



## ***Knowing One's Own Consciousness: The Epistemic Ontology of Consciousness and Its Implication for the Explanatory Gap Argument(s)***<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

It is usually, and without much disagreement, regarded that 'knowing one's own consciousness' is strikingly and fundamentally different from 'knowing other things'. The peculiar way in which conscious subjects introspectively know their own consciousness in their immediate awareness is of immense importance with regard to the understanding of consciousness insofar as it has a direct bearing upon consciousness' fundamental existence. However, when it comes to the understanding of consciousness, the role of consciousness' introspective knowledge is rather downplayed or not given much importance with regard to its ontology. With this in the background, the whole purpose of this paper is, first, to make the rather obvious point that the very existence of consciousness in its most fundamental form is constituted by this introspective knowledge of it or its epistemic dimension, whereby its ontology gets its epistemological or epistemic nature. Second, it aims to strengthen the explanatory gap argument by appealing to our enhanced understanding of consciousness in terms of its epistemic ontology.

### **Keywords**

consciousness, knowing, knowledge, introspection, epistemic, ontology.

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## Introduction

Our individual, subjective knowledge of our own consciousness, that is, how each individual conscious subject *introspectively* knows their consciousness in their immediate subjective awareness, is crucial to its existence insofar as it is this particular knowledge, which not only helps us to epistemically encounter or engage with or apprehend the phenomenon of consciousness in its most fundamental form but also constitutes its fundamental existence thereby (i.e., by means of knowing it). This knowledge involves a special process, namely, *Introspection* (hence, it is introspective), which allows conscious beings to access their conscious experiences or states. Let us call this knowledge 'Subjective, Introspective Knowledge' of consciousness, or in other words, that SIK obtains. Now, there is hardly any debate about the fact that each of us knows our own consciousness, that is, what SIK obtains, although there might be debates about whether or not SIK is accurate in its capturing or (subsequent) presentation of consciousness, or whether its consciousness ultimate metaphysical nature is (at all) revealed in/through SIK. However, keeping all these debates aside, there could barely be any disagreement on the point that SIK obtains, no matter however way it does. But, when it comes to the understanding of consciousness, this knowledge could barely be said to be given its due importance despite it being crucially important to the very existence of consciousness. Important to note that (i) the relevant consciousness under consideration is consciousness as we encounter or engage with via SIK in our immediate, subjective awareness, and (ii) the relevant knowledge under consideration, of course, is SIK. Precisely with this at the backdrop, this paper aims at opening a different avenue of thinking about consciousness by trying to show how immensely important SIK is, that the very phenomenon of consciousness itself, in essence, could be said to be ontologically equivalent to or same as SIK or vice versa. This paper shows how SIK not only lets us epistemically acknowledge it but also, more importantly, constitutes its fundamental ontological existence. Let us call this the 'Epistemic Ontology (of consciousness) thesis,' in short, EO, according to which the very fundamental existence of the phenomenon of consciousness is constituted by SIK. The primary aim of this paper, then, is to present and defend this hypothesis, which necessarily implies the consideration of consciousness being essentially an epistemic entity. This consideration, in turn, has substantial implications with regard to our understanding of consciousness. This SIK could also be called the 'epistemic dimension' of consciousness, that is, the dimension/aspect/component of consciousness that

is directly involved in its self-awareness (or self-knowledge) and which, as claimed in EO, is constitutive of consciousness' fundamental existence. With this enhanced understanding of the ontology of consciousness, duly grounded in the fundamentality of its epistemic dimension (i.e., the EO, in short), the paper then further aims to strengthen the explanatory gap argument in general and the *epistemic gap* argument developed by Levine (1983) in particular, to a much greater extent. The epistemic or epistemologically presented (Levine, 1983) explanatory gap argument cannot exert its full strength unless the phenomenon of consciousness is proven to be an epistemic entity or have an epistemic ontology, which this paper does by defending EO. The paper, however, does not aim to deliberate on the questions of what justifies the SIK, or how SIK justifies its epistemic deliveries (i.e., whatever epistemic contents and their subsequent considerations it delivers pertaining to consciousness), and whether it is consistent or correct, or whether SIK, could at all be regarded as knowledge in any seriously considerable sense. These issues are subject to further and, more importantly, altogether different debates and could be content for another paper.

The paper is divided into six sections, the first one being the introduction. The second section shifts attention to the epistemic dimension of consciousness and exhibits its central importance in the understanding of consciousness by demonstrating how SIK is fundamental to consciousness' existence in its most basic form. In doing so, this section also touches upon a number of important issues, like how SIK is different from other forms of knowledge, and also how consciousness, too, as a phenomenon, is different from other knowable phenomena/entities. The third section delves into explicating the nature of SIK, which quite systematically (as we will see how) and inevitably results in an exploration of the ontology of consciousness. This section shows how the questions about knowing consciousness via SIK and the questions about consciousness' fundamental existence are so intimately related to each other that they become an essential part of the discussion on the ontology of consciousness or vice versa. The exploration of SIK's nature vis-à-vis an analysis of consciousness' ontology in this section eventually reveals the fundamental nature of consciousness' ontology being epistemic, with appropriate reasons, and thereby, it lays the foundation for establishing EO. The fourth section formally presents the EO and offers a few important considerations that follow the EO. The fifth section first sums up all the significant clarifications and considerations from all the previous sections and then discusses how this SIK is central to the formulation of the explanatory

gap arguments, both in its metaphysical and epistemological presentations, and how it is particularly more important with regard to the latter presentation. Subsequently, by appealing to EO, this section strengthens the epistemic gap argument and further advances relevant considerations in that regard. The sixth section presents the formal conclusion of the paper.

