the act of focusing renders the anticipation actual. Thus, we do not here have the Vedāntic notion of not-knowing, for what is in the horizon is still within the grips of consciousness, though only as anticipated possibilities. The concept of anonymity applies to all those achievements of consciousness which have taken place outside of one's explicit consciousness, for example, the cultural meanings that one finds realized in the world around us. One does not give those meanings, they are already there. Their constitution has already been performed anonymously; for Husserl it is only a question of reactivating these anonymous constitutions. We must remember in this context that what is anonymous is not unknown, its originating source is concealed or passed over; someone must have done it, some previous members of my community, for example. They must have interpreted the world in this way; for me, however, the world

has already taken shape. There is always a danger insofar as what is anonymously constituted may be mistaken to be already there independent of any constitution. This happens when one naively regards the meanings he ascribes to things to be really there. So there is a mistake, a deep philosophical mistake, a sort of forgetfulness, as Merleau Ponty puts it, of the process of constitution which lies concealed behind its accomplishments. The task of phenomenology here is to uncover what is unconcealed, to reactivate the process, to discover the *origins* of the objective world. This entire account of anonymity, concealment, and uncovering seems to be moving very close to the Vedāntic notion of ignorance and unconcealment. But, however close it may seem to be, phenomenology by its very method does not find an access to what is not known; it hovers around what is anticipated as capable of being known. The Vedāntin focuses upon not knowing as much as upon knowing. For the Vedāntin, then, there is consciousness of knowing as well as consciousness of not knowing. The limits within the two are always shifting as knowing conquers not-knowing but knowing is always surrounded by not-knowing and both together are present to consciousness. In this regard, the only Western thinker who shares an awareness of this problem is Plato.

The goal of Vedānta is not only to construct a philosophical system, not only to bring to light phenomena that would otherwise escape our notice, but also – in the long run – to illuminate the path to *mokṣa* or spiritual freedom. This freedom is liberation from that ignorance which makes the empirical individual (*jīva*) subject to pain and suffering, confusion (*moha*) and attachment (*rāga*), and thus prevents him from enjoying that bliss which constitutes the very nature of consciousness in its purity. Such an eschatological conception is hardly to be expected from a Western phenomenologist. Did not Husserl say in the *Crisis* that Indian philosophy aims at a practical good and that it never attained the conception of pure theory which the Greeks had already instituted? (Hua VI, §§314–348) Did he not also say, for this very reason, that “Indian philosophy” is a contradiction, while “Western philosophy” a tautology? It is incredible to note that Husserl was so completely oblivious to the fact that philosophical wisdom, even for the Greeks, was ultimately supposed to lead to a good life, the sort of view one finds in Aristotle’s conception of happiness. It is more puzzling still to learn that Husserl noted his conception of pure theory during essays concerned with the ways of overcoming the crisis that Europe in the 1930’s was facing. The truth is that even Husserl’s philosophy, in spite of his attachment to the ideal of pure theory, was intended to serve the renewal of the German culture. The political crisis of the 30’s is well known. Husserl wrote in the midst of great personal suffering from the escalation of Nazism in Germany. However, as a philosopher, he sought to understand the roots of that crisis, which to him lay in a complete objectification of human beings and a forgetfulness of the freedom, creativity, and nobility of the human subject. He believed that transcendental phenomenology

– by demonstrating the autonomy of the subject and the community of subjects – would be able to counteract the powerful forces of objectification. It was not, obviously, a conception of personal spiritual liberation that he was hoping to derive so much as a collective salvation for the West at the political and cultural levels. Without doubt, such a goal is very far from the conception of *mokṣa* which Vedānta strove to achieve. But it is enough, for my present purpose, to bring to your attention that both Husserl and Śaṅkara were inspired by the idea that discovering the truth about our deeper selves and about the true nature of consciousness can serve the highest practical purposes of life.

