

The Puruṣārthic Principle:  
Nature and consciousness in  
physics and Sāṃkhya/Yoga.



Al Collins, Ph.D.

# The question behind this talk

## Are these two things related?

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- The “anthropic principle” in quantum physics – in some of its “strong” forms, at least – claims that to be made conscious (i.e., to *be observed*) is an aim of the physical process of the universe. **[so consciousness is for the sake of the world process.]**
- In the Indian philosophical schools of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, the principle of puruṣārtha asserts that consciousness (=pure awareness, puruṣa), is the aim (artha) of the psychophysical process of the universe. **[the world process is for the sake of consciousness.]**

# Anthropic ~ Puruṣārthic?

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- Can we find a valid “fusion of horizons” between the question of the *observer* in physics (which the world process needs) and the question of *witnessing consciousness* in Sāṃkhya/Yoga (which “needs” the world process)?

# Consciousness and the Self in Sāṃkhya/Yoga and Quantum Physics: seeking parallels and differences

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- In S/Y: We need to realize that we **are** self (puruṣa) and not the assertion of self (ahaṃkāra, asmitā), we are consciousness (cit) and not the **possesors of** consciousness—as our usual mode of life unconsciously asserts (avidyā).
- In physics, we need to understand the role of the mind in nature (the question of the observer); why does the world require consciousness for “something” to happen?

# The problem of the observer in quantum physics

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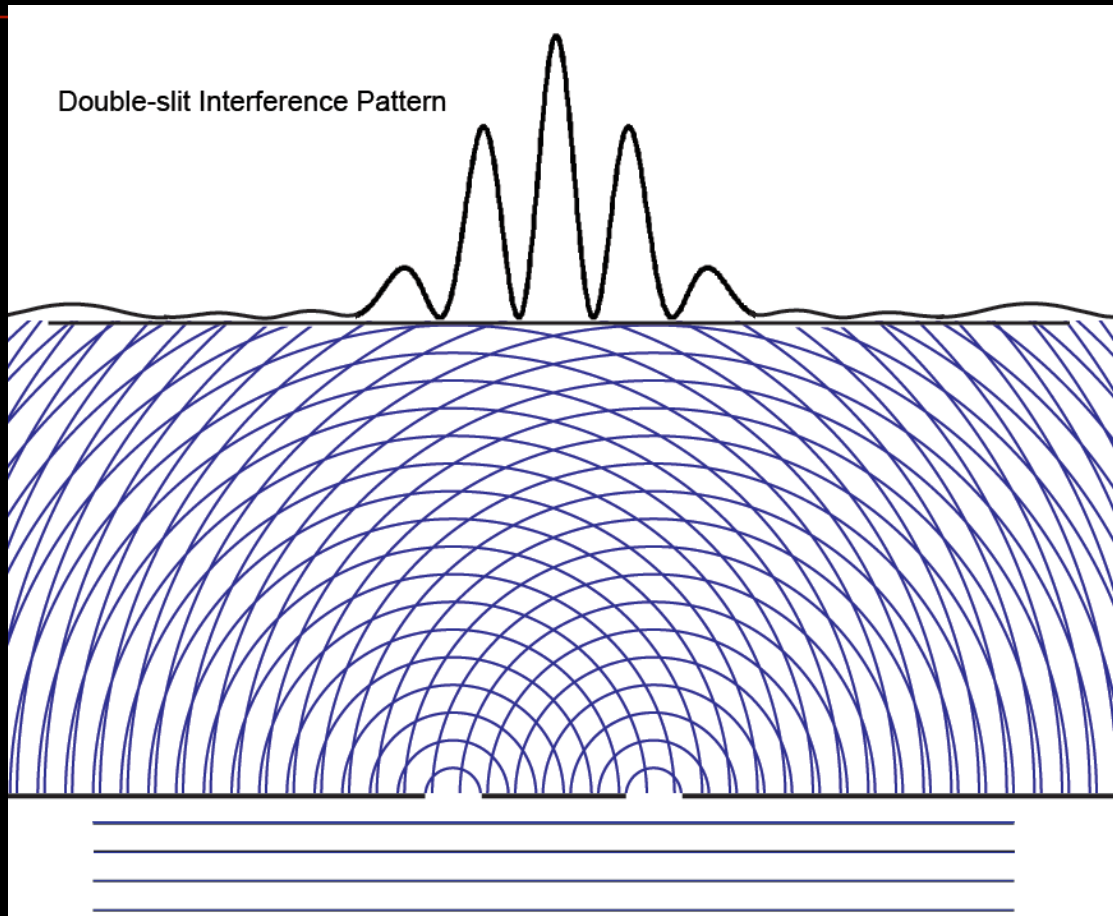
Without an observer, the particle/wave function propagates forever, probabilities of observations that never take place. (A “process” state of affairs?)

