

# ***BEING***

*A Primer*

## ***Being: a primer***

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Also by Dan Bruiger:

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# Prologue: The Indescribable Weirdness of Being

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins.”—T.S. Eliot

Shortly before sunrise, you are driving west along a straight length of rural highway. There is little traffic. As the sky begins to lighten, you see the full moon, large and pale, sinking into low clouds over the distant treed hills ahead. Not only does the scene seem inordinately beautiful, but strangely eerie. You suddenly have the bizarre impression that you are driving toward the moon—on the solid surface of a planet in outer space—indeed, the sole one known to bear life! It seems odd that you even *exist*, that you can have this experience at all. It strikes you that you are a specimen of the only creature known to build and use machines and highways, here or anywhere. It seems remarkable that your civilization, with its cars and asphalt, is even possible, that it could arise in a universe that is mostly empty and was here long before anyone. You know that driving on lonely roads at night can be monotonous and hypnotizing, but in this moment you feel intensely awake and present. In one and the same instant you are acutely aware of your own peculiar existence and that of the strange world you are privileged to witness.

From the time I was eight years old I wanted to be an astronomer. While that never happened, my ongoing curiosity about the natural world was complemented by curiosity about the human presence that seeks to understand it. I discovered philosophy and art along with science. I was fortunate in my mid-twenties to encounter a

“Fourth-Way” teacher, just as I had been fortunate earlier to spend a year at the (then) Gestalt Institute of Canada. I was primed for both these experiences by curiosity and personal study. In other words, I was a young “seeker.” As the saying goes, *when the student is ready the teacher comes*. These two “boot camps” were formative in my life. The latter involved a lot of emotional exploration, while the former opened my eyes to objectivity as a personal as well as scientific ideal.

Despite the influence of these teachings and many other spiritual and philosophical investigations in the course of a long life, only recently did I come to the conclusion expressed in this book. Namely, to realize concretely for myself the profound difference between living from the outside in and from the inside out. As I now see it, that is the difference between ordinary consciousness and *self*-consciousness (by which I mean not social embarrassment but the awareness of being aware). Or, to put it in only slightly over-dramatic terms: the difference between sleep-walking and wakefulness. I grasped that a moral choice between these states lay before one at each moment. The difference is profound, yet also subtle, which makes the choice hard even to grasp. The chief difficulty is that the very existence of this choice is easily obscured by the busy flow of ordinary life. The normal outward focus of the mind, and the habit of inner talk, keep us fascinated as in a dream. One identifies with the characters and situations in the private drama of experience—all the while, as they say, glued to one’s seat.

This belated personal realization may have come through the despairs of old age, as the perennial show grows tiresome and less satisfying. Old pleasures disappear along with shrinking opportunities and capacities. What remains can seem bleak. I recognized,

under the depressive tone, a consumer attitude toward experience, which I felt as though it were a pressure coming from outside. I realized that this sense of oppression could only exist in relation to a passive stance. I decided to push back.

I have the advantage of being a single retired elder without dependents, living in a rural area in relative peace and quiet. Free from many conventional responsibilities and distractions, my time is my own. Even so, my default state remains—as it seems to for my fellows—the habit of *reacting* to experience far more than intentionally *using* it to guide action. I have the leisure to pursue inner agency, to struggle against the inertia of this default state. For many people who do not have this leisure, *work on self* may seem a luxury, if it is conceivable at all.

To live intentionally concerns the inner agency we know as free will. I don't mean just the philosophical question of whether our thoughts and acts are causally determined by physics and biology, but the more practical and intimate question of how one wills life to be. Are we along for the ride as passive consumers of experience or are we somehow in the driver's seat? It is less a philosophical question than a personal choice. If it's too late to rue the mistakes of a lifetime, can one at least recognize this actual choice in the present moment?

To paraphrase a famous philosopher, you are aware that you are reading this, therefore you *are*. Not only do you exist, but you are aware in this very moment that you exist. It is quite possible to read (as it is to engage in many other activities, such as driving) *without* bringing your own existence to mind. Most of so-called waking life passes that way. However, the sentences above happen to mention *you*, which draws attention to your sense of

personal presence. By this simple self-reference, you become *self-conscious*—not in the sense of social embarrassment, but just in being aware that you are aware right here and now.

Though usually taken for granted, that is a strange enough state. While we *know* that we exist, as a sort of background fact, it is not usually in the foreground of attention, just like we know that one day we will die but may not often dwell on it. Like the sudden thought of mortality, *self-remembering* adds a sort of depth to perception. In contrast to simply being aware of the world around you, you are acutely aware of your own existence. The state induced is like a hall of mirrors, with dizzying infinite reflections of reflections: you are aware that you are aware that you are aware...

We have no choice about coming into the world, to which we adapt through learning. A pattern is set for what I will call a *consumer attitude* toward experience. This attitude toward *experience* translates to the consumer *behavior* that is polluting and destroying the world. We *can*, however, have a more active and responsible relationship to our consciousness. We can choose how much or how little to deliberately take life in hand, intentionally *using* experience rather than simply being hypnotized by it, entertained by it, or driven by it. *Individually, we can choose how consciously to be.* The human species as a whole is faced with a similar choice. How well it can direct its destiny will depend on how consciously its individuals can embrace the tasks of living.

Normally, for good reasons, the *world* is the natural outward focus of attention. We are well aware of the existence of things and other people. Indeed, one is aware of one's body as a thing in the world, along with other



bodies. In addition, one may be aware of one's consciousness as something distinct from the body and from the presence of the world. This "self" seems to occupy or animate the body, is involved in managing its affairs, and can potentially direct its ongoing relationship to experience and its conduct in the world. This self and its body are intimately associated: until death do them part. The self can go along for the ride of a lifetime, but can also steer a course.

Hard times lie ahead for humanity. We seem to be at the close of a benign climatic age in terrestrial history, an ending in part brought about by our own rapid success as a species during a brief period of grace. Few people thought much about this until recently. After all, scientific knowledge of a cosmic past and future, and our place in it, began only a few centuries ago. Of course, people had (and still have) religious ideas about the origin and destiny of the world. Yet, while concerned with personal or spiritual salvation, theological ideas are not intended or equipped to save humanity on this planet. While religion has promoted greater moral awareness, and sometimes better behavior, it also sometimes obstructs the self-knowledge required for a deeper moral commitment, without which a species-level consciousness cannot emerge to guide our destiny. Simply embracing doctrines handed down by religious or political authorities leads at best to conventional thinking and habit, which resist change. At worst, it leads to fanaticism, which tears the world apart.