### ***Knowing one's own consciousness: a shift to the epistemic dimension***

What is the most *fundamental basis* for there being any claim whatsoever about consciousness? Or there being consciousness at all, in the first place, for us? Or, in other words, its primary acknowledgment? These questions point to and, hence, intend to enquire about the *most basic*, the *most fundamental consideration* that results in the *primary identification* of consciousness, out of which every other consideration pertaining to consciousness follows. This present query regarding consciousness is least pertaining to any *ontological debate* around consciousness insofar as the query intends not to question whether or not consciousness exists at all but accepts its existence. So, as mentioned, it is granted that consciousness, in fact, *exists* while keeping aside the debates about the *nature* of its existence. Then, what exactly is it that the query under consideration, in essence, seeks to ask (about) and correspondingly shed light upon? It is simply how, in the first place, we come to the *point*, the discovery, the acknowledgment that *consciousness exists*. As said, how it exists, that is, the nature of its existence, is not the point of discussion at this point, but what is the basis for the primary acknowledgment that consciousness exists?

The intention of this query could further be clarified with the addition of interrogative attitudes like *why*, *when*, *where*, and *how* we come to that mentioned point, each of which focuses on approaching the *matter of the inquiry* from different angles. That is to say, asking questions like why or when or where or how do we consider *consciousness to exist* (primarily). The answer to this query is rather quite simple, that is, it is because we *know* (our) consciousness that we come to the point or discover or acknowledge that it *exists*. It is simply and *only* by the means of *knowing* it that we consider it to exist. Again, to re-answer the same against the mentioned interrogative attitudes, we can say that it is since we *know* it (to be) that is *why* we consider it to exist; it is *when* we *know* it, is when (or correspondingly) we consider it to exist; it is, precisely and only, in our *knowing* of it *where* we consider it to exist; and finally, it is only by *means of knowing* it, is *how* we consider it to

exist. We can see that the answer to each of these questions points to the same thing, that is, our knowing of consciousness.

It becomes clear that our knowing/knowledge of consciousness is what should be credited for the *primary acknowledgment* of consciousness. In other words, it is our *awareness* of consciousness that renders consciousness its primary acknowledgment as an existing entity. Without this knowledge, there is no consciousness whatsoever. However, the same could be said of any (*knowable*) object/entity/phenomenon whatsoever. That is to say, whatever it may be, we acknowledge them to exist or as existing objects/entities/phenomena since we know them. Considering this point, it could be objected that why our *knowing* is to be particularly emphasized when it comes to the phenomenon of consciousness. What special does it do to consciousness as a phenomenon that it is to be mentioned emphatically in its context? The answer to this question lies in our understanding of the nature of this specific *knowing* that enables us to know our consciousness (the way we do) or, in simple words, how exactly it operates and which goes hand in hand with understanding whether consciousness, as a phenomenon, is on a par with other knowable phenomena that exist apart from or regardless of our knowing/knowledge.

So, *how* exactly do we *know* or become *aware* of consciousness? Is it knowing in the sense in which we *ordinarily* know things in our environment (broad or proximal), for example, our neighbors, their houses, their behavior, the ecology, etc., in short, things that exist regardless of our awareness of them, that we know consciousness (as)? The answer to this question is a *no*, and the reason is that we do not get to encounter anything as *bare consciousness* that exists in the environment, regardless of our awareness of it, something that is simply out there as an artifact or object or fact or as a theoretical construct. That is to say; we do not find consciousness like any other entity in the environment that is a distinct object, *dissociated* and *detached* from us (i.e., our *knowing*), in short, whose *fundamental existence* does not in any way depend on our awareness of them. In fact, we do not even find anything as *consciousness as such* anywhere, but different instances of *conscious experiences* that are exclusive to each subject of conscious experience. That is to say, these different instances of conscious experience exist exclusively in the awareness of (their respective) individual conscious subjects and strictly nowhere else. Consider, for instance, *pain*, a conscious experience. Is there any pain out there in the environment without a conscious subject knowing it to occur or manifest in their conscious awareness/experience? The answer is “no”.

This consideration, then, sets consciousness apart from everything else possible, and hence, it cannot be said to be on par with the usual objects and entities from our environment (it could be anything other than consciousness as we introspectively know) that are subject to our knowledge. With other phenomena/objects/entities, their nature as being (possibly) subject to our knowledge does not lend or constitute their primary, ontological existence, but with consciousness, its primary, basic ontological existence is entirely dependent on our *knowing* of it. Other objects/entities/phenomena exist whether or not we know them, but consciousness exists precisely in terms of it being known by the conscious subjects. This, then, resolves the earlier raised objection regarding why we should emphasize our knowledge of consciousness. Unlike other entities, consciousness is not only merely acknowledged (epistemically) by our knowledge but is, more importantly, rendered its fundamental existence by our knowledge. Our awareness of consciousness is what constitutes its primary, fundamental existence. Consequently, it is necessarily implied that the way we know our conscious experiences is definitely different from the way we know other things (anything other than our own consciousness).

It is clear now that *the way we know* consciousness via knowing our conscious experiences is different from knowing things ordinarily. Consciousness, as a phenomenon or entity, is primarily acknowledged by being known by its conscious subjects in their immediate conscious awareness, and thereby, it comes into its fundamental form of existence as an existing entity. In its most fundamental and the only accessible form, consciousness is strictly available to us as something (conscious experiences) being most *intimately* connected to ourselves (to each of us individually) in and through our introspective knowledge of it, which does not seem to be the case with other things. With other things, the *gap* between the *known* and the *knowledge* (and also the knower) is wide enough to consider the former being separate and independent from the latter or vice versa. But, with consciousness, there is no consciousness without there being any introspective knowledge of it in the conscious subjects. With consciousness, *knowing it* and *knowing it to exist* go hand in hand as much as it does between *knowing it* and *its existence*. There seems to be no ontological gap between knowing consciousness and its existence. Hence, its existence in the most fundamental form is constituted by our introspective knowing/knowledge of it.