With an observer, there is an actual, specific event for the first time. The wave function “collapses.” It even appears that the observer and her event arise together at this moment. (Concretion, a “thing” state of affairs?)

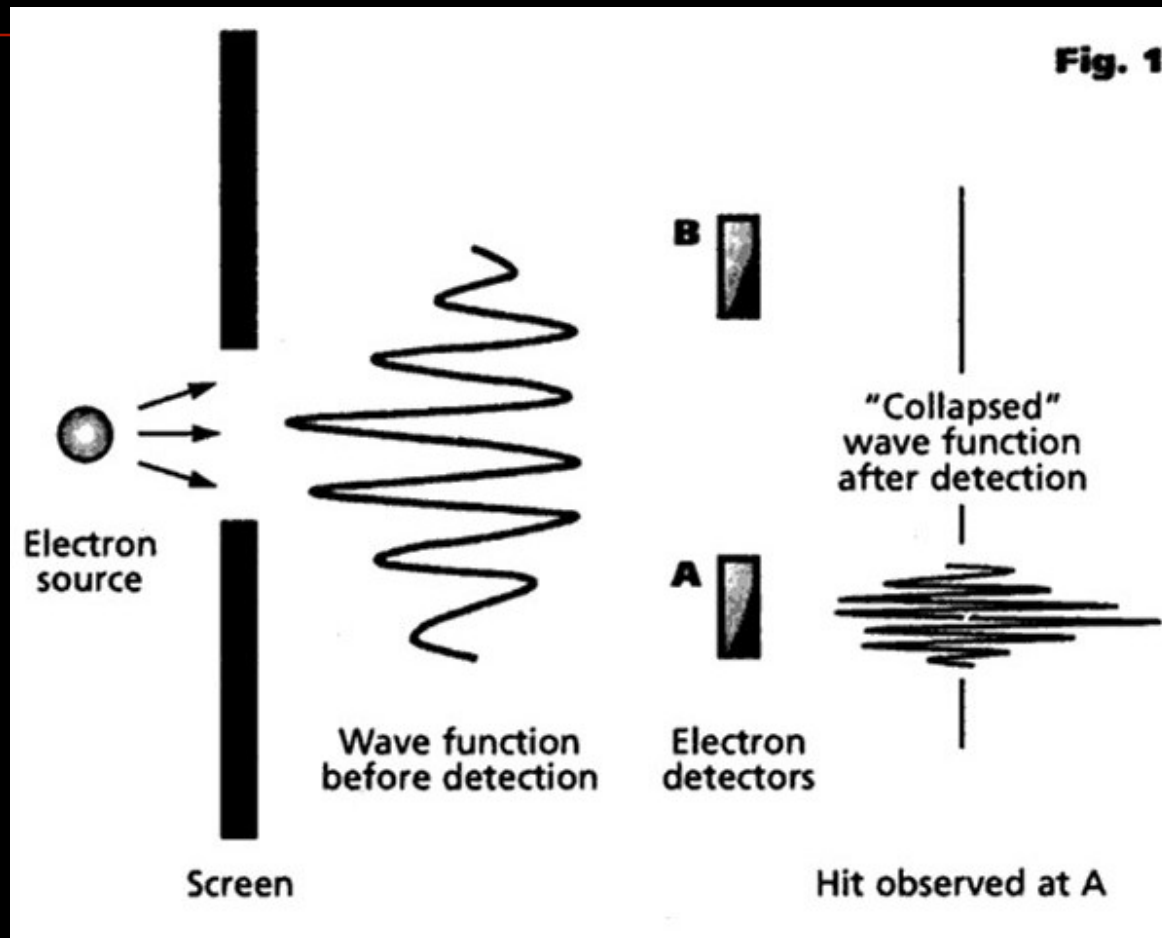
Perhaps it is Husserlian “intentionality,” ***awareness of***, that is critical here.

# No observer: probabilities only

The black curving line on top shows the probability of an electron being detected at each point.



# Observer: Quantum wave function collapse (the electron is actually detected)



detection =  
observation  
(electron in  
box A)