No doubt there has been a slow, if accelerating, evolution of human consciousness from the beginnings of our species. Yet, it has not reached the threshold needed to regulate human numbers and limit their catastrophic environmental effects, let alone to intelligently manage an

entire planet. Our house is in disorder. We have not reached escape velocity from the mindless compulsions and cupidity built into our biological nature and cultural conditionings. A primary obstacle has been the natural outward focus of mind that we (in the modern West, at least) naively associate with consciousness, which has yielded ever more knowledge of the external world but relatively little of the inner world. We are intelligent enough to create sophisticated things to possess, and foolish enough to desire them. What remains to achieve—for the individual and humanity at large—is a deeper consciousness capable of *self*-possession.

Socrates said “know thyself.” But how is that even possible, if that self (or mind) is not an *object* among others—like your physical body, for instance? We have honed sciences to better understand the nature of the external world. That sort of understanding can lead to abstract realms of thought far from daily concerns. Yet, it remains within the normal outward-directed and unselfconscious focus of mind. One is still dealing with the being of *things out there*, even if subtle ones, from which we seem to have a separate existence. The same is true of theological ideas, which focus on abstractions such as God, the soul, angels and demons. One way or another, we find ourselves in a familiar subject-object relationship with the world. Just as our physical eyes do not see themselves, even scientific and theological understandings are but views upon the external world, not upon the viewpoint from which one looks.

The existence of the world is amazing and weird enough, with all its bizarre and buzzing detail. Science attempts to explain the natural world’s complexities. It may even explain why there is a material universe at all, rather than

simply nothing. I doubt it will be able to do so, however, without fully considering the role of the knowing self in creating knowledge. Any fundamental physical theory will surely be highly abstruse, trading on subtleties in the precise meaning of concepts like ‘something’ and ‘nothing.’ It will hardly satisfy most people who are not mathematicians, and who may still be astonished that there is anything at all and even more that they exist to witness it.

This book begins with that astonishment and what it can unlock for those who feel it. After all, it is largely our habits and natural programming that spare us a confrontation with the double uncanniness underlying our experience: the strangeness of the natural world and the strangeness of consciousness plagued with self-reference. If you are squeamish about such confrontations, read no further. If you expect a scholarly exposition, don’t bother. But if you are the sort of person fascinated by the ineffable weirdness of being, I invite you to join me on this journey. The ideas recorded here reflect my own understanding, which I present in the spirit of suggestions for your consideration. When I seem to preach, I am preaching to myself. You are hardly obliged to agree with any of it. But do feel free to try on the shoe for fit.

Above all, I wish you success in your own quest to more fully *be*. More than scientific progress or religious faith, that sort of advance of consciousness may be what enables a future for humanity. Much is at stake.



# Chapter One: The Mystery of Existence

“What I cannot create I do not understand.”—Richard Feynman

**W**hy is there something rather than nothing? The question presupposes notions of ‘something’ and corresponding notions of ‘nothing.’ These notions reflect features of the existence we know—that is, the something that happens to exist, which includes us. We can only imagine non-existence in terms conceived in relation to the familiar realm of the existing things we know. In other words, we cannot get outside *being* to truly conceive its absence. Try, for example, to imagine nothingness. At the very least, there *you* are making the effort!

An important feature of the universe we know is summed in the troubled notion of causality. Through experience in the actual world, we expect events to be preceded by other events which “cause” or “determine” them. Temporally, at least, one thing *leads* to another. For manipulating nature, and ultimately for survival, it serves us to be able to identify the regular antecedents of events, and thereby to predict the future. In other words, cause is a notion we have invented for its utility. We can ask what led to something, and what led to that, in a backward regression. That works well enough except that there is no logical end to it. We can only halt the regression by proposing a beginning that has no antecedent, no cause. Yet, that is scarcely a coherent idea, given our actual experience in the world that exists. Assuming there was a beginning, what was there before it? What caused the event we call the beginning (for example, the Big Bang)?

The mystery is inseparable from our habits of thought, which are well adapted to existence but unsuited to contemplate non-existence.

The notion of causality is learned in early childhood. As babies, we learn that things seem to come and go from the field of view and that one thing can interact with another leading to changes (of position, for example). Yet the notion of a *power* of one thing to influence another surely refers to the early experience of being able to personally *make* things happen. There is the infant's miraculous discovery that a limb of the body can be willed to move; then, that this limb can make other things move. That is a direct experience of an agent's power over the material world, or at least over changes in the sensory fields that appear to result from action on the world. This personal sense of motor power is projected as the apparent ability of other, non-agential things to influence each other.

Physics elaborated this impersonal concept of causality to account for the dynamics of physical reality, which it conceived metaphorically as a machine. It could only do this by ignoring the personal and bodily origin of the concept. Trading on the dual meaning of the word *determine*, it imagined a determinism in which the past mechanically fixes the future, forgetting that the scientist "determines" what the facts of the world are—through acts of measurement, for example—and how they should be interpreted. That forgetfulness aligns with the mandate of the scientific enterprise to explore what nature is "in itself," paradoxically apart from human concepts such as causality or mechanism.

A causal chain must have a first link. A causal system (like a machine) is only coherent if it is well-defined and bounded, deferring the initial cause to something outside the defined system. That works when studying systems

that are relatively closed “for all practical purposes.” But, in truth, there are no absolutely closed systems in the natural world—except the universe as a whole, which is closed *by definition*. There is no metaphysical power of “necessity” behind causation in the natural world. Causality coincides with logical necessity only for machines, which are humanly defined. *Equations* are deterministic (and time-reversible) because they are true by definition. But nature is not an equation or description; it is not deterministic and it has its own existence apart from human definitions and descriptions.

Nevertheless, the structure of our thought demands a first cause, which must then be an agent outside the mechanistic world: *deus* literally *ex machina*! As proposed, human will is the basis of the notion of causation. God personifies the archetype of will or intention as the root concept underlying causality. As *agents* we too are intentional beings, like God, even though materially we are causal beings. The will of a notional God, who serves as first cause, can be seen as a projection of human will as the originator of action. In any case, a deity or other spiritual being is an *intentional* being, not a material one subject to material causation. It would be entirely remiss to ask what causes God to act in a particular instance; for God is by definition *self-causing* and is held to be the original cause of everything else. (One could inquire instead about God’s *reasons*, which may be unfathomable.)

