

# A Śāṅkaran Engagement with David Chalmers on Reality and Consciousness

Anand Jayprakash Vaidya

## I. Introduction

In his (2022) *Reality+*, David Chalmers argues that virtual reality is genuine reality. In his (2014) “Panpsychism and Panprotopsychism” he argues for taking panpsychism and panprotopsychism about consciousness seriously in the philosophy of mind. In this piece I offer a comparative engagement of Chalmers’ views based on the work of Śāṅkara, the foremost proponent of the Advaita Vedānta school of Indian philosophy. In section II, I present Chalmers’s and Śāṅkara’s distinct accounts of reality and compare them. In section III, I present Chalmers’ and Śāṅkara’s account of consciousness and compare them. In section IV, I argue for more cross-traditional engagement with Chalmers’s philosophy through other traditions of Indian philosophy, such as Nyāya and ViśiṣṭādvaitaVedānta.

## II Reality

In his (2022) *Reality+*, Chalmers argues that virtual reality is genuine reality. Chalmers offers five definitions of ‘reality’ and shows that virtual worlds satisfy some of these definitions in the same sense that any non-virtual real entity does.

Chalmers defines “virtual realism” as the view that virtual entities are indeed real, functional, and even central to life, and “simulation realism” as the view that if we are in a simulation, the objects around us are real and not an illusion. Simulation realism holds that even if we have lived our whole life in a simulation everything around us in our simulation is real. He says the following about the *Reality+* view.

[R]eality contains many realities, and those realities are real. Or more mundanely: the cosmos (everything that exists) contains many worlds (physical and virtual spaces), and the objects in those worlds are real. (Chalmers 2022: 108)

Let C be any ordinary object you take to be real, such as a cup. Let V be any virtual object you take to be non-real, such as a character in a video game. Chalmers goes through and shows that just as C exists, has causal powers, is mind-independent, non-illusory, and genuine, so is V. V exists in the video game, it has causal powers since it can interact with the players of the game, it doesn’t depend on the mind of the player but on the video game, it isn’t an illusion, and it is genuine (not a counterfeit). So, if C is real for those reasons, so is V. The argument is basically:

1. If C or V are real in either  $S_1, S_2, S_3, S_4, S_5$ , then they are genuinely real.
2.  $S_1$ : reality as existence.
3.  $S_2$ : reality as causal power.
4.  $S_3$ : reality as mind-independence.
5.  $S_4$ : reality as non-illusoriness.
6.  $S_5$ : reality as genuineness.
7. X and Y satisfy some of  $S_1$  to  $S_5$
8. So, X and Y are both real.

Chalmers argues that virtual objects are real at least in four out of the five senses. That is enough on his account to say that they are genuinely real. Let’s compare this view of reality to that of Śāṅkara’s.

For Śāṅkara, reality is related to dependence and persistence—something which persists is more real than something that changes or is transient. Consider the commonly used example of a clay pot in Indian philosophy. According Dalal (2021)

the clay that is the substantial cause of a pot or a plate is more real than the pot or the plate because it remains continuous over time while the shape changes. As a consequence, we have a graded view of reality under which temporal continuity is how the grade is determined. It turns out that for Śāṅkara, the relation between the clay and the pot is the same as that between pure consciousness and objects: pure consciousness remains through the many forms it takes on.

According to Śāṅkara then, the real is that which is permanent in time or that which doesn't change its nature. This leads to  $S_6$ : reality as permanence in time.

Now consider the following argument.

1. C and V are both real only if they are real in sense  $S_6$ .
2.  $S_6$ : reality as permanence in time.
3. C and V are not permanent in time.
4. So, C and V are non-real.

In Vaidya (2020, 2022) I advocated the view that Śāṅkara is best read as an illusionist about everything other than pure consciousness, because pure consciousness remains throughout while everything else changes at some point in time. Indeed, his opponents often labelled him a *māyāvaadin*, a person that holds the world is an illusion.

However, Dalal (2021) notes that Śāṅkara is focused on the idea that the world is dependent on and an effect of brahman (pure consciousness). Śāṅkara distinguishes between two levels of reality—the conventional intersubjective empirical reality (*vyāvahārikasattā*) and the ultimate reality (*pāramārthikasattā*). In contrast to the illusionist reading of Śāṅkara, there is an alternative, advocated by Timalina (2008) and implicit in Dalal (2021) where Śāṅkara endorses a graded conception of reality, where what is permanent in time is fundamental and real from all perspectives, but what is transient is less real. Although conventional reality is less real from the perspective of ultimate reality, from within conventional reality, conventional reality is real. For the purposes of a more fruitful engagement with Chalmers work, I will take the graded conception of reality as being Śāṅkara's view.

