OVERVIEW AND PROSPECT

On Consciousness

As we get ready to take an overview of approaches to consciousness, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the cross-cultural nature of our inquiry. The comparison of psychological theories poses the same kind of problems as posed by the comparison of cultures. There is a good reason why the anthropologist Malinowski insisted that every culture must be understood in its own terms. For, if we judged all cultures by the standards of a particular one, we would impose the biases of one culture on the others—which would defeat the whole purpose of comparison. Obviously, we cannot judge behaviorism by Yogic standards and vice-versa. Moreover, social institutions and other aspects of culture are so differentiated that we are faced with the impossible task of having to compare incomparables. Likewise, psychophysiology and Vedânta appear so different that, at least at first glance, it seems pointless to try to compare them.

It is true that Yoga and behaviorism appear to have nothing in common. Yet, upon closer examination, the two can be seen as different responses to certain common problems. As noted, the Yogic literature mentions some of the predicaments encountered by the introspectionists of Watson’s time—the infinite regress arising from an attempt to examine one’s own thought processes, for instance. The unreliability of memories is another common problem mentioned in both Yogic and introspectionist literature concerning the observation of one’s own thoughts. Given that Watson turned to the control of behavior as a goal of psychology after concluding that the method of introspection was unworkable, it is

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quite conceivable that someone in the ancient Yogic tradition may have responded similarly in face of the abovementioned problems in introspection. Yoga and behaviorism are alike in choosing the control of behavior as opposed to descriptive analysis of conscious content as the goal of their respective enterprises. The main difference between them is that, while Yoga has tried to develop methods for controlling the mind and body, Watsonian behaviorism chose to control the body while rejecting the mind altogether.

Many readers find such a comparison of Yoga and behaviorism a mere tour de force. The comparison of ideas from ancient Sanskrit texts with those in the works on modern scientific psychology is not an easy task. While suggesting that the yogis as well as the structuralists of Watson's time were involved in introspective observations of consciousness, it is essential to ascertain that both were indeed dealing with the same phenomenon, which we have designated by the label consciousness. The problems in such comparison begin with the need for correct translations. Unless we are quite sure that the terms considered equivalent refer to the same phenomena, the comparison of theories will be deceptive. It is only after careful consideration that I have concluded that the Cartesian "cogito," William James's "Thought," and Patanjali's "vṛtti" are generic terms designed to designate the same broad set of mental events such as perceiving, thinking, imagining, remembering, dreaming and the like. Once we establish beyond doubt that two sets of writings are dealing with the same set of phenomena, we can go ahead with a comparative survey of the literature to search for as many equivalent ideas and expressions as possible. Here is a list of ideas commonly found in the psychological literature in English that have been expressed in almost exactly equivalent Sanskrit expressions in the Yoga-Vedânta literature.

Mental events usually involve rapid changes; thoughts are always directed toward objects or, in other words, there is always an implicit subject-object split; mental events leave their impressions behind; such impressions are stored and retrieved, so to speak; the retrieval of impressions usually has cognitive and motivational properties; we tend to seek those objects that have left pleasant impressions and avoid those that have left unpleasant impressions; desires often lead to distortion in the perception of reality; the origin of desires must be traced to past experiences—including some events that may have occurred prior to the birth of the individual, and so on.

That concepts like cogito, thought, and vṛtti originated independently in places continents apart and times centuries apart should be no surprise because, after all, the occurrence of thoughts is a panhuman