Some religious doctrines hold that God directs everything moment to moment: divine intentionality is the *ongoing* cause of everything, not just the initial impetus that set it all in motion. In any case, we are reminded to distinguish the notion of ‘intention’ from what Aristotle called ‘efficient cause’, which is the version of causality

science has adopted: things that just happen on their own through impersonal forces, which involve no intention and no personal (or moral or legal) responsibility. In contrast, the possibility to control external events lies in our own outward reach, our ability to initiate causal processes in the world that in turn shape an outcome we desire. Like God, though hardly omnipotent, we are the first cause of such processes. However, the limits of human power, and the independent reality of the world, render the outcome of our actions uncertain. We cannot, like an omnipotent being, count on things happening as we wish. As material creatures, we confront the dilemma that we are caused by forces beyond our control, and therefore seem to be mere bystanders, passive consumers or victims of experience as it is dished up by the external world.

One solution to powerlessness is magic or prayer: to attempt to manipulate superior agents to act on our behalf. An alternative is to cultivate our own power to conceive and create things, and thereby to try to make things happen on our terms. Success through technology depends crucially on the laws of nature and the nature of materials. We assert human will within an otherwise found world. We can play the game in which we find ourselves, though we did not make the rules or the ingredients. Manipulating nature, and even trying to duplicate it artificially, is a way to have our way while mimicking divine power. Yet, another way to mimic divine power is to develop the sense of intention or will that underlies our notions of the divine: to mimic divine *being*. This aims at the doer, the cause rather than the effect. It cultivates the sense of being that comes from the inside and moves outward, which causes but is uncaused. This is the sense of being the initiator, self-causing, and hence “divine.”



Given the primary outward focus of mind, upon which life admittedly depends, this sense of being-from-within is relatively unfamiliar and elusive. Consequently, inquiry that ought to be concerned with its cultivation often bypasses it. Psychology, philosophy, and even religion skim over it primarily through *objectification*, reflecting the persistent exercise of the outward focus. These disciplines may cultivate academic or moral understanding rather than *being*. For example, instead of exploring their *own* intentionality, psychologists may conduct experiments on others, while maintaining the conventional detachment from their own subjectivity and from that of the “subjects” of the experiment (who are actually regarded as objects). They may invent abstractions, such as *libido* or *brain function*, to explain experience in impersonal or mechanistic terms. While that is intellectually satisfying and useful, it is a distraction from the personal development of being. Philosophers dwell on *the mind-body problem* as though it was not the intimate personal problem of every human who has ever lived, including themselves! The incrustations of religious orthodoxy are even farther-reaching and ironic. It is because of such tendencies that there is a place and need for esoteric or “spiritual” teachings.

While the divine sense of being-from-within (“in God’s image”) derives from our intentional nature as agents, it is considered sacrilegious to compare oneself to God. “Divinity” is projected entirely outside human being, personified as an agent separate from humanity and even from the natural world. Gods, spirits, angels, and demons are reified as powers outside us, as surrogates for our own agency. Written commandments are given from on high, in contrast to a moral sense coming from within. Future rewards are promised and punishments are threatened,

instead of morality inhering in our bodily experience and felt relationship to things here and now. This outward focus leads to doctrine handed down from external authority, to be taken on faith instead of felt with independent conviction. Such thinking glosses superficially over real questions, missing the point, with the result that doctrines can vary widely among groups. Splitting hairs leads to divisiveness, contention, and often violent outward action.

One marvels at the existence of the world and at one's own presence as a conscious observer who is part of its fabric. Science may never fully unravel the mystery of the world's being, which may, after all, be limitless. The universe could be indefinitely complex or infinite in extent, or both. Whatever the precise implications of those possibilities in scientific terms, human thought is limited and finite. In fact, it is *necessarily simplistic*, since it deals always with idealizations.

The same simplistic thinking that is applied to the external world is applied to our own existence when trying to understand it from the outside. The inner sense of being remains mysterious when we do not know what to make of it in third-person terms. While we are not infinite in size or complexity, our nature includes the potential to transcend any specific self-conception. We are thus no more able to pin down our own being than that of the world. Indeed, the problem of understanding consciousness derives precisely from trying to grasp its nature in the familiar terms in which we think of the world: trying to understand the internal in the terms of the external. However, consciousness is not a *thing in* the external world but an embodied *relationship to* the world. The being of the world itself is mysterious because it is bigger

than us and any of our concepts. It contains us and we cannot stand outside it to get a wide enough view. Our own being is mysterious precisely because we *can* stand outside any given concept or view that we contain in thought. This leaves our footing always in some doubt.



# Chapter Two: What It Is Like to Be You

“I’d rather be a hammer than a nail.”—Pete Seeger

In 1974, a contemporary philosopher published a celebrated article asking “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” Far from answering the question, he makes the point that we can only guess, based on our own experience and an understanding of the bat’s perceptual systems in third-person terms. He does, however, presume that there is *something* that “it is like” to be the bat—and certainly any other mammal, at least. That something is the creature’s *experience*, which we loosely call consciousness. In contrast, there is presumably *nothing* it is like to be a rock or an atom or empty space. We associate sentience with life, and consciousness with a nervous system. We can *imagine* being a rock; but that is putting oneself in its place and describing the world (as *humans* see it) from the rock’s literal position in space. It is in no wise the experience of the rock itself, if it could have experience.

A similar argument can be applied to the bat, which presumably does have experience of its own. We can put ourselves in its place and imagine what it is like to fly, to catch and eat insects, to hang upside down for sleep, etc. We can try to imagine what it would be like (for us humans) to “see” with echolocation, for example. But none of that is the bat’s own actual experience.

The argument extends even to other human beings, with whom at least we share a nearly identical physiology. That *physical* similarity is as solid a basis as we can have for imagining the experience of other people. Yet it suffers

from the same limitation: one's nervous system is uniquely hooked up to one's own body and to no other. I cannot literally feel your pain or pleasure, for example, nor you mine. Not even if your brain could somehow be "wired" to another person's body (bypassing or replacing that person's brain) would it be *their* experience you were having. Being the individual that you are means having *your* experience in particular, via *your* brain and body. Because we are highly social animals, human beings have developed empathy to compensate for this isolation imposed by physical individuality. Certainly, it may be more developed in some people than in others. But your feeling of gladness or sympathy for someone is your own distinct feeling, not the other person's feeling of joy or suffering.