# Schrodinger's cat

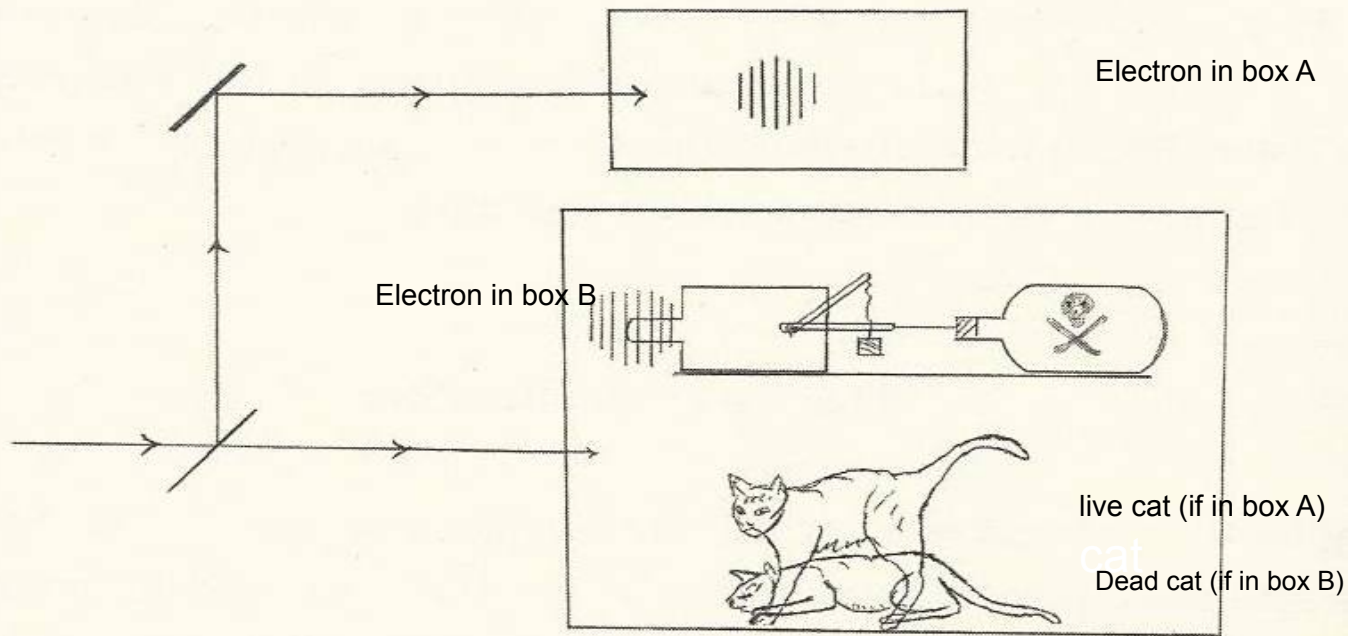


Figure 11.1 Schrödinger's cat



# Multiverse interpretation

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Each observation brings about a different world

Events bifurcate at every moment of observation

Both “A” and “B” happen, but in different universes

The cat is both alive and dead, in different worlds.

# Do things happen for the sake of the observer (who appears when they do)?

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- The moment of observation is the moment of bifurcation in the universe.
- Do things happen so that they can be observed, made conscious?
- Or do they happen so that there can be an observer?
- Combining these, do they happen so that intentionality can take place?

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- Take a moment  
to let the waves subside.

# The problem of the observer in Sāṃkhya and Yoga

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Actions (karma) flow out of an earlier state within which they are inherent (satkārya). Other terms: pariṇāma, pravṛtti. The flow is mostly downhill, a devolution, based on ignorance of our true self (avidyā) and proximally due to saṃskāras, vāsanās. [similar to Buddhist pratītya-samutpāda]

But, on the other hand, actions are performed only for the sake of an enjoyer (or seer), the real self, and for the sake of that enjoyer's emancipation from the world of suffering (bhukti/mukti). [Buddhist parallel: role of nirvana in world flow?]

# The actor in Sāṃkhya/Yoga (kartr̥) and the observer in quantum physics

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Very much the same.

The *actor* in S/Y also *observes* (jñānedriyas and karmendriyas are parts of the person = liṅgaśarīra).

And the *observer* in physics *acts* (sets up the experiment, reads off the results).

The person is organized around action and the fruits of action (perception), which cannot be separated.

