

# A Revised Epistemological Exposition

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## Abstract

*Sree Narayana Guru* is first and foremost an epistemologist. He conceived Consciousness (*cit*) or *Arivu* as the Ultimate Reality. He re-presents Vedānta as a Science of Consciousness. Consciousness assumes the form of all the worlds both mental and physical. Consciousness shines inwardly as the subjective experience and outwardly as the objective experience. The essential Reality in the being of oneself is none other than that Reality. This inconceivable Reality self-unfolds as the “knower-known-knowledge. The one Consciousness and its manifest forms do not exist one without the other, this oneness of oneself, the world and the Consciousness cannot be intellectually conceived but to be intuitively experienced. Awareness of Guru’s intuitive vision helps one to solve many of the problems of philosophy and life and ensures enduring happiness in life.

**Keywords:** *Consciousness, subject, object, interiorized perception, happiness.*

## 1. Introduction

Narayana Guru is a continuator of the Indian tradition. In the Indian context, the epistemological inquiry into truth is identical with the search for moksha or liberation from all kinds of generic or psychosomatic conditionings and socio-cultural colouration to which an individual is exposed in the course of his or her life. The Guru is an Advaita Vedantin, represents Vedānta as a Science of Consciousness. He conceived Consciousness as the Ultimate Reality, that assumes the form of all the worlds, both mental and physical. If the Ultimate Reality is Consciousness, Vedānta can be considered as a Science of Consciousness. This Science of Consciousness or Science of knowledge is referred to epistemology in modern philosophy. This is a revisualization of Brahmanvidya or the Science of the Absolute. Thus, Vedānta is revisualized to be pure epistemology, with Consciousness functioning as both epistemological and ontological reality. As a

result in the Vedāntic framework, epistemology and ontology are interchangeable words. Thus Narayana Guru’s philosophy is a philosophy of oneness of Consciousness. Guru’s analysis of Consciousness provides an answer to the challenging problems of consciousness posed by modern cognitive scientists and philosophers investigating the philosophy of mind as well as all other problems of philosophy and life. Hence the Guru’s epistemology has ample relevance which this study intends to bring out.

Narayana Guru’s philosophy includes, metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, religion, social speculations etc and so on therefore, it is all comprehensive but first and foremost the Guru is an epistemologist. In his philosophical works, the Guru usually uses the terms *ātma*, *arivu*, *cit* and Consciousness rather than *Brahman* to denote the ultimate Reality. This peculiarity itself shows that the primary concern of the Guru is epistemic. Moreover, the Guru re-presents Vedānta as a Science of Consciousness or Pure Epistemology, in one of his philosophical works entitled *Arivu* or Epistemology of Gnosis.

Epistemology is the philosophical study that investigates the origin, structure, methods and validity of knowledge. The term epistemology comes from the Greek words ‘episteme’ meaning “knowledge” and “logos” means discussion or study. Thus, epistemology means discussion about knowledge. Each school of thought has its own epistemological doctrine. Consciousness or knowledge alone is the theme Vedānta deals with. Vedānta is itself thus epistemology in its broadest sense. Hence there is no relevance of a separate section for it in Vedānta.

The term consciousness comes from the Latin word “conscire” “to know”, “to be cognized of”. Consciousness is generally considered as an indefinable term rather a term definable only by the direct introspective appeal to conscious experience. Guru, in his *Vedānt Śūtras*. Verse 3, defines

consciousness as tajjyotih; that effulgence-effulgence in essence.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Consciousness and Self are Inseparable

In verse 59 of his *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam* the Guru says;

Without knowledge I do not exist  
Without me there is no knowledge;  
Light alone is  
Thus, both knowledge and knower  
When contemplated, are of one substance. There  
can be no doubt.

In verse 99 of the same work, the Guru says;

Knowledge and I – Consciousness – both are one  
to him for whom the veil is removed to another  
there is doubt.

In his work *Arivu* the Guru says;

There is only one *arivu* or knowledge and there is  
nothing to fall outside its scope. Knowledge is the  
only copying stone of existence. All relativistic  
and finite knowledge is within the ambit of the  
one infinite knowledge.

*Cit* was thus ascertained as the all underlying sat.  
This *cit* itself is what manifests phenomenally as  
everything and it does not remain without  
manifesting.

This idea is given in Bhagavat Gita chapter II.6.

The Guru adopts scientific methods and proved that  
the reality of the individual and the phenomenal  
world is Consciousness.

## 3. A Unique Way of Self - Enquiry:

The Guru fully conforms with the spirit of  
the age of Science in which he lived and taught, to  
inquire into the Self and its nature adopts a method of  
a controlled “laboratory experiment”. The laboratory  
is a dark room in which two people are sitting, unable  
to see each other, suspecting the presence of someone  
else in the room, one asks “who is sitting in darkness”  
In reply the other person in turn asks, the same  
question. The reply to both questioners is one alone,  
viz. “I”. What is the common ‘I’ in both? This ‘I’  
should be common to every one else as well. At the  
same time, each also has a separate ‘I’ – sense  
comprising all the fleeting elements that form the

physical body as well as the subtler inner faculties  
along with their functions.

