

University of Latvia
International Conference
Freedom of Consciousness
8th UN International Day of Yoga
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Remarks
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Namaskar,

I would like to begin by thanking Mr. Arnis Silins, Prof Pirags and their colleagues for organising this special Seminar on the occasion of the upcoming 8th UN International Day of Yoga on a subject of extreme importance that seeks to advance understanding of the very nature of the foundation of existence.

I regret that I am not able to join the Seminar in person, but it is indeed a privilege to listen to such a distinguished gathering of scholars.

I am not a student of Philosophy, and therefore, the concept and the definitions associated with today's topic will not be easy for me.

One of the least understood aspects for modern science is ourselves.

As a lay person, I feel that Consciousness remains a mystery and a deep puzzle. However, philosophers throughout history across civilizations have tried to offer many different interpretations to this elusive concept.

When Mr. Arnis first mentioned the topic of the Seminar to me some months back, I must confess that I did not fully understand the scope of it. Perhaps I still do not.

I wondered if it should not be conscience in place of consciousness in the theme but then I was on a different, more mundane plane than the Organizers of the theme were.

The confusion, however, might not be so out of place.

It is likely that although consciousness and conscience denote two different things today, the emphasis in conscience as an inner source of truth "played some role in the inward turn so characteristic of modern reflective view of self".

The search of truth is basic to both science and philosophy.

In India this search for Truth has been a preoccupation of the finest intellect since the very beginning of the human thought, which ultimately led it to the *Brahma* (ब्रह्म, not ब्रह्मा) who is Truth, Consciousness and Bliss (*Satchidananda*).

Brahma (ब्रह्म) is defined as *pragyanam* (Consciousness). It is very difficult to know (*Agyeya*) and even impossible to describe (*Akath*).

In the Indian tradition, consciousness is an infinite all-pervasive, unchanging field, without attributes, which is the basis of all sentient and insentient world including the world of all phenomena. It goes far beyond the individual selves and exists everywhere in the universe.

Thus, it takes some time and effort to comprehend the meaning and the import of freedom of choice in an unchanging, all-pervading field which is the root and source of all consciousness which includes the unconscious, insentient world within its fold and all phenomena.

That it is unknowable (*agyeya*) and indescribable (*akath*) arises from the fact that since the one who tries to know it (the knower, the subject) and the one which is sought to be known (the object) are all parts of the same undivided, indivisible whole without attributes, there is little distinction between the knower and the known.

An Indian grows up listening to such discourse and this becomes a part of his being.

The leading and influential Italian theoretical physicist of our time Carlo Rovelli who works on history and philosophy of science and has made significant contribution to physics of space and time, writes about the profound impression on him made by the *Nagarjuna* who lived in 2nd century.

Carlo Rovelli says that the central thesis of *Nagarjuna* that there is nothing that exists in itself, independent from something else, has immediate resonance with quantum mechanics.

This indivisibility and unchanging nature of the absolute has obvious implications on the concept of 'freedom' or the lack of it.

It is interesting that the leading physicist and mathematician, Roger Penrose, a Nobel Laureate, concludes that it is not possible to make a mathematical model of consciousness.

In the west, the search for the Ultimate Truth in earnest begins a few centuries ago when philosophers and psychologists start grappling with the question of awareness of the world (perception) and the awareness of the Self (apperception).

The mind-body or the consciousness-matter divide in the western philosophical tradition is resolved in the nondual Indian traditions such as *Advaita Vedant*, and *Mahayana* Buddhism which assert the lack of any object owning an individualized consciousness.

As I understand, Yoga helps one experience the interconnectedness of all creation - a fundamental truth that modern science is discovering only now. Through this realization of interconnectedness, Yoga helps tune an inner sense of unity with our surroundings comprising nature and fellow human beings and the community of all living beings.

After avoiding this for centuries, some scientists – for instance cognitive neuroscientists or AI specialists - have now joined the philosophers, to try and decipher this Hard Problem over the last forty years or so.

Still, some may wonder whether the human mind can ever grasp this truly.

The question of what it means if we are free to make decisions if our behaviour can only follow predetermined laws of nature, can be perplexing. This brings to the age-old question of Free Will that has engaged the attention of philosophers over millennia.

Only a few days ago, in a fascinating and perhaps scary development, it was reported how Google asked one of their AI researchers to go on leave after he wrote about how LamDa – Google's Large Language model – had become sentient or self-aware, and how the model had told him that it had a soul.

We may recall here that around a century ago, the Indian polymath, researcher and inventor Jagadish Chandra Bose published his experimentation results to show that plants could feel pleasure or pain from external stimuli.

In the 1970s the British scientist James Lovelock, who worked with Jet Propulsion Lab, formulated the Gaia hypothesis that proposed that earth itself was a self-regulating system.

Some scientists working on exploring deep origins of consciousness of how subjective experience came into being in a biological sense, propose that marine creatures like the Octopus also have a high intelligence although their evolutionary lineage is radically different from ours.

Our understanding of the visible universe, space and time, stars and galaxies, life on earth continues to expand.

All the exciting scientific research that is ongoing on the human mind, or the inner selves of birds and animals or the conversations and signals within the wood wide web both above and below ground will also continue to reveal insights and contribute at its own level to exploring these concepts of consciousness, conscience, and free will or freedom of consciousness.

For some time, humanity has been thought of as the pinnacle of evolution where nature or reality becomes aware of itself. However, in the universe everything communicates with everything else and transforms into everything else.

Early systems of belief around the world have believed in the inter-connectedness of their surroundings – in terms of not only the living but also the non-living. They have ascribed agency to rivers, mountains, trees, animals, sun or moon or stars and other planets.

To the Australian aboriginals the entire landscape is sentient. In New Zealand, a river considered as an ancestor by an indigenous tribe, has been granted legal status as a living entity.

I look forward to listening to all the experts and scholars and gurus who are participating in today's seminar to get a glimpse of this fascinating debate.

Once again, thank you for inviting me to this discussion on a fascinating subject that is of abiding interest.