This entire discussion, then, sheds light on this very dimension of the phenomenon of consciousness, which is involved in its self-knowing exercise.

This dimension, due to the nature of its essential activity, that is, knowing (itself, of course), can be called its 'epistemic dimension'. This dimension, as discussed, is a crucially important aspect of consciousness insofar as it is this dimension that constitutes the fundamental existence of consciousness.

### **The nature of the introspective knowledge of one's own consciousness**

It is, by now, quite clear that the way we know conscious experiences is different from the way we know other things and that this knowing is what renders consciousness its fundamental existence. But what about the specific *nature* of this knowing/knowledge, something that essentially sets it apart from other (forms of) knowing/knowledge? What exactly is it like knowing one's own conscious experiences the way we know it?

The answer (about its nature) lies in equal parts, in the understanding of both (i) the distinct way this knowledge operates and (ii) what it knows (i.e., consciousness). In fact, although it may seem to involve some sort of circularity, the distinct nature of this knowing, that is, how it operates, derives as much from the object of this knowledge (i.e., consciousness itself) as the object itself derives its distinct nature from the way in which this knowing operates (*vis-à-vis* the object) or how this knowing *knows*. That is to say, this way of knowing is marked as distinct due to the distinct object that it knows, and at the same time, the object of the knowledge is regarded as distinct due to the distinct way it is known (through). But, more than a circularity, it has to do with the peculiar way in which the existence of consciousness is *structured*, as they both derive from it.

So, as suggested, this *knowing/knowledge* being indispensable for our only and primary grasp on consciousness (that too in its most fundamental form) demands a serious understanding of it *vis-à-vis* its nature. Its nature, again, as mentioned, depends on the interplay between how it operates and what it knows, both of which have a direct and inseparable link with the way that consciousness, as a phenomenon, *exists*. This, then, implies that discussions about the nature of this knowledge cannot be done in separation from, and hence must necessarily involve a discussion on the *ontology of consciousness* (Searle, 1997), its (consciousness) *mode of existence* (Sartre, 2003), that is, the very structure of the existence of consciousness. It is because of the reason that the nature of this knowledge that enables us to access conscious experiences, and the fundamental structure of the existence of consciousness complement each other mutually. To explain further, knowing consciousness via SIK not

only gives it its fundamental existence but also sets it apart from other entities (that are knowable in other ways), hence rendering it a *distinct* ontology; at the same time, since it has this distinct ontology that is why it is knowable/known in a *peculiar way* as different from other knowable entities. This is how the complementary relation between the distinct *knowing* of consciousness and its ontology is to be understood.

Now, what about the ontology of consciousness? *What* does it have to say about the nature of the knowing/knowledge that reveals conscious experiences to their respective subjects, and also, perhaps, *how*? The ontology of consciousness or its structure of existence is such that it is by default *conscious of itself* (Sartre, 2003), and that is its *raison d'être*. *Being conscious* (of) here is the same as *knowing*, with no fundamental difference between the two. And, this *knowing*, again, is to be understood in the earlier sense as the one that reveals conscious experiences to their respective subjects. So, to explain it simply, the existence of consciousness is such that it exists precisely by or in terms of *knowing itself*. It *exists* as it *knows itself* and vice versa.

This, then, advances two significant implications, of which one is slightly more controversial, albeit not when properly understood. One implication is that consciousness is the knower (subject), the one which knows, and which is quite obvious and hence not controversial, and the other is that consciousness itself is the known (object). This latter one is deemed *prima facie* controversial vis-à-vis its counterpart, that is, the former one, owing to the general consideration that the subject that knows cannot be the object at the same time in that very act of knowing. However, the antidote to this confusion lies in the very ontology of consciousness itself. Consciousness definitely does know itself, but it knows itself not as its object (Sartre, 2003) but simply by reflecting on itself as the *knowing subject*, in its *absolute inwardness* (Sartre, 2003). The confusion arises, rather, due to our conceptual limitation that prevents us from conceiving epistemic relations without thinking of them in terms of the duality of the subject and the object.

This (pure self-) *reflectivity* or *immanence/inwardness* then contributes as much to as they derive from the distinct ontology of consciousness. They render consciousness its *pure(st)* form as (a) *phenomenon* (Sartre, 2003) in which there is no ontological difference/gap between appearance and reality (Sartre, 2003; Searle, 1997). This no *is/seems gap* (Strawson, 2012) is one of the fundamental marks of the ontology of consciousness.

However, the *immanent* nature of the *reflectivity* involved in its *knowing–(being conscious of)–itself*, what is deemed as a distinctive feature of

the ontology of consciousness, could be challenged by appealing to the fact that this Sartrean reflectivity (self-consciousness) of consciousness is ontologically dependent on its (consciousness) awareness of *transcendent object(s)* (Sartre, 2003). These are the objects that *transcend* the *very act* of awareness/knowledge, that is, *being conscious*, in the sense of being outside of it. The gist of this objection is that if the immanence of consciousness depends on and, therefore, is considered to be brought from outside of it (transcendent/intentional objects), then it is never a real immanence, a pure one. And if it is not immanence in the strictest sense, then the distinct nature of the ontology of consciousness cannot be preserved.

But, does consciousness being self-conscious (not to be confused with the awareness of one's own *self* as a distinct person, or one's *personhood*, but simply consciousness' awareness of *itself* as consciousness), in and only through or via the awareness of transcendent objects, really pose any serious threat to the purity of the immanence of consciousness, and thereby to its distinct ontology? There is no doubt that consciousness is ordinarily (regarded to be) *consciousness of* its objects (i.e., transcendent objects). It is determined by its very *law of existence* (Sartre, 2003). These objects are *posited* (Sartre, 2003) by consciousness, and thereby, they become *the objects* as distinct from the *subject*, that is, the consciousness that *posits* them. These objects reside outside of consciousness. So, the very fact that the objects not being the subjects and residing *outside* of it is the ultimate and most prominent *evidence* of there being a domain of *pure immanence* (of consciousness) that is untouched and unaffected by anything whatsoever that is outside of it. Had that not been the case, then there would have remained no discernible differences between the subject and the object or any such distinction. So, the above consideration poses no threat to the purity of consciousness' immanence and, hence, neither to its distinct ontology.