On the graded conception of reality view, C and V are not illusions or fictions that don't exist. Rather, they are just less real than what is most real: pure consciousness. C and V have causal powers. They are "genuine" from the level in which they reside as transient objects. They are not "genuine" from the level of pure consciousness which is fundamental because it is permanent in time. C

and  $V$  are real, but less so.

Given that Śāṅkara thinks that ordinary reality is less real than pure consciousness, nothing stands in the way of his embrace of virtual reality as “genuine” reality. Given both virtual and “genuine” are less real than pure consciousness, they are equally real, in the graded sense of reality. Thus, in the work of Śāṅkara one finds an ally to the reality plus program with a caveat. While virtual reality is as real as “genuine” reality, they are both less real than pure consciousness.

### III Consciousness

In his (2014) “Panpsychism and Panprotopsychism”, Chalmers offers a Hegelian styled argument for panpsychism. By “Hegelian” he means that the argument has the form of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. A technique common to the work of Hegel (he does not endorse the Hegelian position on consciousness, which is closer to Śāṅkara’s own position). A major background assumption in the work is that the starting point that either materialism or dualism is true. Materialism holds that physical truths suffice for all the truths. Dualism denies materialism, holding that some truths are not physical truths.

**Thesis:** Dualism via the conceivability argument

Where  $P$  is the conjunction of all microphysical truths, and  $Q$  is an arbitrary phenomenal truth, such as “I am conscious,” the thesis and antithesis arguments are as follows.

1.  $P \ \& \ \neg Q$  is conceivable.
2. If  $P \ \& \ \neg Q$  is conceivable,  $P \ \& \ \neg Q$  is metaphysically possible.
3. If  $P \ \& \ \neg Q$  is metaphysically possible, then materialism is false.
4. So, materialism is false.

Because we have the ability to conceive of all the physical truths without phenomenal truths, materialism is false. Chalmers enhances the argument by showing that *zombies*, physical duplicates of humans that lack phenomenal consciousness, are conceivable—a version of the argument where  $P \ \& \ \neg Q$  is used to describe a zombie. However, consider the antithesis for dualism.

**Antithesis:** Materialism via the causal argument

1. Phenomenal properties are causally relevant to physical events.
2. Every caused physical event has a full causal explanation in physical terms.

3. If every caused physical event has a full causal explanation in physical terms, every property causally relevant to the physical is itself grounded in physical properties.
4. If phenomenal properties are grounded in physical properties, materialism is true.
5. So, materialism is true.

Ever since the time of Elizabeth of Bohemia's critique of Descartes' dualism about mind and body, it has been known that mental causation is a problem for dualism. How can the mind cause the body to do anything if it is the case that mind and body are totally distinct substances? How can thinking about what to do tomorrow cause someone to do anything if the thinking is made out of a substance that by definition cannot interact with matter because it is not extended in space like matter? The back and forth between dualism and materialism leads to their synthesis called *panpsychism*. Chalmers says.

I think constitutive Russellian panpsychism is perhaps the most important form of panpsychism, precisely because it is this form that promises to avoid the problems of [materialism] and dualism and to serve as a Hegelian synthesis. In particular, one can argue this view avoids both the conceivability argument against physicalism and the causal argument against dualism. (Chalmers 2014: 255).

Let's break this view down piece by piece. First, let's distinguish between macro experience and micro experience. Macro experience is the kind of experience humans have; macrophenomenal properties characterize the what it is like aspect of experience that are instantiated in macro experience. Micro experience is the kind of experience microphysical entities have. And microphenomenal properties are instantiated in micro experience by microphysical entities. *Panpsychism* is the thesis that microphysical entities are conscious. *Constitutivism* about panpsychism is the thesis that macro experience is wholly or partially grounded in micro experience. *Russellian panpsychism* is the thesis that some quiddities are microphenomenal properties. *Quiddities* are the fundamental categorical properties that play the fundamental roles specified by physics. *Constitutive Russellian Panpsychism* holds that there are quiddities that play the mass role and charge role, for example, and at least some of these quiddities are phenomenal. In his *Analysis of Mind* (1927) Bertrand Russell argued that it cannot be all about structure and dispositions all

the way down. While there are models in physics that make sense of the idea that there are all and only dispositions, Russell felt that this view was empty. In his articulation and examination of *constitutive Russellian panpsychism* Chalmers argues that it is not a form of dualism or materialism.