These two kinds of ‘I’ sense find their unity in the  
neutral being of each of us. This neutral ‘I’ related to  
the individual being on one side and to the cosmic  
being on the other. The non-dual Self in which these  
conceivable self – aspect find their unity is what we  
are seeking.<sup>2</sup>

*Cit* or *arivu* is itself the one Reality that underlies the  
being of an individual as well as the universe.<sup>3</sup>

## 4. An Analytical Method

The Guru adopts an analytical method to demonstrate  
that Consciousness alone is the all underlying  
substance, in his work *Advaita Dipika*. verse 3.

Cloth is nothing but yarn,  
Yarn is nothing but cotton fibres  
And fibres turn to be but primeval  
Elements clinging together;  
This way of search extended to its extreme,  
Reveals that everything becomes apparent  
Out of one Consciousness,

Comparable to the flow of mirage-waters seen in  
desert lands; ultimately Consciousness alone does  
exist.

When everything is divided on and on into parts, then  
what is perceived at the end of that is: all is but Pure  
Consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

The Guru in yet another context, adopts the method  
of pure logical thinking to conclude that Pure  
Consciousness alone has real existence.

## 5. A Revised Epistemological Exposition

Guru’s work *Arivu*, a brief philosophical poem of  
fifteen verses is so unique in the history of  
philosophical writings that is unparalleled. It is an in-  
depth philosophical examination of Consciousness.  
In this work, the Guru clarifies his epistemological  
stance and leads us to a great intuitive clarity. In this  
work, the Guru answered all philosophical questions  
as part of depicting a comprehensive vision of the  
functionally existing Consciousness Reality and its  
certainty lies on one’s own self-awareness. It begins  
by demonstrating that the known object and the  
knower’s subjective consciousness are both in  
essential content *arivu* and there is no ultimate  
Reality other than *arivu* or Consciousness. In the first

<sup>1</sup> Guru, Muni Narayana Prasad, *The Vedanta Sutras of Narayana Guru*, D.K. Printworld, 9, (1997)

<sup>2</sup> Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati, *Narayana Guru*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 9, (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Guru Muni Narayana Prasad, *1000 Full Moons*, D.K.Printworld, 19, (2022).

<sup>4</sup> Guru Muni Narayana Prasad, *1000 Full Moons*, D.K.Printworld, 20, (2022).

ten verses the Guru adopts a synthetic way of thinking that ascends from the many to the one.

In verse eleven, the Guru says that primary knowledge, which is the only knowledge behind all forms of knowledge and which reveals to us all several items of perception and conception is in reality ourselves. It is the one Consciousness that knows everything and makes me know of everything.

The final certitude about the Consciousness Reality is marked by the conviction that, it alone exists, that it alone has room to exist, and that I am that Consciousness in essential content.<sup>5</sup>

This study concludes by demonstrating how this one Consciousness Reality, known to everyone only as subjective awareness, descends to become the objects known, even the unknowable. Before concluding it demonstrates how there is parity in terms of the number of components between the subjective and objective aspects of knowledge. Finally it states that all of these aspects are only relevant if we examine *arivu* analytically.<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Epistemological problem

Narayana Guru has tackled all the epistemological problems. Origin of knowledge, its structure, validity and method of knowing.

Everything originates from the one *cit* or Consciousness and hence the origin of any specific knowledge also has to be the same *cit*.

According to the Guru, in every event of knowing there is the coming together of two sides; the subject and the object. The subject is *cit* becomes manifested in a subtle form. In the case of an object, the same *cit* becomes manifest with a gross form. The subject and object thus are nothing but one *cit* shining forth in two different forms.<sup>7</sup>

The structural pattern in which Consciousness manifests itself as its knowing function is examined by the Guru in verses 36 to 42 of his *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*.

Verse 36 says.

Infinite is the way in which the knowing function becomes unfolded from the one Consciousness. Yet its entire range could well be classified into two 'sama' and 'anya'.

In verse 38, the Guru defines 'sama' and 'anya'. The knowing function in which one perceives many

realities is called *anya*, literally 'the other', the knowing function in which Reality is perceived as one is called *sama* (the same). After indicating the two kinds of knowledge, the Guru says that the goal of the contemplative is not to give primacy to one or the other of the two rival aspects but to transcend them both through the neutral point of which he names as *anya-samya*.

That *arivu* is what the seeker is in essence and in fact everything is in essence.

Through his discussion of 'sama' and 'anya', Guru gives a valuable analysis of the structure of knowledge to the world of philosophy.

Almost a similar classification of knowledge is made by the Guru in his *Darsanamala* chapter VII entitled *Jnana Darsanam* into *nirupadhika jnanam* (unconditioned knowledge) and *sopadhikajnanam* (conditioned knowledge).<sup>8</sup>

How Consciousness manifests itself as 'the known' – the objective world is examined by the Guru in detail in chapter V entitled *Bhāna Darsanam* of his *Darsanamala*.