Those differences that persist between these two systems are largely a function of the two cultural contexts involved, the Eastern and the Western. One way of bringing these remaining differences to light – or at least part of them – is to reflect on the Vedāntic thesis that consciousness in its purest nature is also bliss or *ānanda*. This is one of the most difficult concepts of Indian thought which stems from the Upaniṣads. In its negative aspect, this thesis amounts to claiming that all pain and suffering is due to consciousness becoming entangled in the hopeless causal chain of *saṃsāra*, the empirical world. This includes both ascription of one’s consciousness to an ego or I, as well as its attachment to an object. Bliss, therefore, is achieved when these entanglements are eliminated. The earliest promise of such a possibility is indicated by the experience of deep sleep. The retrospective judgment that “I slept well” testifies to an experience of well being, and the judgment “I did not know anything or anyone, including myself” bears testimony to the absence of any intentional directedness toward the world. But deep sleep by itself cannot serve as a plausible practical norm for existence. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the Vedāntin also suggests what is called, symbolically, the *turiya*. The *turiya* is at once a state free from intentionality, free from ego-attachment – it is a fully self-conscious enjoyment of bliss. Such an ideal seems to escape Western phenomenologists . . . but could not one similarly say that the ideal of a community of autonomous subjectivities who create a free ethical and political culture equally escapes the Vedāntic tradition? Or, one may wonder, is it possible to combine these two ideals? I will leave these questions for my readers to decide how best to answer them.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at Husserl Archives, Freiburg, Germany, May 2000.
2. The Advaita Vedānta tradition – a live tradition of India – has a rich and varied history. Its doctrines are constantly revised and reconstructed in order to answer challenges posed by contemporary situations. Primarily explicated by Śaṅkara (788–820 CE), it is one of the most widely known and recreated systems of Indian philosophy. It makes the most enig-

matic assertion about the nature of the world and our perception of it: the *brahman* alone is real, the world is false, and the individual self is non-different from the *brahman* (*brahma satyaṃ jagan mithyā jivo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*) – an assertion that scholars find difficult to comprehend.

3. Śaṅkara's youngest contemporary and student, Padampāda (820 CE), started a tradition of interpretation and understanding of Śaṅkara. He authored *Pañcapādikā* (henceforth PP), an exposition of Śaṅkara's commentary on the first four aphorisms of *Brahma-sūtras*. Several commentators belonged to this tradition, including Prakāsātman, who wrote a commentary called *Pañcapādikāvivaraṇam* (hereafter PPV). This commentary is the pillar of the Vivaraṇa school and the school is named after it. The views expressed in PP and PPV have come to be known as the tenets of the Vivaraṇa tradition.
 

Leaving aside the Vivaraṇa tradition, one finds two additional lines of interpretation: (a) The first line of interpretation originated with Sureśvara (800 CE) and his pupil Sarvajñātman Muni (900 CE); and (b) The views of Maṇḍana Mīśra, another contemporary of Śaṅkara, were developed in considerable detail by Vācaspati Mīśra (9th century C.E.). He incorporated Maṇḍana's ideas in his interpretation of Śaṅkara, which came to be identified as the tenets of the Bhāmāti tradition.
4. Professor J.N. Mohanty often talks about a conversation he had with Hans-Georg Gadamer, in which Gadamer questions whether Sanskrit word "*cit*" should be translated as "consciousness." In this lecture, I will not enter into that controversy. For me everything that is said about *cit* in the Vedāntic tradition does favor this translation and I have no doubts about its validity.
5. See *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (hereafter BU), IV.3.6: "*ātmaivāsya jyotir bhavati, ātmanaivāyam jyotiṣaste, palyāyate, ātmanaivāyam jyotiṣāte, palyayate, karma kurute, vipalyeti iti.*" In *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (henceforth BSBh), I.3.22, Śaṅkara also quotes several BU texts to substantiate this claim, for example, "it is on account of the light of the self that one sits, goes out, walks, and returns." Henceforth this work will be referred to as BSBh.
6. At the outset of his commentary on *Brahmasūtras*, Śaṅkara contends that the subject, the self, and the object, the non-self are as opposed to each other as light and darkness, and cannot be identified. Nonetheless, individual beings, because of ignorance, do not distinguish between the two and their respective attributes and superimpose on the one the nature and the attributes of the other. "*Adhyāśabhāṣya*" of BSBh.
7. *na hi niravayavya yugapajjñeyajñāṭṭvopapattiḥ... . Taittiriya Upaniṣadbhāṣya*, II.1.
8. In the introduction to his commentary on *Brahmasūtras*, Śaṅkara defines superimposition as the "apparent presentation (to consciousness) in the form of remembrance of something previously experienced in something else." "*Adhyāśabhāṣya*" of BSBh.
9. For an analysis of the basic issues discussed in the "Perception" Chapter of *Vedānta Paribhāṣā*, see this author's *Perceiving in Advaita Vedānta: Epistemological Analysis and Interpretation* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1991).
10. The Advaitins argue that two conditions must be fulfilled in order for a thing to become an object of knowledge: a mental mode – through which the mind reaches out to the object, assumes its form, and becomes non-different from it – and consciousness reflected in the mental mode. Cognition of an object is not possible in the absence of both of these two conditions.
11. To explain the involvement of the real with the apparent and the subsequent retracing of the real from the apparent in an epistemological context, the Advaitins postulate the concept of the *sākṣin* or the witness-consciousness. The Advaitins argue that when an object is cognized the object is indeed manifested; however, the object is not the only thing that is manifested – cognition of an object is accompanied by an immediate self-awareness of