So, the essence of the ontology of consciousness is that it exists as or in its *pure immanence* in which there is no gap between the knower and the known as much as between the knower and the knowledge. This, in turn, guarantees an extraordinary *immediacy* or a direct awareness (with regard to its epistemic content) to the knowledge under consideration as, in principle, this knowledge remains no different from the known (or even the knower).

So, coming back to the discussion on the *nature* of the knowledge under consideration, that is, the knowledge that provides us access to conscious experiences and thereby to consciousness, in terms of an analysis of *how it operates* and *what it knows*, as promised before, it can be said that it operates

as an *immediate*, direct *presentation* (as contrasted with *re*-presentation, which is mediate in nature), precisely because whatever it knows is nothing but *itself*. And that answers the second question. Both this immediacy and ‘consciousness itself being the content of this (its) knowledge’ are as much a direct entailment of the ontology of consciousness as they entail it back.

In short, a close analysis of our knowing of consciousness vis-à-vis the ontology of consciousness or vice versa helped us realize how (i) the introspective knowledge of conscious experiences or SIK, (ii) the way this knowledge functions/operates, and (iii) the very structure of the existence of consciousness are intimately connected to each other, so and so much that their necessary-sufficient functional amalgamation forms the very *core* of the ontology of consciousness.

As we can see that there is no ontological difference between this *knowledge* and *consciousness as a phenomenon*, or in other words, since they are *ontologically inseparable*, hence the questions and concerns about the ontology of consciousness, that is, its existence, become as much an issue of/for this knowledge as they are of/for consciousness. In fact, because of this relational dynamics between the mentioned two, as per the ontology of consciousness, the phenomenon of consciousness itself becomes essentially equivalent to this knowledge, which, in turn, turns it into an essentially epistemic phenomenon/entity and, correspondingly, its ontology into an epistemic ontology. In this sense, this knowledge of consciousness becomes as *integral* in matters pertaining to consciousness as consciousness itself. Hence, it necessarily implies that in no account of consciousness can this knowledge, the very *knowing* that not only primarily reveals conscious experiences to their respective subjects but renders it its fundamental existence, be undermined or overlooked. This very knowing/knowledge is constitutive of consciousness in its most fundamental form of existence and, therefore, can be regarded to be ontologically equivalent to the phenomenon of consciousness itself.

This specific knowledge is equipped with what can be called ‘*epistemic immunity*’ against something that can be termed as a ‘*skeptical gap*’. The skeptical gap arises when there is an ontological distance between the knower/knowledge and the known/knowable/content of the knowledge. As clarified earlier, there is no such gap when it comes to (self-knowledge of) consciousness. In effect, this knowledge enjoys absolute epistemic immunity. The absence of the skeptical gap and the (presence of) epistemic immunity go hand in hand, and this *complementary duo* is the mark of a *pure epistemic entity*, which consciousness is. This point, however, does not promote any

general skepticism about ordinary knowledge though. Other than a few drawbacks that may stem from perceptual inaccuracies (in perceptual epistemic cases) or other relevant anomalies (e.g., lack of conceptual clarity, lack of relevant information, being misinformed, etc.), ordinary knowledge (i.e., any knowledge other than our introspective knowledge of consciousness or SIK) is quite effective in helping us grasp the world out there. The emphasis is rather simply on the point that, in other (forms of) knowledge, despite the guarantee of epistemic access (to relevant knowable entities), the skeptical gap is there, or that there is an ontological distance between knowledge and the knowable content. Since, in such cases, it is not our *epistemic exercise* that renders the objects of such knowledge their basic existence, they exist regardless. There is no ontological intimacy between the knower and the known (and also the knowledge) in such cases.

In this connection, it is important to mention that there are philosophical theses that consider SIK to be evidential or to have substantial justification or justificative capacity or potency. For example, Duncan (2023) talks about the self-justificative nature of consciousness' self-knowledge in terms of *direct-from-the-source evidence* (Duncan, 2023), which he considers being evidential in its very own right and that too in quite an *especially powerful* (Duncan, 2023) manner. However, this is debatable, and this paper does not aim to discuss this issue in detail.

### **The *epistemic ontology* of consciousness**

So, it becomes clear that consciousness is essentially a pure epistemic entity whose existence is warranted, or even better, constituted by its *self-knowledge*. This, then, further specifies the nature of its ontology, needless to say, as an epistemological or epistemic one, as mentioned earlier. When this is understood properly, then it takes us no time to grasp the fact that this knowledge is the same as conscious *awareness* or *experience* with no fundamental difference. To *know* (in the specified sense that enables us access to conscious experiences), to be *aware*, to be *conscious*, to *experience* are all just the same; so far, it is consciousness as we directly encounter in our immediate awareness is the content of the knowledge. This is the reason why we see a parallel between *defining* consciousness in terms of *awareness* (Searle, 1997) and *being experienced* (Flanagan, 1992).

This knowledge or knowing, that is, consciousness itself with its distinct ontology, is the *data* (Chalmers, 1996; Searle, 1997; Goff, 2019) we have. The fact that other than this knowledge, the data are *difficult to find* (Chalmers,

1996) and (hence) such data is required in order to *validate* (Bayne, 2022) the third-person methods, shows that there is an undeniable *epistemic constraint* over accessing consciousness in its most fundamental form, and that in turn proves it to be the *only real data* pertaining to consciousness that we have. Hence, this data cannot be denied. This knowledge is the data, but at the same time, its *source*, and the *means* too, by which it is arrived at. And this union of the triad also highlights the distinctness of consciousness' ontology, reflects its epistemic nature, and calls for its special treatment.