No doubt this is why a circumlocution such as "what it is like" must be used to refer to the actual experience of another creature. We cannot experience its experience for ourselves; we can only imagine what that must be *like* in our own experience. Such imagining may or may not be a uniquely human capacity. Certainly, other creatures appear to show empathy for each other. But what that experience of empathy is for them we cannot know. If it *looks* like how we behave when sympathetic, we are free to interpret it as like our feeling.

The very concept of *being* is an abstraction. What exactly does it mean? (I do not propose to define 'being', and am not convinced that every language has a precisely parallel term for the English.) Along with the nature of something, perhaps one imagines its sheer presence in contrast to its absence. Such comparison refers to actual or remembered experiences. Yet, the *idea* of presence or absence is not tied to particular things or experiences. It already involves

abstraction, imagination, and reasoning—capabilities that invoke directed thought.

Directed by what? Directed thought suggests some agent doing the directing and *knowing that it is doing so*. For humans, at least, consciousness seems to imply self-awareness; being involves not just real-time sensory experience, imagination, or focus on the world, but also the awareness of being aware—which means awareness of your own existence. You “think,” therefore you are. Since “you,” unlike your body, are not a thing, it may be difficult to imagine your own *non*-existence, which may be one reason for the loathing of death.

In the sense we have been discussing, you are the only being you can truly know what it is like to be. But that privileged familiarity consists in nothing other than the actual flow of your ever-changing personal experience. You cannot find among its contents the “self” who witnesses them. There is underlying continuity in that experience, from which one might infer an ongoing personal identity. Yet, that sense of identity, too, is but part of the flow of your experience, which may change over time. It is also not the same as other people’s experience of you (not to mention other creatures’ experience of you). How others may identify you, for *their* purposes, may be quite different than how you identify yourself for your purposes.

This brings us to another aspect of being: as portrayed in third-person description. This not your private inner experience of the world, but the world’s “objective” (or, rather, interpersonal) nature, as it is commonly observed. Since there is presumably nothing that it is like to be a rock, its being, in this sense, is effectively what external observers—and scientists in particular—claim that it is.

Yet, such third-person claims are necessarily the result of first-person experience.

Similarly, when we speak of ‘human being’, we do not mean only what it is like to be a human, but also the characteristics of one species among others, as currently conceived. That is, we can look at human being from the inside and from the outside—as first-person experience or as third-person fact. And just as there are characteristics of *homo sapiens*, so there are specific characteristics of you as an individual: alleged facts about you that others can claim or dispute. These include not only physical characteristics, but also traits of your mind and personality as noted by others. All these are as viewed from outside, and distinct from your own interior experience of being you.

There is a third sense of being: what something is *in itself*. This is supposedly what something is intrinsically, apart from how anyone perceives it, defines it, or conceives it. Call it a god’s-eye view, or what something is when no one is looking. (Kant called it the *noumenon*.) The concept is paradoxical, since *any* notion of the world takes place in someone’s mind. For, just as we cannot access someone else’s nervous system to have their experience, but are confined to our own nervous system and experience, so we cannot observe the world without any nervous system at all. All possible experiences, including imagination and abstract concepts (such as what something is “in itself”) are functions of our biological *embodiment*. We can *imagine* something continuing to exist while we are not looking—perhaps because we have already seen it or something like it. But we cannot logically suppose that there was some way the universe “appeared” before there were eyes to see.



What is it like to *be* you in this very moment is a different question than what you *see* nearby at this moment, from your perspective. Even though both are your experience, the first concerns *your* state, while the second concerns the state of the world. Generally, the senses involved in the latter are the “external” senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell, etc.) while those for the former are “internal” (pain receptors, proprioceptors, interoceptors, etc.) Their functions may overlap. For example, you can both see and feel the damage from a flesh wound. You might “feel hot,” which could be information about your body temperature *and* about the temperature of the room. Touching an object produces a sensation in your fingers, which also gives you information about something in the world.

The fundamental distinction is between self and world, which are in some form of contact. Attention can be directed inward or outward. Yet, even information coming through the external senses must be interpreted by the brain, in terms of the body’s needs. This renders such information ambiguous, since it is a joint product of self and world together. It can be considered as information about the world or as information about the self; as caused by the external world or as created by the brain. Always it is necessarily both.

What it is like to be you at this moment will include all the senses, internal and external, in a total impression that may embrace thoughts, memories, feelings, mental images and so forth. Simply posing the question induces a different *relationship* to that potpourri of total experience, adding the dimension of awareness of being a subject who receives that total impression and can do something with it. This sense of self includes a view of oneself not only as a perceiving subject but also as an agent capable of inner and outer action. The *inner* sort of action includes

whatever the self does to perceive and feel exactly as it does. Much of that appears to happen unconsciously. While, for us, to *be* is to perceive and feel, it is also to reflect, to consciously intend, to act, and to feel responsible for our actions. We are used to the idea of being accountable for our public actions, and perhaps even for our private thoughts. We are hardly used to claiming responsibility for our perceptions and feelings, however. How we experience the world, including the part of the world that is one's body, seems to be dictated by the world itself or the demands of the body. Yet, we cannot, without diminishing our own being, avoid knowing that we are at least co-responsible for all we experience as well as all we do.

# Chapter Three: Inner and Outer Being

“I can’t get no satisfaction.”—the Rolling Stones

**A**n organism is relatively autonomous. It maintains itself the best it can, adapting and preserving its structure in spite of changes in its surroundings. But it remains dependent on those surroundings for nourishment and to maintain itself within a tolerable range of conditions. To do this, the individual organism can try to adapt the world to itself through action on its environment; or it can try to adapt itself to the world.

Collectively, the species too adapts to its environment, through random genetic changes that prevail through natural selection over generations. The individual participates passively in that process, usually with no way to change its internal structure deliberately. Through learning, by contrast, it *can* change aspects of its behavior, including some aspects of its internal management. For most species, such learning remains “mechanical” to the extent that the individual has no dedicated inner agent to oversee its internal and external affairs—no “self” and no concept of itself as an intentional agent.