the cognition. To be specific, in an external perception when an object – say a pitcher – is known through a mental mode with the help of a sense organ, the mental mode is also known without the mediation of another mental mode. In short, particular cognitions presuppose a continuous principle of self-awareness; this principle is none other than the witness-consciousness. It is the most enigmatic epistemological concept of this school and in the absence of this notion, no knowledge at all would be possible.

12. *Sarvaṃ jñātatayā, ajñātatayā vā sākṣin caitanyasya viśayaḥ*: “All things are objects of the witness-consciousness, on account of their being either known or unknown.” Srirama Śāstri, *Pañcapādikāvivaraṇam*, 1st *Varṇaka* (Madras: Government Oriental Manuscript Library, 1958), 83–84.
13. Fink argues that prior to transcendental reflection, a human ego’s reflection upon himself is limited to human self-apperception and it moves within the parameters of the natural attitude. Bracketing of the world implicitly implies that, for the first time, an attempt is made to establish a reflective ego which is outside human apperception from the very beginning. Accordingly, he argues that there are three egos in Husserl’s thinking: (1) “the ego which is preoccupied with the world (I, the human being as a unity of acceptance, together with my intramundane life of experience); (2) the transcendental ego for whom the world is pregiven in the flow of the universal apperception and who accepts it; (3) the “onlooker” who performs the *epoché*.” Eugen Fink, “Husserl’s Philosophy and Contemporary Criticism,” in *The Phenomenology of Husserl*, edited by R.O. Elveton (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1970), p. 115–116.
14. The absolute time-constituting consciousness at its deepest level of the “primal living impression,” is neither temporal nor intentional.
15. J.P. Sartre. *Transcendence of the Ego*, translated in English by Forrest Williams (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957); and A. Gurwitsch, *The Field of Consciousness* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1964).
16. Dagfinn Føllesdal uses this example in a lecture delivered at the World Congress of Philosophy in August, 1998.
17. For these metaphors, see the essay “The Origin of Geometry,” where Husserl speaks of the “*strömend-stehender-Lebendigkeit*,” in the “Appendix” of the *Crisis*.
18. Advaitins of the Bhāmata persuasion argue that an individual self is a limitation of pure consciousness on account of ignorance, the limiting factor. Space, though really one, is seen to have been divided in particular spaces, like the space in a room, in a pitcher, and so on. Similarly, the Self, though one, is seen to be many.
19. For the Naiyāyikas (a realist school of Indian philosophy), ontologically a cognition is a quality of the self. This quality, a product of various causal factors, originates under special conditions and from an epistemological perspective, refers beyond itself to an object. A cognition does not cognize itself – it reveals its object (*viśaya*). Accordingly, a cognition is related to the *viśaya* by the relation of *viśayatā*, that is, by making it an object. In response to the question of how a cognition cognizes itself, the Naiyāyikas maintain that a cognition is cognized in a secondary act of retrospection. The primary act does not cognize itself but only the external object; for example, a pitcher, in “here is a pitcher” (*ayaṃ ghaṭaḥ*). However, the cognition ‘I know that here is a pitcher’ is different. It succeeds the first cognition and is called “after (*anu*) cognition (*vyavasāya*).” The Naiyāyikas further maintain that the *anu-vyavasāya* of the primary act of cognition is infallible and intrinsically true, a position that when viewed phenomenologically makes sense.
20. The Buddhists also argue that consciousness is self-luminous.
21. *Ideas* I, §32.
22. *Ibid.*, §45.