Chalmers argues that panpsychism is not a form of dualism. He does so by distinguishing between narrow physical properties and broad physical properties. Narrow physical properties are microphysical role properties and structural properties. Broad physical properties are physical properties and structural properties along with any other non-structural property necessary for the instantiation of the physical property. Quiddities are not narrow physical properties. But they are broad physical properties, since they are necessary for the instantiation of the microphysical role property by a physical property along with the structure. Thus, it is not a form of dualism.

Chalmers also argues that panpsychism is not a form of materialism because there is a sense in which panpsychism is only a form of “broad” physicalism. While “narrow” physicalism entails broad physicalism, broad physicalism does not entail narrow physicalism. Thus, it is not a form of materialism.

Constitutive Russellian panpsychism emerges as a distinctive view from a Hegelian dialectic between dualism and materialism, where they are seen to be the two alternatives driving toward a synthesis. After exploring other views such as panprotopsychism, Russellian monism, and panqualityism, Chalmers concludes by saying:

I think that the Hegelian argument gives good reason to take both panpsychism and panprotopsychism very seriously. If we can find a reasonable solution to the combination problem for either, this view would immediately become the most promising solution to the mind-body problem. So, the combination problem deserves serious and sustained attention. (Chalmers 2014: 274)

Here’s the combination problem as Chalmers sees it:

The problem can be stated as follows: how do micro experiences combine to yield macro experiences? It is at least very hard to see how a number of separate experiences had by separate entities could combine to yield a distinct experience had by a composite entity. (Chalmers 2014: 266)

Philip Goff (2017) and Itay Shani (2015) argue that one solution to the combination problem is to simply drop the atomistic metaphysics of panpsychism which favours small atomic like entities being prior to wholes that they compose. If we reverse the order of explanation by adopting priority monism—the view that wholes are prior to their parts, we get—constitutive cosmo psychism—the view that all facts are grounded in / realized by /constituted of conscious involving facts at the cosmic level. However, the constitutive cosmopsychism of Goff and Shani faces a corresponding decombination problem.

In Vaidya (2022) I offer an account of the decombination problem as breaking down into two questions. How is it logically or metaphysically possible for there to be a cosmic conscious subject where every individual finite mind that is conscious is coherently a part of it? That is: how is it possible for a cosmic consciousness to coherently coexist with and explain individual conscious minds while preserving the reality of individual minds, their subjectivity, their consciousness, and the contents of their consciousness? And: how are individual conscious centers of experience delimited from a cosmic consciousness? That is, given that it is possible for a cosmic consciousness to explain the consciousness of every finite conscious mind, how are those individual minds generated from cosmic consciousness?

Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta may come to our aid here, for "Advaita" means non-dual. The thesis that ātman is *brahman* (non-duality) is the claim that *the true self* is *pure consciousness*. The non-duality, however, is not about the opposition between dualism and materialism as theses about the relation between the mind and the body, but about the individual self (ātman) and pure consciousness (*brahman*). Thus, according to Śaṅkara the following holds:

Brahman (pure consciousness) is the sole reality.

The world, *qua* world, is unreal.

The individual self is non-different from Brahman.

In order to bring Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta into the problem space of analytic philosophy of mind, we can turn to the work of Albahari (2020):

[T]he most promising way forward in the mind-body problem—navigating around all problems to date—is to renounce the pervasive panpsychist supposition that consciousness must belong a subject. This extends the reach and scope of consciousness to ground not merely the inner nature of the cosmos, but everything we take to be the world, with its subjects and objects. (Albahari 2020: 2)

As Albahari sees it, we cannot solve the combination problem (how to build up macro experiences of the kind we humans have based on micro experiences), nor the decombination problem (how to divide down from a cosmic consciousness to individual conscious selves), because we are trying to do so in a way that makes both the individual self and pure consciousness equally real. Recall the illusionist view of Śāṅkara discussed in section III, which holds that given that Brahman is the sole reality, everything else is an illusion, including the sense that there is an individual self that is distinct from Brahman. However, from the graded levels of reality view, Brahman is the most real, while the individual self *qua* individual, ordinary, and virtual objects, are less real. Also from section III, recall that for the purposes of this engagement, I am taking the graded view of reality.