The human individual *does* have this inner agent—the conscious self—if only implicitly and intermittently. We take it for granted that everyone “has” a self, but what is meant by that exactly? For the most part, we mean that any person is a perceiving subject, whatever their capacities to act. A paraplegic is still a person and a perceiving subject. In contrast, a comatose patient with motor capacity intact

may be legally a person, though socially and practically not a subject.

Whether or not they are deemed subjects, living organisms are *agents*, regardless of their capabilities. They can act deliberately, whereas inert matter is merely ruled by causal laws, as discerned by outside observers who are themselves agents. These laws pertain to the bodies of organisms, including those of conscious observers, since they too are material. But agents, unlike inert matter, also act on their own initiative. While they are material beings, they are also *intentional* beings. While inert matter is passively acted upon from the outside by other material things and causal forces, agents act from within upon the external world and potentially upon their own nature. Such action might be no more than a *reaction* to external stimuli; but even reflex goes beyond simple causality, since it brings the organism's concerns to the interaction. In addition, an agent may deliberately plan action upon the external world, and even upon itself. We are used to thinking of agency in terms of the motor ability to affect the world. But agency is also the capacity to act upon one's own being. Because of how we are wired by evolution, and our natural outward focus, this internal agency (will) is not as well developed as motor skills and their extensions through technology. Yet, the subjective sense of being depends as critically upon it as upon passively received experience.

In our capacity as subjects, we receive and process input from the world of objects, including input from the part of the world that is the body. As agents, we act upon that input and thus upon the world. These dual capacities correspond to the sensory and motor functions, which are naturally integrated in a way that allows us to survive. Yet, that is not the only possibility for the conscious agent, who

is to some extent able to bracket natural perception and activity to pursue a novel course.

The parts of speech recognized in many languages reflect a duality arising from potential awareness of being a subject. This is the fundamental divide between subject and object. To be a subject is to have a point of view, from which to act and view the world. To be an object is to appear to a subject *from* a point of view; one cannot see where one is looking *from*. This difference is more than an issue of literal placement in space. It matters not whether “objects” are physical or merely objects of attention. The relationship is the same: the subject is *here*, the object is *there*.

In that sense, the perceiving self can never see itself, nor be an object of perception for others. The self can scarcely even be an object of thought, except as a kind of abstraction. One can look in a mirror, of course; but it is the physical body that one sees, and which others see, not the subject who is looking. One might feel a configuration of sensations that one takes to be one’s self; but sensations, attended to this way, are no more than subtle objects of attention, not the witnessing subject.

Consciousness may need objects to be aware of. But do objects require subjects to be aware of them? Does the tree fall in the forest whether or not anyone sees or hears it? Naïve realism (or materialism) is the belief that objects can exist without subjects. Naïve idealism is the belief that subjects can exist without a physical basis and even without objects of attention. It may include the notion that there *are* no real objects, or that mind simply invents them. These are both extreme responses to the conundrum of

subject-object dualism, trying to circumvent the dualism itself.

Realism ignores the subject. Idealism denies the reality of the object. A middle way is to allow that subject and object are entangled in such a way that they enter conjointly and inseparably into what we know as consciousness. Everything we can experience, feel, or think depends on *both* the subject and the object, the self and the world in interaction. That means there is no way the object “really” is, apart from the ways that observers see it. For, observation is an interaction of subject and object. Nor are there disembodied observers; observers are necessarily physical agents, subjects embodied as objects. Humans may be natural-born realists, routinely assuming that the way the world appears to them is just how it objectively is. In truth, how it appears to them depends on their state and their needs as biological creatures.

A self-aware agent confronts the choice to rely on natural programming and habit or to pursue a more deliberate course. Except in moments of self-awareness, we tend to engage the world according to our learned ways and programming—that is to say, naturally and automatically. The very fact that we are alive, after all, means that these ways are mostly tried and true. We learn the ropes at home and at school, and continue to learn them throughout life, with little reason to dispute what evidently works. On the other hand, sometimes it *doesn't* work—for example, when circumstance has changed. In general, conscious deliberation intervenes when instinct, habit, or “mechanical” behavior prove inadequate in the face of novelty or change.

Self-awareness thrusts the dilemma and the choice under one's nose—that is, when we *are* self-aware. In that

moment, the subject is knowingly set apart from the object. One's sense of self is also set apart from one's programming and potentially can oppose it. A chronic sense of separation or alienation from the body and from the way of nature may be the indirect driving force behind civilization. For, as self-conscious subjects, we do not relish our dependency on nature at large, and on the body in particular, which is a source of pain and limitation, prone to disease, injury, and finally putrefaction. We must obey the laws of nature and suffer the restrictions of embodiment, though we can imagine living beyond them. We suffer in the knowledge of our natural condition, in a way that animals without this self-consciousness cannot. Moreover, we believe we can do something about it. To some extent, we *can* control and manage nature and create environments more to our liking than the wild. We have been able to improve the human lot through external action. Yet, there is also an inner sort of action of which we are capable, which comes of the sense of being a free agent.

The price to pay for a consumer relationship to experience is that one is at the mercy of the external world, which seems to determine that experience. Of course, *all* experience is a product of self and world in interaction. But what I call consumerism is a passive stance in regard to experience, which emphasizes the object of experience rather than the agent behind it. Focus is naturally on the outside world to satisfy one's needs or desires. One accepts or rejects the stimulus in relation to those needs and appetites, judging what is good or bad, pleasing or painful in regard to one's body or psyche. Perforce, one is in a struggle to have experience be as desired, doomed to disappointment when it is not. One solution to this problem is to suspend judgment, to not be "attached."

Desire nothing and you will not be disappointed! That formula addresses the appetitive side of being, which is only half the picture. The other half is the intentional side. A “consumer” expects goodness to come from the outside, always judging and shopping for the best deals, hoping optimistically for fulfillment, but subject to disappointment when the goods may not be enough or good enough. While the world of experience can implode upon the consumer, intention can push back—especially the intention to do good, because it is generally not a reaction but an initiative. Intention activates the self, fills one from within, freeing one from feeling helplessly dependent. When goodness comes from the inside, one can take or leave the particulars of experience.

There is no denying that we *are* dependent on both the natural and the human worlds. Hence, our primary orientation is external, toward things and others. We are natural-born gourmets of experience, as of food, water, and air. Yet, self-awareness gives this relationship an added dimension. We are not helpless in the face of experience. We can push back against the seeming impositions of the external world and the conditioning of our biological and social nature.

