

## **The Kashmiri Nondualism and the Philosophical Counseling. On the Nonduality of the Consciousness**

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**Abstract:** *The paper aims to present the role of the philosophy of mind and consciousness for the philosophical practice (philosophical practice) and to explore the possibility of a transpersonal philosophical counseling.*

**Keywords:** *philosophy of consciousness; philosophy of mind; transpersonal philosophical practice.*

**How to cite:** Sandu, A. (2023). The kashmiri nondualism and the philosophical counseling. On the nonduality of the consciousness. *BRAIN. Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience*, 14(4), 404-416. <https://doi.org/10.18662/brain/14.4/513>

## Introduction

In 1974, Thomas Nagel formulated the question: "What is it like to be a bat?" and with this, he started a new direction in the philosophy of the consciousness, of the cognition and of the mind (Nagel, 1974).

The paper aims to present the role of the philosophy of mind and consciousness for the philosophical practice (philosophical practice) and to explore the possibility of a transpersonal philosophical counseling.

A traditional question in philosophy is: *What is consciousness and what are the relations between consciousness and matter?* and we approach this issue starting from the point of view of a possible philosophical practice.

## What is philosophical practice?

### *The importance of philosophy of mind for the philosophical counseling*

For Descartes (1996), there are two kind of substances – called *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, more exactly the extended, spatialized substance and the cogitative one. But Thomas Nagel contradicts, in a way, Descartes: according to Nagel, conscience can never be a substance (Nagel, 1974). We understand this position in a metaphysical way – that there are no two different substances, a material one and a noetical one, consciousness should have a different ontological position than the substantial one. This is due to the fact that we manifest something called *awareness* – and this awareness is not a byproduct of the material substances, even if it appears in the brain and we cannot say how the qualia appears in the mind (Dennett, 2020).

We are mainly interested in how and if the consciousness emerges from the mind activity and from the brain. First of all, we notice that we are aware of the external objects. We are aware of the outside world through the senses - hearing, sight, etc. - which transforms the external world into a reality that exists in our consciousness. Even if we use tools that facilitate perception, we still make the connection with the outside world through the senses. However, the consciousness of the self that perceives the external object also appears in the consciousness. *I see you – and I'm aware that I see you!* And that awareness is not coming directly from perception. But still, the existence of the perception of an external object is what generates the appearance of awareness of one's own existence. For the practitioner philosopher, the question arises of the significance of this occurrence of self-awareness, within the very process of perception, what it means for me to be simultaneously aware of your existence and of my own. This self-reflexive

consciousness that appears in the process of perception, differentiates the perception of an animal or even of a current Artificial Intelligence from the way a person perceives in general and perceives themselves in the usual way. And this is an opportunity to philosophize about oneself and about the place of oneself in the world as well as about the emergence of the consciousness.

Another level of awareness is the awareness of internal objects. For example, to be aware of the thinking process: I am thinking of my cat. The act of thinking is an internal process – on what I am aware of. This process is facilitated by the remembrance of the cat, which is an external object, but the process is realized by myself, the subject. So here appears a semiotic triad: knower - knowing - known. However, I am not always aware of my awareness. Sometimes, simply by daydreaming, I'm thinking about my cat and how cute it is, and somehow the fact that it's my cat, not just any cat - the cat I'm thinking about - goes into the background, almost unconsciously. And this is what occupies the entire field of my consciousness at that moment.

But in the process of philosophical practice, in philosophical counseling for example, this process of reflection on the cat is accompanied by a process of signification of the cat, and especially on its relationship with me - what does the cat mean to me, why a particular cat, why did the cat come to mind and not anything else, etc. And, metaphysically speaking, what is the consciousness of the self if both the cat and the process of reflection on the cat suddenly disappear from the field of consciousness. In what way does the *I* exist outside the objects of consciousness and the processes that connect the *I-ness* to those objects. In the process of philosophical counseling also we can use questions like: Why are you thinking about a cat? What does a cat represent for you? It is an attempt at awareness of the thinking process, which starts from the cat but is not actually about the cat - but an attempt to put the subject in front of one's own nature as a thinking being and in front of one's own cognitive processes that take place starting from the simple remembrance of a cat.

The third level of the conscience is the awareness of the awareness itself. Sometimes I'm aware that I'm aware, I don't have a particular thought about, I'm just aware of the process of awareness. How awareness comes in my consciousness and how the consciousness (*I-ness*) exists outside the awareness? This process is outside the awareness of an object or a process, it is just a simple awareness of awareness. And the question that the philosopher-practitioner immediately addresses is: is there an awareness outside of any cognitive processes? Or is awareness itself a cognitive process? And, from here - is the sentiment of *I-ness* generated during the cognitive processes, or is this one the very source of some cognitive

processes, and in what way the cognitive processes are outside of our own awareness, even if at the moment we are not aware of our own awareness.