# Ahaṁkāra (“utterance of ‘I’ !”)

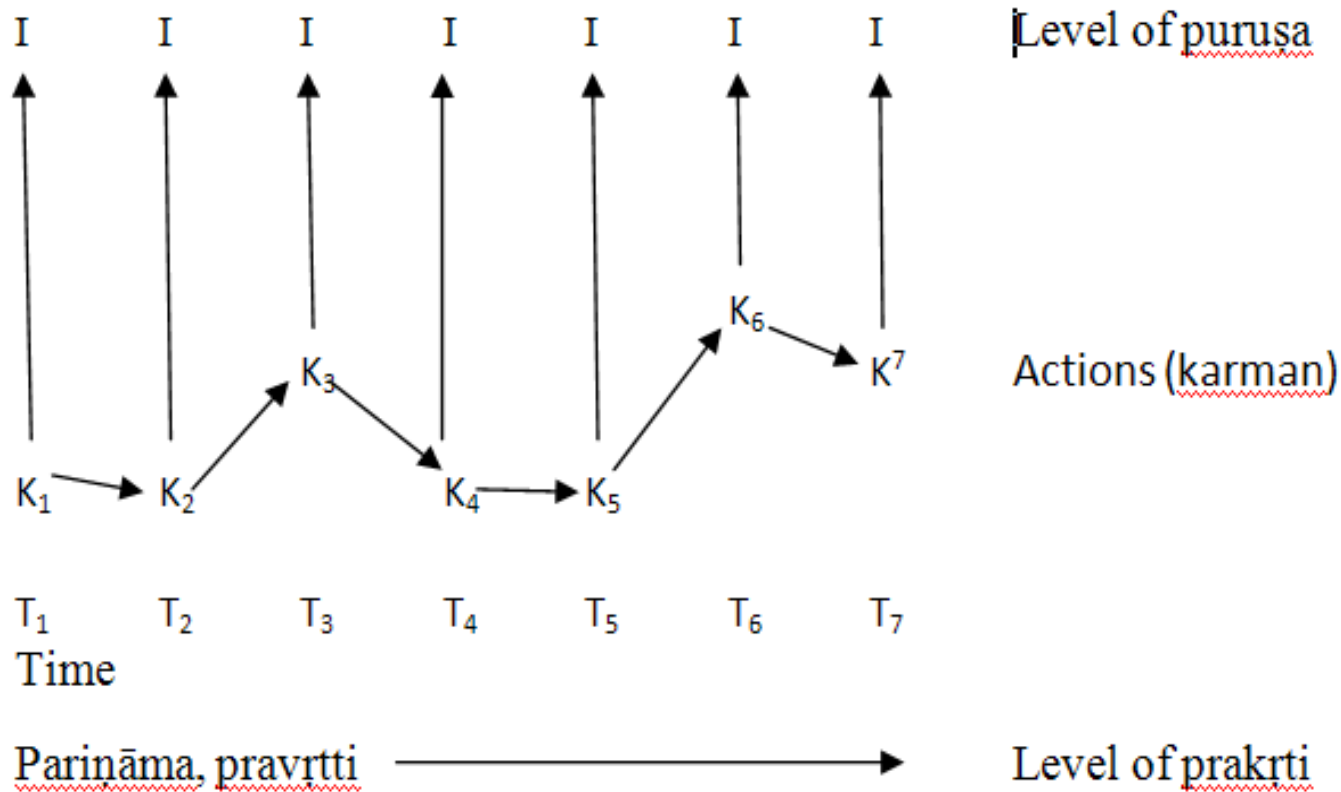
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- Taking consciousness (self) as an object “The self as seen” (Ian Whicher)
- Asserting “I am” (asmitā)
- Trying to establish a self in the objective world (the ego)
- and to create intentionality (“It’s about ‘x’ [and about me]”)
- Turning witness into observer
- Ahaṁkārartha (ahaṁkāra + artha)
- A case of consciousness for world (not converse)—like the anthropic principle

# Vishnu's māyā: seed of the “self as seen”



# Puruṣārtha and ahaṁkāārtha





# Sāṁkhya and bhakti

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The insight that puruṣa is referenced at every instant, at least implicitly, corresponds at the level of devotional religion (bhakti) to the rasa-līlā (love play) between Lord Kṛṣṇa and the cowgirls (gopīs) at Vṛṇḍavān shown in this very popular image.





# The last verse of the Yoga Sutra

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- puruṣārtha-śūnyānām guṇānām pratiprasavaḥ kaivalyam svarūpapraṭiṣṭhā vā citiśaktir (YS 4.34).
- “Identity (kaivalya) is the flowing backwards of the guṇas which have emptied themselves for the sake of the puruṣa. Kaivalya is also the power of consciousness in its innate reality.”
- Prakṛti “identitical” to puruṣa

# A new world

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- The way up achieved
- The way down commences
- The (an) origin of tantra

# The observer versus the Witness

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In quantum physics, the observer is needed to collapse the wave function and allow an event to occur. In the multiverse interpretation, this is the moment of “splitting” into many new worlds.

In Sāṃkhya/Yoga, focus on a Witness (puruṣa, sākṣin) makes it possible to prevent the further devolution (pariṇāma) into more ignorant, egoic states. (This is the function of yoga).

# The evolution of worlds and their resorption (or non-evolving)

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- Stephen Collins speculates on the question: if everybody achieved nirvāṇa, would the world come to an end?
- In Yoga, if all reached nirbīṇa (“seedless”) samādhi?
- In physics, if we stopped observing, ceased to collapse the wave function?
- Pratiprasava, “return to the beginning”

# A new take on science, a different kind of observation

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- A yoga of scientific observation
- Or observation as yoga
- A recognition that observation is (should be) puruṣārtha, “for the sake of pleasing and releasing consciousness”
- Not to gratify the scientist’s ahamkāra.