The contrast between these stances toward experience is hardly black and white, but a matter of degree. We cannot *not* consume experience, at least to the extent needed to survive. We cannot *not* be physical organisms or outer-directed. One needs food to live, without which there is the literal emptiness of hunger and eventual starvation. The problem is that the *attitude* of consumption then expects *all* satisfactions to come from the outside, without which there is a metaphorical emptiness and hunger. One can then feel deprived, as though literally empty or starving,



sorry for oneself and even sorry that one feels sorry... The world is blamed for failing to satisfy one's needs and one feels victimized.

Of course, it can go differently. One may actually get what one needs and more—feeling satiated, fulfilled, successful and even powerful, at least momentarily. That's an unstable situation, however, to the degree it depends on fortune, which can always change. While a comfortable lifestyle can result in provisional fullness, hunger is still possible with a change in circumstance, which remains a potential source of anxiety.

To continue the food metaphor, fasting is an option: to deliberately go hungry for a period, perhaps as part of a health regime, or to prepare for leaner times. There can be other benefits as well. Struggling with any attachment develops the will needed to override habit, programming, and desire generally, thereby reclaiming agency. There is an important difference, however, between the desire to lose weight for health reasons and dieting to gain social approval, which is still a form of consumerism, expecting fulfillment from outside. (People could still dislike the slimmer or healthier you.) The point of living intentionally is to fill oneself from within, not to remain at the mercy of others, whom one hopes will fill one from without.

Intentionality generates inner heat or pressure, so to speak, which can warm you from inside and counter the seeming tyranny or uncaring of the outside world. Intentionality can also develop the capacity of the self to act objectively—that is, impartially, without bias, proactively, and adequately to the situation. In short, with *love*.

Some spiritual teachings preach dissolving the self, others strengthening it. Some deny there *is* a self. How to

reconcile these approaches? It depends on how we understand the nature and role of “self.” As organisms, our natural self-centeredness goes hand in hand with our natural outward orientation and dependence on the external world. As subjects, our experience follows from these arrangements. Since we are also able to conceive other possibilities, we can feel trapped within the body or within the mind that nominally serves it, with a longing for liberation from those confines and even from the limits of physical reality.

As social beings, we decry the “ego” for its petty and anti-social tendencies. There can also be liberating experiences of release from that limiting sense of self, when one seems, for example, to dissolve in oneness with the cosmos. That is like the snake shedding its old skin. The snake has not disappeared, but may have been reborn. There is no contradiction between the “death” of the self to its habitual self-centeredness and its “awakening” to become more objective and caring.

Objectivity is better focus, not focus on better objects. The issue may be confused by the natural tendency of the mind to see objects where there are only relationships and processes. *Reification* is a natural faculty of the outward-looking mind. It serves us to identify objects, at least in the literal perceptual field. However, it can become problematic when the objects are abstract, metaphorical, metaphysical, or imaginary. Talk of higher and lower selves, for example, can be confusing if we think of the ‘self’ or ‘ego’ as an entity instead of as a function.

A key feature of the inner world of most people, as of their outer world, is language. Apart from perceiving the world through the senses, we are also perpetually talking to ourselves (or talking in imagination to others). We talk

incessantly to others in the outer world; we continue to talk incessantly in our minds even when alone. The inner voice may be silent for moments, but rarely for long. Of course, one may also daydream in visual images as well. If we pay attention to such experiences, we learn that the mind wanders in a “stream of consciousness,” which means more or by less association. Attention may be more focused when reading, writing, listening, or speaking. Otherwise, we seem to assert little control over the direction of “thought.”

Just how difficult it is to deliberately stop this discursive wandering can be a shocking discovery. It may come to some people through meditation that attempts to bring the inner observer gently back to sensory awareness. The point is not that sensory awareness is more valid than imagination. (Even when done “mindfully,” chopping wood and hauling water is not morally superior to being lost in thought.) The point is rather to gain some control over the restless mind. The fact that we can daydream while doing other things testifies to the mechanicalness of much activity. That could be seen as a blessing: just as we have machines to do things for us automatically, freeing our attention for other tasks, so our minds are freed to wander when so much of what we do is automatic and does not require full attention. However, daydreaming is generally *not* directed thinking toward some task, but more like random entertainment. The so-called freedom gained is hardly used to purpose.

Language provides the structure for formal thought. We reason in terms (such as nouns and verbs) that reflect features of the experienced world. The relationship of the self to that world and to other people is reflected in—but also reinforced by—the grammar of first, second, and third

“persons.” We reinforce belief in the self and in the subject-object relationship through language, especially through repetition of the pronoun *I*. Along with actual speech, self-talk reinforces the notion of an inner world distinct from the outer one. This inner world, like the social world constructed from language, is a distinct creation in contrast to the world revealed by the senses. Since we are largely at the mercy of the external world, we take comfort in the domains over which we have more direct control—the inner world dominated by language, fantasy, and the man-made world of civilization.

Descartes articulated the subject-object duality, but hardly invented it. Claiming to doubt the reliability of the senses to reveal the external world, he turned to the inner world for certainty. His *cogito ergo sum* is translated “I think, therefore I am.” (More logically, however, it should read *cogito, ergo cogitationes sunt*: “I think, therefore there are thoughts.”) What is this “thinking” but some mixture of sensation, imagination and self-talk? If “thinking” merely indicates some phenomenological occurrence, Descartes’ conclusion does not follow. His formula is no more than a tautology: thoughts occur, therefore thoughts exist. There is no logical basis in that for concluding a unitary self to have these thoughts. On the other hand, self-talk perpetually suggests the activity of a self, distinct from the perceptions themselves. It might seem that there *must* be a self to engage in self-talk. (Otherwise, quite simply, “there are words, therefore words exist.”) Perhaps this is one reason to meditate, to disrupt the stream of self-talk and the continual reinforcement of a sense of self that is little more than a habitual function of language. Have we simply talked ourselves into believing we exist? Is there some more substantial basis for the reality of the self?

## Chapter Four: Do You Exist?

“Life is real only then, when ‘I am’.”—G.I. Gurdjieff

Our human experience of the world and of ourselves seems to imply a subject-object relationship. There appears to be an external world of objects and a cognizing subject who experiences it. Though the reality of either can be doubted, they seem to rise or fall together. Descartes’ point is not that the existence of an external world should be doubted, but that knowledge of it cannot be guaranteed and must be taken on faith. In contrast, one could hardly deny *having experience*, which is known with direct intimacy. The phenomenal realm has a privileged status that knowledge of the external world does not.