Returning to Thomas Nagel, he provides us with a question that can be the basis of some philosophical counseling practices - namely: how can you understand an existential situation without the knowledge channel that that entity uses? What is it like to be a bat, after all? That is, what it is like to configure in consciousness an object that cannot have a sensory representation for you and, moreover, a world generated in a way for which you do not have a perceptual system to present that reality to your consciousness. You cannot perceive through infrasound, like the bat, and as such how can you configure in your consciousness the qualia you would have if you were a bat? What is the substrate of consciousness outside the objects of consciousness, of qualia, generated by the interaction with the external world or by one's own internal processes? Or how would the consciousness be emptied of qualia and in the impossibility of configuring any qualia? Such a consciousness would be Consciousness in Itself, which for a Kantian type of thinking would be equivalent to talking about the thing itself, that is, outside of any experience. Hence, for Thomas Nagel, consciousness is beyond any substantialization. But, for the philosophical practitioner, this concern for the consciousness devoid of the objects of consciousness remains a problem that can and deserves to be explored in philosophical practice.

The question of the philosopher counselor is what is it like to be something you are not and cannot be? And how could you understand / represent this in your mind? And this leads us to think that everything we experience is present in our own mind, even if we experience that thing as an external reality. More precisely, we exist in our own inner reality, which more or less closely replicates the outer world, but living always happens in the inner reality, limited by our channels of perception of the outer world.

I perceive my beautiful wife in front of me, but this perception is in my mind and could be very different from the perception of another person – and this is a problem for philosophical counseling: how to understand the perceptual position of another person and, from this standpoint, how to perceive otherness, especially if the otherness is the Absolute Otherness. The subject for philosophical counseling is: to what extent does the client understand that his awareness is his own awareness and not the reality itself, in a Kantian way, and that the very fact of being aware generates I-ness.

Hence, another question that can be explored starting from the philosophy of consciousness: does the awareness of awareness itself generates the experience of the self, or the implicit experience of the self is configured as awareness when it is superimposed on some cognitive

processes? Hence the exploration of the meaning that the subject attributes to the expression of being self-aware. And, starting from this, another question which arises for the philosophical practitioner is: *what is myself?* and *who am I?* Not in a particular sense - I am Mr. X, Professor Y, not how I appear to others - rich, poor - but what I am in a metaphysical way or what I am in an absolute way, more precisely what I am beyond of the qualia that my own experience attributes to me. I have stated about myself that I am a professor - but does this represent my essence? Or is it what I do at a certain moment? How do my possessions define me?

This particular way of asking questions about one's own existence can be thought of in connection with Upanishadic thinking in Hindu philosophy and, as such, Vedanta - Upanishadic thought - can be a source of inspiration for philosophical practice.

We will notice that for many individuals - our clients or even ourselves - to the question "Who am I?" the first tendency is to respond with an identification with the outside world: I am my profession, I am my family, sometimes I am even my car to which I am very attached and which causes me suffering when it breaks down (even close to physical suffering), I am the technology that accompanies me - the phone, the laptop, which almost becomes a part of me. On the one hand, these identifications generate an expansion of subjectivity in the sphere of objectivity, but, on the other hand, it can alienate consciousness when it tries to identify the essential on itself. And we see this identification - disidentification as specific to a philosophical practice/counseling and less specific to any other counseling practice in the field of mental health. If myself or my client are owners of a company, for instance, how much that company represents myself or themselves? Often, it depends on how much we are emotionally involved into that activity, but the ability to determine this level of involvement and the consequences of this involvement - is a problem that must be treated distinctly in philosophical practice.

The question we can formulate is: to what extent is my world a part of me and, reciprocally, to what extent do I recognize myself outside of my world? And, from here, the question: *What is it like to be You / Yourself?* And this because, like Nagel's bat, whose perceptive channel we do not have and, as such, we cannot be totally identified with it - likewise, without our world, we cannot have a channel of total identification with our own Self. If for the counselor psychologist this does not represent a problem of mental health or suitability to the environment, for the philosophical practitioner - this aspect may become a central point of his philosophical practice, hence the

question: *What is the Self in itself?* This represents the quintessence of a philosophical experience - both in Eastern and Western philosophy.