This knowledge, being essentially the same as consciousness itself, is the most fundamental of all, insofar as against the backdrop of this knowledge, the possibility of all the other (forms of) knowledge(s), including scientific ones, are realized. That is to say, if there is no consciousness, there is no knowledge, and on the other hand, if there is no self-knowledge of consciousness being the *subject* or *subjectivity* (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2007) that knows, that is, precisely of itself, then there is no consciousness.

### **Epistemic gap: further advancements**

As discussed in the previous sections, due to its coming to its fundamental form of existence via our knowing of it, or in other words, its fundamental existence being constituted by such knowledge, then it turns out to be an epistemic ontological entity, and which, in the course of further analysis, is discovered as being a *pure* epistemic entity, due to the distinct nature of the ontology of consciousness. It is because of this pure epistemic ontology of consciousness that we can claim to have an epistemic upper hand over (knowing) consciousness. That is to say, we, as conscious subjects, can be said to have some sort of *epistemic authority* beyond doubt with regard to knowing our own conscious experiences. For example, our doctors cannot access<sup>1</sup> The pain (a conscious experience) that each of us individually has (or knows) the way we do, and hence, they have to rely on our knowledge of our respective conscious experiences, be it pain or other sorts, communicated via our

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1. There is no outright denial, however, of the fact that doctors, or say for that matter, anyone whosoever can know or access the relevant correlates, both overt and covert, of our direct introspective knowledge of our consciousness (whether its content is pain or any other conscious experience) with the aid of relevant apparatus. However, the point is that such knowledge has a fundamentally different mode of presentation as compared with the SIK. The characteristic immediacy and directness of SIK, which makes one's knowledge of their respective consciousness exclusively their own or subjective, cannot be said to be characteristic of the mere disengaged (in the subjective epistemic sense) knowledge of correlates.

verbal reports, and this is evident of our epistemic authority/privilege over (accessing) our conscious experiences. It is definitely true that the exact way we introspectively know our conscious experiences in our direct awareness of them cannot be accurately or adequately translated in any verbal descriptions or via any other means. It is because of the fundamental fault line between experience and description. These two are fundamentally different from one another. Where experience is more direct and immediate, descriptions are (lingually) mediated. Having an experience and transacting (receiving or sharing) descriptions are not one and the same thing. The epistemological peculiarities involved in the processes of experiencing and one of transacting descriptions are so unlikely of each other. Now, so far as our knowledge of our respective conscious states is concerned, it presents itself as direct experience and not as descriptions of any sort. However, it does not imply the impossibility of the communication of our conscious experiences. We can definitely talk about them in ways that can quite serve our practical purposes. But, all that is emphasized here is the point that there is an epistemic constraint over accessing consciousness in its most fundamental form. That is to say that it cannot be found at all, or at least, with *adequate certainty* anywhere else but in our awareness, in our immediate knowing. In other words, it can be grasped and known in its most basic form only via SIK and in no other way.

So, on the one hand, the only way we *certainly* know about consciousness or the way we know consciousness in its *most fundamental form* is through SIK, but, on the other hand, objective scientific *knowledge* (there is no final one as it gets regularly revised in the light of latest research findings, however, it has enough substantial basis to advance possible knowledge claims on the basis of and a fundamental physicalistic framework to follow) associates or identifies consciousness *entirely* with its (consciousness) supposed *neural vehicle* and their distinct neural nature that is expected to yield consciousness through their systematic agitations; or with the *functional dynamics* (regardless of the base matter/material), that is expected to *realize* consciousness. The scientific expositions of consciousness may come in different forms and varieties, each varying from the other; however, what combines them all and collectively sets them apart from our direct epistemic engagement- via SIK with consciousness is the directness or immediacy that is quintessentially characteristic of SIK.

Our knowledge of our conscious experiences has its own peculiar presentation of consciousness.

To explain, we know consciousness for sure, but then we do not know it

either as its neural foundation or even as its functional realization. This then creates a gap; a gap between how we *directly know* (via SIK) our consciousness to be and how it is *described* (to be) in scientific knowledge. And, so far as consciousness is claimed to be *explained* in terms of such neural or functional correspondences, this gap between our ways of knowing consciousness and the scientific exposition of consciousness in neural or functional terms could be called the *explanatory gap*, that is the gap between the explanandum, that is, consciousness as we know it via SIK, and the explanans, for example, neural basis or the correlated functional processing.

This explanatory gap then exerts *resistance* to the *firm and final* establishment of the scientific expositions of consciousness with regard to the determination of its metaphysical nature (duly explicated in neural or functional terms). But how? It is that the explanatory gap objection may suggest that there is a *metaphysical gap* between how we know consciousness to be in our awareness and how it is explained to be. This kind of *gap objection* develops its argumentative grounds in terms of an idea of *metaphysical identity* where the explanandum and the explanan(s) are considered to be one and the same thing based on *Leibniz's law* (Churchland, 1988). If they are one and the same thing, and which is always understood numerically or as numerical identity, that is, despite the seeming differences, the entities/objects under consideration are one thing, then all their properties are also expected to be just the same, not only qualitatively but *numerically* too. That is to say, each of the properties that the relevant relata must share with each other owing to their relation of identity must be *nature-wise* just the same, and the total number of properties that each of them has must be the same as the number of properties in the other relatum. This, then, can put forth an objection like, as Churchland (1988) observed, that why, despite (i) our introspective knowing of consciousness and (ii) consciousness understood in neural or functional terms, being metaphysically one and the same thing, differ qualitatively, or in terms of their properties. While the former has the quality of being *introspectively accessible*, the latter does not seem to have any such quality. So, correspondingly, there is also a numerical difference between the two insofar as the former has a property, while the latter lacks it.