Although Albahari does not say the following, I read the position she does state as follows. By accepting the graded view that pure consciousness is most real, and the individual self is less real, one can avoid the twin problems. By taking a graded view of reality between the individual self and pure consciousness, i.e. by making the individual self *less* real than pure consciousness, there is a way to avoid the combination and decombination problems. Putting it the other way, the twin problems are hard to solve when one must recover the view that the individual self is equally real to that of pure consciousness.

According to Timalina (2008), there are several properties to note about the nature of pure consciousness in Śāṅkara that are relevant to this discussion. First, pure consciousness lacks attributes (*nirguṇa*). It is without qualities, as the name suggests: pure. However, there is one property that pure consciousness has as its fundamental nature: bliss (*ānanda*). In other words, we will not find a plethora of phenomenal properties to build up micro experience so as to ground macro experience, there is only bliss in Śāṅkara. Nevertheless, if bliss is an *ur-property* then perhaps it can play multiple phenomenal roles or be part of the process of generation for other phenomenal properties. The answer to whether pure consciousness can have a qualitative nature that addresses the issue of phenomenal properties found in macrophenomenal experience and microphenomenal experience, is thus a qualified yes.

For Timalina, Śāṅkara's pure consciousness is intrinsically self-aware. As a consequence, it would appear that intentionality would be built into it. However, Śāṅkara's pure consciousness is not directed at anything, nor does it have directedness as its intrinsic nature—it is not an object-directed but a non-dual

form of consciousness, which would seem to preclude intentionality. Just as in analytic philosophy of mind we distinguish between access and phenomenal consciousness, because one is about capacity and cognition and the other is about phenomenology and qualitative experience, in Advaita one distinguishes between dual (object-directed) and non-dual (pure) consciousness.

Additionally, Timalisina's view is that Śāṅkara's pure consciousness is time-constituting, and thus in a sense is not temporal since it is the very ground of temporality. For Timalisina, a central issues for Śāṅkara is the generation of difference (*bheda*), and how something is grasped via difference. The being in Śāṅkara's is not independent of pure consciousness: the only being there is *is* pure consciousness. Pure consciousness has a different metaphysical structure than constitutive Russellian panpsychism because pure consciousness is a unified singular field of consciousness. As a consequence, it is often compared to cosmopsychism as advocated by Goff (Goff 2017). Critical engagements with Goff and Śāṅkara are to be found in Albahari (2018, 2020), Gaspari (2019), and Vaidya (2020, 2021).

Timalisina thinking that Sankara equates pure consciousness with God, tries to draw disparities between Chalmers and Sankara. It is clear in the work of Chalmers that there is no implication that consciousness has any theistic elements to it. Goff (2022) further makes it explicit when he says the following about cosmopsychism and micropsychism (a version of panpsychism):

Cosmopsychism is not to be confused with pantheism: the view that the universe is God. Just as the micropsychist holds that electrons have experience but not thought, so the cosmopsychist holds that the universe has some kind of experience, but may refrain attributing thought or agency to the universe. (Goff et. al. 2022: 2.4)

## IV Conclusion

Given the availability of primary texts and reliable communication via the internet, it is far easier now to bring ideas from various philosophical traditions into contact with one another. Through the combination of Indian, Analytic and Phenomenological studies of mind, there is room for a great deal of growth in the philosophy of mind. While I have focused here on Advaita Vedānta, and then again only Śāṅkara's, there are many traditions that I think are equally deserving of engagement with Chalmers' work.

In the case of reality I believe a lot of interesting work can be done by bringing Nyāya and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta into contact with Chalmers' account of reality. The reason why both of these schools of thought embrace complicated forms of realism, can either be used to challenge the form of skepticism based on the simulation argument that Chalmers' endorses or so as to offer an alternative account of a graded conception of reality. Rāmānuja, the father of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, also holds a graded view of reality. However, his view has a different structure from the one offered by Śāṅkara because it doesn't engage the idea of levels of reality. Rather, it discusses different spheres of reality, where each sphere is equally real, but one sphere is more fundamental than the others because all the others depend on it.

In the case of consciousness I believe a lot of interesting work can be done by bringing the other traditions of Vedānta, such as Viśiṣṭādvaita, so as to see how they compare to analytic panpsychism and cosmopsychism. Vaidya (2022) pursues such a project. The Samkhya tradition also has a lot to offer the philosophy of mind because of how it draws a distinction between mind and consciousness through the distinction between *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*.

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