Another level at which Self identification should operate is the bodily/physical level. In the case of an amputated limb, is the identification with the Self affected by something? Am I, in other words, still me - after an operation in which a part of me is amputated/extirpated? Psychologically, we are talking about a bodily self - and hence, a self-image that aims at bodily integrity. To what extent does this body image affect the essential identity of the being? What about painful sensations - do they affect identity? What about the authenticity of the person? And from here - what is the connection between identity and authenticity in front of the corporeal self?

An important question to address in this context should also be: Am I my body? Or even: What am I, if I am not my body? Of course, a philosophical perspective on disembodied existence can occasionally appear - existence outside the body - or preexistence or postexistence, but the main issue here remains: what exactly maintains the identity of the Self despite the bodily transformations experienced throughout life - if such identity really exists.

Another level of this self-inquiry is about the identity between the individual and his mind: am I my thoughts? am I my mind? And from here - if someone suffers from a mental condition, which possibly affects his personality, is it also affected by this that metaphysical self, that *who am I* beyond all external determinations? To what extent is the mind an ultimate level of existence of consciousness, or does it exist beyond any substance - as Thomas Nagel seemed to conclude in his article (Nagel, 1974)?

At the moment of questioning the identification of the ego with the thoughts, the question of preserving the self outside the thinking process can be raised. Descartes identifies his own existence precisely in the process of thinking. But during complete dreamless sleep, when at least apparently the mind has no thoughts, does the Self continue to exist? So, what am I when I have no thoughts? This problem involves the reference to Indian philosophy - Vedantic or that of the Trika School in Kashmir, for example - which raises the issue of the existence of consciousness in special states completely devoid of thoughts, and even states that this state devoid of thoughts is the foundation of the Self and is present in any other state, including the ordinary one, in which we think, but as a substrate that we do not normally observe.

The identification with the past, present and future temporal moments is also an important point for a philosophical counseling process, since these appear as forms of consciousness to interact with reality, but

outside the present moment - which can be experienced in immediacy, the past and the future are experienced as projections into the present. These patterns of temporality form the awareness of *Who am I*.

Starting from the philosophy of Vedanta, and more precisely from the text of the Upanishad that states "I am That" - a philosophical practice can be built that aims at the question "Who am I?", because the That which often speaks of the Upanishad is eventually an identification with everything and nothing in particular. And, ultimately, this identification with everything and nothing in particular, represents an opening to non-duality - a philosophy that affirms that there is nothing separate, that there is not a second one outside of the Self. The degrees of identification with the Self can be different, but the Self cannot know something outside of itself - because the fundamental way in which the individual knows is through appropriation. If I know something, that something penetrates me - either through sensations or through conceptualization. Perceiving something can be translated by bringing that something inside - either directly, as in the case of taste or smell, in which case particles of a certain substance become part of its own structure and thus the sensation is born (when those particles are incorporated), either through a vibratory relationship with reality - as in the case of sound or visual perception.

We identify reality as external, but there is a relationship of knowledge when that object becomes, in one form or another, interior within the consciousness. Otherwise, it does not exist in consciousness, even if we could consider that it exists objectively outside of us. For the European before Christopher Columbus, the indigenous people of America did not exist, even if they founded civilizations later discovered to be particularly advanced - such as the Inca, Maya, Aztec, etc. civilizations. For us, at the present time, aliens exist only as a possibility, or as descriptions of possible/probable encounters with them, despite Drake's Law that estimates how many extraterrestrial civilizations could exist in our galaxy (Gertz, 2021). However, aliens are configured by consciousness, most often in an anthropic manner, given the experience of the immediate - which through complex forms of paradiola projects the contents of consciousness onto some aspects of reality about which we do not have enough information and cannot configure them otherwise.

A theme for philosophical reflection is the consciousness of subjectivity - and this because the subject is the one who perceives himself as an object. No matter how objectified the perception of subjectivity may be, pure subjectivity, like the thing itself, escapes knowledge. Subjectivity becomes an object of one's own contemplation when it is externalized

through cognitive processes. As such, the cognitive process is an exercise of subjectivity's ability to know itself, and not an expression of subjectivity itself. In terms of Indian philosophy, the perception of subjectivity can be, *in extremis*, understood as emptiness - because it is void of any objectivity and, from here, the possibility of using Indian philosophies in philosophical practices related to the understanding of subjectivity.