The argumentative strength of this metaphysically characterized explanatory gap objection seems quite powerful insofar as it effectively demonstrates that there is a *seeming gap* between the explanandum and the explanan(s), which in turn resists (establishing) the purported identity between the relata. However, its strength can be considerably attenuated (to the extent

of abandoning it altogether) simply by anchoring the discussion on the explanatory gap in the question of what guarantees that the way an object or entity is *known* (to be), it *actually* is *so*. In *knowing*, there might be mistakes ingrained due to several factors that could prevent us from knowing the objects the way they *actually* are. For example, some of us may not know that the plant/tree leaves are the power plant of vegetation that produce glucosic energy through photosynthesis. However, this lack of knowledge does not alter or in any way affect the objective and experimentally proven fact, that is, the reality that they are *so*. Considering this point and the example being shared, it seems quite difficult to conceive whether anything at all guarantees us that our *knowledge of things* accurately captures the *things-themselves* or to hold the conviction that *how we know things is what they are*. As Levine (1994) noted, the former is *matter(s) epistemological*, and the latter is *matter(s) metaphysical*. And these (i.e., epistemological and metaphysical matters) are fundamentally different from one another. The former concerns knowledge of things and the latter concerns the existence of things. To explain further, epistemology signifies our acknowledgment of things' existence (regardless of the nature of their existence) via our knowledge or epistemic exercise while on the other hand, metaphysics signifies how things actually exist irrespective of the epistemic acknowledgment of their existence. Correspondingly, against the explanatory gap argument as we have come across so far, it could be said that there is no reason for one to conclude its (consciousness) metaphysical nature, that is, how it actually exists, on the basis of how and what one knows it to be via their introspective *knowledge*, which due to the fundamental gap between epistemology and metaphysics, remains fundamentally *distanced* from what the relevant metaphysics is. To explain further, an argument of this sort says that insofar as the metaphysics of consciousness, that is, how it actually exists, is concerned, none of the peculiarities that are claimed to be picked out via the SIK (of consciousness), and subsequently associated with the phenomenon of consciousness, are part of it (in other words, its metaphysics), but are mere matters of how one merely knows it to exist, or matters of its mere epistemic apprehension. Correspondingly, there cannot be claimed to be any *metaphysical gap* between the *object explained*, and the *object known*. In a slightly different way, it could also be said that there is no reason to claim a *metaphysical identity* between how it metaphysically is and how it is epistemologically considered to be in subjective awareness. All these objections aim to establish the point that there is no metaphysical or metaphysically relevant explanatory gap.

So, considering the objections stated above, it is established that there is no metaphysical explanatory gap or that the possibility of there being any such gap is quite weak. What then? Is it the end of the debate? The objection against the metaphysical explanatory gap seems quite convincing. However, it is precisely due to *knowing* consciousness in a peculiar way via SIK that we know nothing else as, what creates the explanatory gap. Thinking this way, the problem of the explanatory gap with regard to consciousness, rather than being a metaphysical issue in the strictest sense, turns out to be more of an issue to do with how we encounter it in our awareness or subjective knowledge, and hence *epistemological*. It is in this sense that however way we happen to introspectively *know* our consciousness in our awareness, and whatever it is that we come to know of it thereby, does not coincide with the *supposed* metaphysics of consciousness, which is spelled out in terms of neural basis or functional realization, and that in turn creates an explanatory gap. Grounded in this particular conviction, Levine (1983) develops an *epistemic explanatory gap* argument. Unlike its metaphysical counterpart, the epistemic one limits itself to making only epistemic claims based on our direct awareness of consciousness. The argument could be simply summed up by the question of why, despite consciousness being metaphysically such and such, it seems to be quite different when it is *known* via SIK. Unlike the metaphysical version, this epistemic one quite cautiously avoids making any comment on the metaphysics of consciousness but simply wants to know why our conscious awareness (knowledge) represents nothing of its metaphysics or why consciousness reveals itself (via SIK) to its subjects or to itself in a way, which does not (and is possibly never likely to) coincide with its metaphysics. In a different way, it could also be asked that if there is no metaphysical gap here, then why does there seem to be one insofar as our epistemology goes? Indeed, that is a problem that is there and which, in turn, retains an explanatory gap in the context.

This epistemic gap could also be explicated in terms of what Chalmers (1996) calls *epistemic asymmetry*. As mentioned earlier, this gap problem, as revised, is of an epistemological nature since it stems from our peculiar introspective *knowledge* of our conscious experience that resists any sort of identification of consciousness with anything whatsoever, of which we do not seem to have any knowledge that is as direct as our introspective knowledge of consciousness. The epistemic asymmetry is then this *realization*, the hunch (nonetheless, intuitively and discursively well grounded) that with nothing whatsoever, whose knowledge is not as direct and immediate as our subjective

knowledge of consciousness, can the phenomenon of consciousness as we *know* it (via SIK), be identified or be held identical to. This asymmetry is such that it prevents equating *knowing consciousness* with *knowing anything else* whatsoever, and this, in turn, creates the explanatory gap. This gap is the same as the *skeptical gap*, as we mentioned and discussed in detail in the previous section. This asymmetry is not present in any other knowledge containing whatsoever identity statements (that something is something) but in any knowledge statement pertaining to consciousness that explains or identifies it (consciousness) to be anything else of which we do not seem to have any knowledge that is as direct as SIK.