Here is an analogy of this distinction. Try to look at a movie on a digital screen and “see” only the patterns of light and dark, shapes and colors, instead of the action, characters, and scenery of the story. There can be no doubt that some pixels are illuminated while others are not. If it were possible to look at the screen and see *only* pixels, one could reasonably doubt that they portrayed anything at all about the external world or that this is a movie with a story. We could be certain that *pixels* exist, but what does this certainty gain us? The challenge, rather, has always been to understand the relationship between the phenomenal realm and reality: how the mind intervenes to organize “pixels” into perceived images.

Descartes casts doubt on the transparency of that relationship. He points out that a malevolent agent could intervene to fake not only the sensory input (pixel by pixel) but also all the mental processing involved in cognition (the formation of images). This could give an inner

observer the false impression of an external world, including the impression of living in a body that is part of it. Thereby, if inadvertently, he underlines the fact that experience is mediated by the nervous system, indeed somehow co-produced by it.

An updated version of his skeptical argument is the “brain in a vat” scenario, more recently articulated in the Matrix films and the so-called Simulation Argument (the bizarre idea that we are “probably” living in a simulation). At the time, Descartes’ politically correct solution to the dilemma was that God would not permit such deception. A modern answer is that *natural selection* would not permit it. However, humanly devised neuro-technology and artificial intelligence can indeed facilitate such deception. The question in the digital age then becomes, how can you be certain you are not living in a virtual reality, a simulation? But that is a loaded question, for it presumes a real subject to experience virtual objects. And it presumes a real external world that can be deliberately faked and someone real who does the simulating on real computers.

Literal virtual reality, as a human technology, presumes a real embodied observer, not a disembodied consciousness that can live within some alternative digitally simulated environment. Yet, virtual reality serves as a handy metaphor to elucidate the arising of both the phenomenal world and the self as a virtual agent within it. The external world *is* being simulated—naturally—by the real brain. This does not mean that the external world is not real (with your real brain in it). It means only that your knowledge of it (as of the brain) is provided through a “show” created by the brain itself. This show bears a systematic relationship to the external world because it is a simulation created by the organism through its

interaction with that world, in such a way that permits survival. If that were not so, we wouldn't be here to talk about it.

Alternative shows might do as well, within limits, to permit survival. The tricky part of understanding our fundamental epistemic situation as embodied beings is that 'brain', 'body', 'organism'—indeed, all possible concepts concerning the external world—are all part of this virtual reality! That includes any notion of the 'self'. Many have tried in vain to evade this circularity through mental gymnastics. But it is built into our consciousness. The challenge is what to make of it and how to live with it and use it.

One can say that the experienced world is a “guided hallucination” and that the self is a functional part of that hallucination. Yet, instead of concluding that the world and the self are illusory, it is more productive to investigate what we mean by *realness*. Acknowledging the above circularity as inevitable, let us arbitrarily assume that the external world, and the body within it, “really” exist. The natural orientation of this body, as a product of natural selection, is outward toward the environment on which it depends. Natural realism is the well-justified conviction that the world can seriously affect one for better and worse—and that one can affect it. That conviction, too, is a product of natural selection. It is the natural *meaning* of realness. In other words, realness is not only a *property* of the external world, but also a *quality*, like color, with which the mind can imbue experience for good reason. Even in physics, what is recognized as real is that with which the observer can causally interact, which means to potentially affect or be affected by it. It is utterly necessary for the organism to treat its environment as real. In these terms, is the self also real?

What is the relation between the putative self and the real body? In common parlance, one *has* a body and one can speak of one's own body" as "it." The implications are manifold. For instance: "I" am *not* this body but "occupy" it. Perhaps I "own" it, am its master, and possibly could wander from it, or survive its death, or be incorporated into another body. Let us set aside such fantasies and suppose that, since the body is natural, the self must be a natural bodily function, like breathing. From that perspective, the self exists to serve the body, not the other way around. Indeed, we do identify with the interests of the body to a compelling degree. We experience damage to it as pain, threat to it as fear, its well-being as pleasure. We are aligned with its interests but do not completely identify with it. We might say that we are *attached* to it—both in the psychological and the literal sense.

This ambiguity is the source of much trouble. The semi-autonomous self can stake out territory of its own, claim interests of its own even opposed to those of the body. Above all, it can claim to *be* the subject which experiences the sensations of the body, the thoughts of its brain, its consciousness. It can believe these inputs exist for its benefit. The self can claim to be the agent that directs the body's behavior, even against the body's natural interests. To that extent, this problematic self may appear to be a usurper, a natural function *gone rogue*, more like cancer than breathing.

Some traditions point to this dilemma and claim that the self does not "really" exist. Others distinguish the "ego" from the "transcendental observer," or the social personality from the person's "essence." Many religions reify this essence as an entity, the soul. The relationship of the inner agent (or transcendental observer) to this entity



is unclear: one then supposedly *has* a soul, like one has a body. But who or what is this *one* who does the having?

Alternatively, we could think of the body as a corporation and the self as its CEO. The cells and organs of the body, like employees and departments, do their jobs without micromanagement by the CEO. Yet, the latter's job is to make certain executive decisions on behalf of the whole corporation that cannot be made judiciously by the parts.

We know from experience that literal CEOs are often overpaid and do not always serve the best interests of their corporations. We know that power corrupts. The bottom line of literal corporations at present (like the bottom line of organisms) is survival and growth. Their mandate is profit to shareholders (ultimately, genes in this metaphor), at the expense of other organisms and possibly the common biosphere. For better or for worse, upper management can potentially do far more than *merely* serve such parochial interests. While leadership can go to one's head, on the positive side the CEO *could* be a leader who transforms the very nature of the corporation for the betterment of the world.

The challenge to the spiritual aspirant is not to eliminate upper management (or to deny that it exists), but to educate it and enlighten it in favor of a broader view that pursues the interests of the whole. That is the dimension along which the pilgrim's progress should be measured, not merely in terms of some notion of personal salvation, liberation, or enlightenment. The question *Do you exist?* must be considered in that light. "You" exist to the degree you consciously serve an objectively worthy motivation. You are illusory to the degree you chase after illusory goals. It is not a question for an outsider to judge, but your inner choice.