For Vedanta philosophy, the world is an illusion (*Maya*), because it appeared to the consciousness as external to *That*. But reality is, despite the illusion, the subjectivity - without any modification, more specifically without any object, the objects appearing in pure subjectivity without being able to affect it in any way. According to Vedanta, we cannot correctly say that subjectivity even exists, because the way of being of subjectivity is outside of existence. For Vedanta, the world appears as a projection on a screen of consciousness that, despite any changes to the images that appear on this imaginary screen, it does not actually undergo changes - but only constitutes a support for the projection. The idea of the screen is not, as it would seem, new for the philosophical consciousness, since it was used, for example, by Plato - in the myth of the cave - even if not in the sense of a background on which reality is projected, but at the opposite pole - as a simple approximation of reality by the illusory shadows in the cave world.

Unlike Vedanta, Abhinavagupta (2012)- one of the most important authors of the Trika School in Kashmir - states that the illusion is not the external world but the perception of separation from it. And, from here, we can deduce a question for the philosophical practitioner: what is it like, for me, to be separated from the world. What is it like, for me, to be a separated entity?

Both Vedanta philosophy and Kashmiri Shaivism raise the issue of states of consciousness as the background of existence, precisely starting from the relationship between self and non-self. A first such state of consciousness is the waking state, in which the self interacts with the external world, which is seen as objective and situated outside the self. The I-you relationship is specific to this state, and objectivity is the way in which the individual establishes his otherness. For philosophical practice, the experience of objectivity represents the exercise point of philosophical research - more precisely in the form of the question: "How is it what it is?" Rational consciousness - and therefore philosophy - can only exist in the self-otherness relationship and, as such, philosophical consciousness is born from questioning the particularities of existence that cannot, therefore, be absent. Mysticism, on the other hand, blurs the specificity of otherness, focusing on



unity - as such, a philosophical practice that originates in a mystical philosophy can interrogate itself on the Self outside of its Otherness.

A second state of consciousness is the dream state. An entire philosophy was built starting from the Freudian interpretation, but here in the Vedantic and Kashmirian manner, the cognitive processes being considered analogous to dreaming and assimilated to this dream state, since the emphasis is put on mental processes and not on perceptual ones. We can interpret mental constructs as such constructive hallucinations (paradolia) that make our existence resemble a perpetual dream, and the role of philosophy and philosophical practice in particular is to examine this dream and how it appears in consciousness. Philosophical counseling is based on the Socratic acceptance, that an "unexamined" life is not worth living. The examination represents the very integration of how cognitive processes distort perceptual processes and how various models of interpretive adrift generate new meanings on the same world.

A table could become a chair if you sit on it, so the meaning that we attribute to an object changes how we react to it, so the way we construct the meaning is one of the main topics of the philosophical counseling. Meanings substitute objects, and the human world is a symbolic one. According to the same Vedanta philosophy cited earlier, this is a dream world, because it is based on interpretive adrift.

Many people construct their life around a concept and define their own existence through that concept. An example is the movie "The Englishman Who Went up a Hill but Came down a Mountain". In this movie, the entire reality of some citizens from a locality was built around the self-perception that they are people from the mountains (mountaineers). When finally there was an official measurement of the highest landform in their village, it turned out that this landform, which they considered a mountain, did not fit the official dimensions (height) to be declared a mountain, and therefore their status was reduced to "people from the hill" - which seemed to ruin their entire self-perception. In the end, they decided to artificially raise the respective landform, adding soil to its top, in order to regain their status as mountain people.

The question for philosophical practice could be: how does the identity of a person differ depending on the living conditions and how does self-perception influence the behavior of the individual? And also, a significant question can be: is the identity built around such concepts (such as mountaineer) the real identity of the person? And if not, to what extent do mental constructs redefine the individual's life, even without him realizing it? And, from here - other constructs take form, around which

individuals build their identity, such as that of a poor or of a millionaire, constructs that determine their lives, even without them realizing it. And then the natural question is why that construct was chosen, what particular meaning does that construct have and if a life built around that construct is what they want and if they are aware of this. It is not a problem in itself that someone builds their life around a construct - as long as they question themselves about this, he/she has awareness on this, and he/she accepts it. As in Thomas Nagel's example from the article *How is it like to be a bat*, we have a series of data about reality as pure mental constructs, since they are not and cannot be formed by the senses - and, as such, do not represent a world exterior to us, but our own inner world, sometimes making us prisoners of our own imagination, superimposed, sometimes illegitimately on top of reality.

The next level of consciousness, according to Vedanta, is the dreamless state - considered by this system to be the highest and generally associated with mystical states. Regarding this state it is very difficult to philosophize, since there is usually no memory of this state - however, certain aphasias can represent moments when no concept is formed in the mind and reality is perceived outside the usual constructs superimposed over this one. This state of dreamless sleep functions as a reset of our own mental operating system regarding the categories of space, time, causality, etc., categories that appear together with the mental activity which constructs concepts.