Consciousness is effulgence in essence. It shines forth. Any specifiable aspect of the shining process incessantly happening in *cit* is known as *bhāna*. On the one side it shines forth inwardly as the subjective experience that we have examined in detail, on the other hand it shines forth outwardly as the objective experience - the world of the known.

The *bhāna* of *cit* has two facets *samanyabhāna* (generic shining forth) and *Viśeṣa-bhāna* (specific shining forth). A forest seen together, is generic or universal, whereas each tree in it, seen separately is specific or particular. Also, every *bhāna* depends on something, yet another manifest form of the same *cit*. This factor is called *bhānasraya* (that on which *bhāna* depends).

Four kinds of *bhāna* are differentiated.

Śthūla bhāna shining forth of *cit* as subtle objective experience.

Śūkṣma bhāna shining forth of *cit* as subtle

<sup>5</sup> S. Omana, *Vedānta - The science of Consciousness, Sree Narayana Guru's Vision*, D.K.Printworld, 20, (2022).

<sup>6</sup> S. Omana, *Vedānta - The science of Consciousness, Sree Narayana Guru's Vision*, D.K.Printworld, 20, (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Guru Muni Narayana Prasad, *Shorter Philosophical Poems of Narayana Guru*, D.K.Printworld, 82, (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati, *The Psychology of Darsana Mala*, Narayana Gurukula, 233, (1987).

Karana bhāna shining forth of  
"cit as causal objective experience.

Turiya-bhāna shining forth of  
cit as the fourth state of mystical experience.

Each of these four modes of bhanas has a corresponding generic facet and a specific facet, with each facet having its own bhanasrayas.<sup>9</sup>

Yet another scheme of manifestation of Consciousness into objective and subjective worlds is given by the Guru himself in the last four verses of his work 'Arivu', that we have explained earlier.

Though all these analytical studies help us have a clear understanding, really the one arivu and its manifest forms do not exist one without the other. Similar to the inseparable oneness of gold and ornaments is their non-duality. The eternal gold cannot exist without assuming some form. So too, the transient ornament form can not have being without gold that in essence is eternal. Similarly the one eternal arivu does not exist without assuming the world form analysable as above, and that ever changing world cannot have being without arivu existing. Intuitively perceiving the eternal Reality and the transient appearance is where non-dual perception attains finality (advaita darsana).

According to Narayana Guru, a certain and clear vision of *ātma* or Consciousness is not the outcome of any logically tenable means of knowledge (*pramānās*) but is an experiential illumination. So fully in line with the *Upanishadic seers* the method relied on by the Guru in the search for Reality is that of interiorizing one's perception, while resorting to dialectical reasoning.<sup>10</sup>

The validity of the *pramānās* – *pratyaksha* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *arthāpatti* (presumption), *anupalabdhi* (non-apprehension) and *upamāna* (analogy) – is only in respect of the externally oriented knowledge, where someone sees something else. They never help us to attain self-knowledge. The only indirectly helpful *pramāna* is *sruti* (verbal testimony), for it is the words of instruction the seeker hears or reads from the authority of a realized person. But words do not make the seeker enlightened straight away; he will have to ponder over them meditatively to get the hidden meanings of the words revealed.

Hence in the context of the knower knowing himself, one's attention becomes interiorized towards oneself. The effective use of the method results in the effacement of the seeker who becomes merged in what is sought. Intuitively perceiving the unitive Reality by making use of its own two manifest aspects of an opposite nature is the only method helpful in seeking *Brahman* and it is called *yōga-buddhi* in *Bhagavad Gīta* and dialectics in the Western philosophy.

From the above understanding of Guru's epistemology, it is clear that he provides ample scope for the problem of consciousness such as the relation between subject and object, mind and matter, the origin of life from matter or consciousness etc. The problem of consciousness is not, in fact, a new one, but it still remains a mystery, especially among Western thinkers.

Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Sartre, Einstein, Schrodinger, Arthur Eddington, Henri Berson attempted to solve the problems, but their attempts are not most satisfactory. They are not ready to accept the essence of man and the world as Consciousness.

## 7. Conclusion

Narayana Guru's revision on Vedānta and his neutrality between skepticism and belief or as between the a priori and the a posteriori gives to it a normative scientific-status. It at once puts his metaphysical speculations on par with that of physics. A careful scrutiny of his epistemology will reveal the neutral normative nature of the position that the Guru maintains in his attitude which is intended to be universal and scientific, neither taking the side of the believer nor of the skeptic, the orthodox or the heterodox of any traditional context of any time or any part of the world. It is here the Guru's epistemology excels in being scientific.

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<sup>9</sup> Guru Nataraja, *Life and Teaching of Narayana Guru*, Narayana Gurukula, 584, (1995).

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