Knowledge of other things or other knowledge(s), as contrasted with SIK, are *propositional* in nature as characterized by their subject-object structure, that is, the structure that '*x is y*'. Knowing (anything) propositionally, in turn, could be understood as knowing (certain) *identities* insofar as through such knowledge, we know '*something to be something*'. The identity under consideration could be of any kind. Let us, for example, consider *semantic identity*, that is, identity in terms of meaning or, more precisely, in terms of having the *same meaning*. Like 'perhaps' and 'maybe' are two different words, as they are spelled out with different juxtapositions of different letters, or they sound different when uttered. But, insofar as both embody the (same) meaning of a sense of uncertainty or faint possibility, they are *semantically identical*. And now, if somebody who knows the meaning of either of them without knowing the meaning of the other, and if that person in any instance comes to know (in the relevant sense) that '*perhaps is maybe*', or vice versa, what they come to know, in essence, is the *identity* between the two. The same holds for any propositional knowledge.

Now, the epistemic asymmetry, as mentioned before, is claimed not to be there in the *other knowledge(s)* insofar as they contain only *other-theoretical identities* as contrasted with *psycho-physical identities*. The distinction between these two sorts of identities was observed by Levine (1983). The psycho-physical identity essentially means any identification of consciousness as we know it via SIK with whatsoever (but physical, and hence the latter part of the name of this identity) of which we do not have any direct or immediate knowledge akin to SIK. On the other hand, any other identity statement, where the knowledge of both the relata is equally indirect to us, is understood as other theoretical identities. There is an epistemic asymmetry in knowledge statements containing psycho-physical identity as they are characterized by *felt contingency* (Levine, 1983), that is, the fact that the *truth* that such statements

intend to capture and convey always *seems* to be *possibly false*. In his later scholarship on the same issue, Levine (2001) makes a similar distinction between *gappy identity* and *pure identity*. The former is comparable to psycho-physical identity, while the latter to other-theoretical identities. As Levine (2001) explains, while the pure identities seem to require no further explanation, the gappy identity makes intelligible requests for further explanation (owing to their felt contingency, as mentioned in the context of psycho-physical identity). Now, the explanatory gap argument, reformulated in its epistemological or epistemic style, is established. And compared to its metaphysical counterpart, it stands on a much firmer ground. We can call this explanatory gap argument simply as the *epistemic gap* argument.

### **Strengthening the gap argument(s)**

Irrespective of their different presentations that come with their different implications with varying philosophical weights, what is crucially integral in the articulation of both, is SIK. The metaphysical gap argument is called so since it can be said to be both (i) based on, as well as (ii) advancing a *metaphysical* conviction or thesis (respectively) that SIK has direct access to the metaphysics of consciousness (i.e., how it actually exists), and it reveals nothing about the supposed neural or functional *metaphysical counterparts* of consciousness, and correspondingly, there is claimed to be a metaphysical gap between consciousness and its supposed neural or functional metaphysical bases. So, it is quite apparent that SIK is crucially instrumental to the formulation of the metaphysical explanatory gap argument and, as already mentioned, owing to its advancement of a metaphysical consideration/conclusion about consciousness, it is called a ‘metaphysical’ gap argument. The problem with this argument or thesis, however, is that SIK, being a knowledge, delivers only epistemological apprehensions, and so long as there is a fundamental chasm between epistemological apprehension and metaphysical existence of things (including consciousness, which is the matter of concern here), it does not allow to derive metaphysical considerations/conclusions from epistemological apprehensions. Precisely at this juncture, Levine (1983) articulates his epistemological/epistemic explanatory gap argument to highlight the point that, although there can be philosophical problems with or resistance to claiming there being a metaphysical gap or advancing a metaphysical explanatory gap argument based on SIK, there is definitely an epistemological explanatory gap between the relevant relata insofar as there is a noticeable difference or fundamental

gap between knowing consciousness via SIK and knowing it as its supposed neural correlates or functional realization in whatever ways they allow to be known.

Now, even though the epistemological explanatory gap argument quite coherently, and logically presents the explanatory gap argument in its essence, without involving any philosophically gross controversy, and it effectively demonstrates the relevant gap still being considerably there, still owing to its epistemological origin and philosophically well-grounded and widely acknowledged fundamental chasm between epistemology and metaphysics, it is acknowledged as a mere *conceptual gap* with no philosophically important bearing upon the metaphysical existence of the phenomenon of consciousness. So, even the epistemological makeover of the explanatory gap argument can be seen to pose no real threat to the proposed metaphysical identity between consciousness and its purported neural/functional counterpart, whereby a fundamental explanatory gap could be said to be there for our serious philosophical consideration vis-à-vis our understanding of consciousness. An explanatory gap is definitely there so far as our epistemological apprehension is concerned, but so far as the relevant metaphysics of consciousness is concerned, such a gap is irrelevant and not worthy of any metaphysical consideration. This is a typical type-B materialist strategy, as Chalmers (2006) observes, which acknowledges the epistemic gap but considers it to be no real threat to the *ontological monism* involving consciousness and its purported neural/functional counterpart that the physicalist metaphysics of consciousness proposes and defends. Correspondingly, there cannot be said to be any real explanatory gap. In this connection, it is important to mention that unlike type-B materialism, which acknowledges (at least) an epistemic gap, type-A materialism (see Chalmers, 2010) does not acknowledge anything as such. For type-A materialism, there is no explanatory gap as such, let alone an epistemic kind. Type-A materialism engenders and endorses a very particular understanding of consciousness that is spelled out in exclusively *functional and behavioral* (Chalmers, 2010) terms. And any understanding of it beyond such characterization is rather eliminated, including the one we have based on our access to our own consciousness via SIK.