The fourth state, according to Vedanta and according to Shaivism of Kashmir (Abhinavagupta, 2012) is the state of *turya* - which is nothing but the substrate of self-consciousness, superimposed on the other states and indifferent to the contents of these states.

Of course, there are also intermediate states - as, for example, the dream state in the waking state, when, although we are focused on the sensory activity, there is at the same time an interpretative adrift and a phenomenon of *paradolalia* in which the perceived object receives a series of complete meanings, different from the usual ones - and looking at such an object, for example at an art object, facilitates mental processes that make the meanings of the respective object more important than the object itself.

In such a philosophical practice, based on Vedantic and Kashmirian philosophy, we can use a series of aspects derived from transpersonal psychology, such as the creation but also the identification of various trance states, especially those that appear on a daily basis in the individual's life. We call the trance state that occurs daily in the individual's state those moments of unconditional adherence to an idea, point of view, etc., without it being

previously judged from a moral or existential point of view. A first form of such trance can be induced through the sense organs, being it visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or even consensus trance. The specificity of this trance state is the fact that one of the sensory channels is used to transmit suggestions and information that are difficult or impossible to analyze by the mind and which lead to the formation of constructs and, later, of specific reactions. The favorite example in Vedanta is that of confusing a rope with a snake, a confusion that generates a completely inappropriate response from the subject. Of course, Vedanta's favorite example is that just as in the dark you can mistake a rope for a snake, so we confuse constructed reality with ultimate reality and we confuse pure consciousness with objects of consciousness. The task of the philosophical counselor can be to identify such suggestions operating in his own mind and in the mind of his clients.

Consensus trance can be understood in the sense that if everyone around me believes/accepts a particular truth, I will also accept it without analyzing it, precisely because I consider it certain, because everyone else has already accepted it. This sometimes happens in politics, but also in philosophy when the argument of authority replaces reason on a phenomenon or on its explanations. If everyone sees an object/phenomenon in a certain way, I am inclined to stop making efforts to find other possible angles of view.

From a certain point of view, the reality we perceive is itself such a suggestion, Bernardo Kastrup for example showing that we, as a species, are not equipped to perceive reality, but to function the best we can in it. We do not perceive quantum reality, for example, time and space are seen as universal - although physics shows that they are dependent on the system of reference. We rather perceive qualia on things, for example on the color red, which is a construction in consciousness of the combined frequencies that generate red light.

Another state of trance to which we have access is the one generated by cognitive processes. Our own concepts and constructs are meant to introduce us to a state of trance, that is to say, to accept a certain reality in accordance with them and to reflect as little as possible in relation to alternatives. The philosophical counselor has the mission to bring these alternatives before the client and to understand the significance of choosing one or the other of the constructs involved in the definition/redefinition of that object-phenomenon. This state of trance appears after an interpretative agreement, and Jurgen Habermas calls it communicative action (Habermas, 1981).

Another possibility of the appearance of the trance state, considered very high from a spiritual point of view in Vedanta and in the Trika School, is related to the lack of any mental construct (*no vikalpa*). This can be understood as the pause between thoughts - that pause after the formation of a thought and before the formation of the next thought. It is about what in Zen is called *satori* (Deshimaru, 2002), or *nirvikalpa* in Kashmir Shaivism (Swami Laksmanjoo, 2015).

The analysis of archetypes can be a subject of philosophical practice - for example by questioning the meaning of some of these archetypes: what does it mean for me to be king in my own existence and to what extent do I succeed in this? Am I in control of my own life? And what exactly does this control of my own life mean to me? How far am I willing to go to gain control of my own life? What does power mean to me, and to what extent does power over my existence or the exercise of power over other people influence my various decisions and way of being?

## Conclusions

Practical philosophy can start in an effective way both from the latest developments in the philosophy of mind and even in neuroscience, but it can also use elements taken from various spiritual and philosophical traditions - such as Vedanta or Kashmiri Shaivism - which it can, however, recontextualize in order to adapt them to the modern man's need for self-knowledge and his tendency towards reflective awareness.

## Acknowledgement

This paper was realized within the Center for Research in Applied Ethics of „Stefan cel Mare“ University of Suceava, Romania and it was presented as oral speech within ICPP2023 - The 17th International Conference on Philosophical Practice, 5-8 of June 2023, Timisoara, Romania.

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