The upshot, then, is that even after the epistemic makeover, the explanatory gap argument is unable to make a philosophically more vital point with which it can exert an inexorable attack against the proposed physicalist metaphysics of consciousness. It seems to remain equally innocuous as its metaphysical predecessor. Now, precisely at this point, the epistemic ontology of

consciousness could revive the epistemic explanatory gap argument quite vivaciously. However, it is not in this sense that in order for the epistemic explanatory gap argument to be stronger, it has to be coupled with the epistemic ontology of consciousness in any artificial and, therefore, questionable manner, but that a much stronger epistemic gap argument comes as a direct entailment of the epistemic ontology of consciousness. Let us now see how exactly a much stronger epistemic gap argument comes from the epistemic ontology of consciousness. The epistemic ontology of consciousness is simply the fact that so far as the fundamental ontological existence of consciousness is concerned, it exists as an epistemic entity or knowledge. It is in the sense that its most basic form of existence is constituted by knowledge. This knowledge, again, is its self-knowledge, a.k.a. SIK. It is a knowledge that knows itself as knowledge, and thereby, it exists. This knowledge then seems ontologically equivalent to or the same as or inseparable from the phenomenon of consciousness. That is to say, the kind of ontological monism that the physicalist metaphysics of consciousness claims to hold between consciousness and its relevant physical counterpart can actually be said to hold between this knowledge and the phenomenon of consciousness. Now, if so, then there cannot be any metaphysical or ontological gap or distance between this knowing/knowledge and the phenomenon of consciousness, which can question the tenability of the deduction of metaphysical facts about consciousness from its epistemological apprehension as done via SIK. There is no denial, however, of this knowing/knowledge being essentially an epistemic apprehension only, but that the very epistemic ontology of consciousness warrants that in consciousness, its (consciousness) knowledge (in the specified sense as mentioned throughout) is its existence, or that there the epistemology constitutes the metaphysics. Consequently, the epistemic explanatory gap argument can no longer be claimed to be only a matter of epistemic apprehension with no considerable bearing upon consciousness' metaphysics. This, then, culminates into a strong argument against the type-B materialist response to explanatory gap conviction.

Furthermore, the conjugation of epistemology and metaphysics within the peculiar dynamics of consciousness' epistemic ontology suggests that there is no additional or separate need to give an epistemic makeover to the metaphysically presented explanatory gap argument since the distinction between epistemology and metaphysics does not hold there (i.e., the ontology of consciousness). This, then, besides critically responding to type-B materialism, constructs an argument against type-A materialism too, firstly, in

terms of demonstrating how this epistemically apprehended gap carries a hefty metaphysical implication with regard to consciousness, and secondly, insofar as it implies that SIK being consciousness' ontological essence is a credible source of materials to form an *ineliminable* (cf. eliminating as per eliminativism) understanding of consciousness. SIK, in the light of the epistemic ontology of consciousness, is no longer a peculiar epistemological spinoff of the phenomenon of consciousness but its very *raison d'être*.

On a tangent, keeping aside the discussion on the requirement of the epistemic makeover of the explanatory gap argument, which is anyway irrelevant as explained above, there could be legitimate questions against the proposed physicalist metaphysics of consciousness. It is that the physicalist metaphysics, which claims the relevant neural correlates or functional realization to be the metaphysical equivalent of consciousness, is advanced on the basis of some sort of knowledge or the other. Such knowledge may be different from SIK in terms of its nature, but it is knowledge nonetheless. But, insofar as it operates on some epistemic (i.e., knowledge) basis, then should not a similar argument be mounted against this undertaking as well based on the fundamental chasm between metaphysics and epistemology? Besides that, considering the notion of metaphysics that signifies *things-in-themselves* or *in-and-of-itself*, that which is beyond our knowledge, and considering the nature of our access to everything being essentially epistemic in nature, it could also be questioned, then, whether metaphysics of anything whatsoever, let alone of consciousness can ever be revealed to us. Also, if there is anything to be called 'metaphysics' as such, could also be questioned, insofar as all that we have in the name of metaphysics is something that we *know* (to be metaphysics), and hence, it too turns out to be a notion that is essentially epistemic. Now, if so, then the very distinction between epistemology and metaphysics can no longer be said to hold in any relevant sense. Correspondingly, it appears to be utterly meaningless to deny epistemology the capacity to conclude any conclusion about metaphysics.

Now, despite everything being said and shown with evidence, there could still be a rather farfetched, hyperbolic skepticism about this very knowing, that is, SIK, that expresses unnecessary concerns about its viability. But doing that would be to deny something that is obviously the case, something that is the primary point of identifying consciousness in its most fundamental form, without which there is no consciousness at all in the first place. An epistemic understanding of consciousness secures it on a much firmer foundation of SIK, which could barely be considered controversial. There can hardly be

any disagreement on the fact that we know our consciousness. And this avoids something that Flanagan (1992) calls *mysterianism*, which is, to explain simply, the position that mystifies the phenomenon of consciousness by suggesting that there is something mysterious about it. There is no mystery, nothing mysterious about the fact that we know our consciousness. It is something that is obviously evident. This fact that we know our consciousness is a *Moorean fact*. A Moorean fact is, as Lewis (1999, p. 418) describes, “one of those things that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary.” No wonder, that the way we know our consciousness (and therefore we are so) is known in a much better and certain way than we could ever know anything whatsoever.

## **Conclusion**

Insofar as SIK, as discussed, constitutes the fundamental existence of consciousness, the phenomenon of consciousness is an epistemic entity/phenomenon. That is, the very ontology of consciousness is epistemological/epistemic. This then further suggests that in the context of consciousness’ ontology, there is no fundamental difference between epistemology and metaphysics as there the relevant knowledge constitutes its existence. This then strengthens the explanatory gap argument(s) to a much greater degree and blows an inexorable attack against the proposed physicalist metaphysics of consciousness. Furthermore, it is clarified that an explanatory gap argument is a necessary derivative of the acknowledgment of the epistemic ontology of consciousness and is not an artificial import with no logical grounds for it.

## **Conflict of Interests**

The author has no competing interests.

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