## Chapter Five: Reality and Appearance

“The brain is not an organ of thinking but an organ of survival, like claws and fangs. It is made in such a way as to make us accept as truth that which is only advantage.”—A. Szent-Gyorki

**H**ow can we know what is objectively true? Because we are finite biological beings, we have a particular relationship to the objective world-in-itself that is conditioned by our needs and structure as organisms. Our perception and thought are not naturally an open window on that world, but more like maps of a mythical land upon which no one has ever actually set foot.

But here is a better metaphor: we are like submariners, confined aboard a vessel with no windows or doors, whose nature, functioning, and purpose we do not at first comprehend. About the world outside the hull we initially know nothing—not even that there *is* a world outside or that this compartment in which we find ourselves is a *vessel*. (In this thought experiment, you had no prior life on shore and have no experience of anything outside the submarine.) In this imaginary scenario, all that we will come to call knowledge of the world is strictly inferred from events within this sealed compartment. These events consist of flashing lights, dials, lever settings, pushbuttons, etc. (Observers with a privileged outside view might say these are connected to sensors and motor controls.) Simply by toying with them, we begin to discover correlations between instrument readings and lever settings, between input and output. Patterns emerging in these correlations imply the existence of *something* that intervenes to

mediate the relationship between input (from instruments) and output (via controls). We come to think that this ‘something’ linking them exists independently of our manipulations and is the cause of a consistent relationship between input and output. In other words, we come to think of the correlations as due to a real world outside the hull.

By actively experimenting with control levers and noting the resulting instrument readings (from sonar, for example, as an outsider would call it), we begin to form a map of this underwater environment. Though we have never had a direct glimpse outside the hull, we come to think of this map as what that territory *looks* like and indeed *is* like. In our excitement, we do not at first appreciate the fact that *seeing*, for us, is nothing other than an inner theory of a presumptive outer world, based only upon patterns between instrument readings and controls, and justified by our continuing existence. Rather, we simply “see” this world, as it were, right through the hull.

Eventually, we submariners come to realize our situation: that what we apparently see is not the world-in-itself but appearances created by us within the sealed confines of the vessel. These appearances are “realistic” in the sense that they allow us to successfully navigate what an outside observer would call the underwater world. The validity of the map, in other words, lies in its effectiveness as a guide, not in any literal sense of *resembling* the territory. The notion of resemblance is meaningless in such a context, where there is no direct access to the territory for comparison with the map.

This metaphor represents the situation of the brain sealed within the skull (or the nervous system within the skin). Access to external reality (i.e., external to the nervous system) consists of remote sensors (afferent

nerves) and activators (efferent nerves). The eyes—poetically called “portals to the soul”—are hardly port-holes through which we glimpse the external world. They are part of the opaque hull and provide (like other senses) no more than a stream of data through the wired connection of nerves. The illusion of transparency comes of interpreting such data in specific ways required for our existence.

There is a categorical gulf between Kant’s *phenomenal* realm of appearances and his *noumenal* realm of objective reality. The former in some sense is an image or map reflecting the latter, but not in the way that a photo visually resembles the scene photographed. *Accuracy* of the map cannot be established by direct comparison with the territory outside; rather, it can mean only *adequacy* for certain purposes. The ultimate test of adequacy is whether the map permits survival. Our perceptual map is fine-tuned by many generations of natural selection. There are shorter-term measures of the adequacy of scientific maps, such as the results of experiments and advances in technology. As far as the ultimate measure, the jury is still out.

Of course, not all maps are equal. One can be better than another for some purposes, or better for some purposes than for others. There can be significant differences in how we interpret appearances. More relevant here is the tendency to see the map—however adequate—*as though* it were the territory, to take appearances as *real*. This is normal in ordinary perception. It would be dysfunctional to always doubt appearances, to habitually embrace them only with hesitation, or to experience them as taking place inside the skull instead of in the world. For, survival often requires us to act quickly and decisively in the face of

ambiguity, to be sure of what we see before us—even when wrong. Yet, because of the possibility of being wrong, it also serves us to maintain a reserve of skepticism, a *stance of unknowing*.<sup>1</sup> It is important always to bear in mind that we *can* be wrong. Sometimes he who hesitates is saved rather than lost.

While “appearance” contrasts with “reality,” the trouble is that appearances compel us to act in certain ways, which may not accord with reality. This distinction normally refers to aspects of the map that may be wrong in a particular detail or in a particular use. That is one kind of error. Yet, *illusion* refers more generally to the categorical difference between map and territory, which are entirely different *sorts* of thing. We live with and through this functional illusion, in which the map is projected outward as so-called external reality. The illusion is to see the map *as* the territory *out there*, forgetting that it is actually one’s own creation *in here*, made for the purpose of advantage rather than truth.

To put it the other way around, the ideal of truth attempts to compensate for the natural illusoriness of perception, the natural partiality and self-orientation of the organism, and the natural ambiguity of experience. The notion of truth recognizes the possibility of error, bias, or self-deception and proposes to rectify it or transcend it. It acknowledges that error is relative to specific purposes. The notion of illusion, in the metaphysical sense of which the sages speak, hints at our failure to realize a world without suffering, an ideal world.

The problem of knowledge in science is the same as in ordinary experience: how to distinguish appearance from

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<sup>1</sup> See my website: [www.stanceofunknowing.com](http://www.stanceofunknowing.com)

reality. *Appearance* is generally visual, seen from a distance. Changes in apparent size or position, for example, are relative to the observer's own position and state of motion. Such information depends also on an intervening signal, such as light, which has little physical effect on either the observer or what is observed on the human scale. (It does have an effect for interactions on the microscopic scale.) The *reality* behind the appearance, on the other hand, involves the direct causal effect of one system on another. The relevant property in physics for such interactions is *mass*, which can be measured directly by weighing things within reach. But it can also be inferred indirectly through changes in apparent movement of remote things. In other words, even in physics, reality and appearance are entangled in the way that object and subject are.

The classical ideal of objectivity holds that knowledge should be independent of the state of the observer and the path through which it is obtained. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this implied an absolute frame of reference from which to observe and measure things: a sort of god's-eye view from which all observers could potentially see the same things, arrive at the same values for measurements, and come to the same conclusions, regardless of their own state. The revolutions of 20<sup>th</sup>-century physics upset this presumption, rendering observation relative in certain ways to the observer's state. In the theory of Relativity, it became relative to the observer's state of motion. In the Quantum Theory, it became relative to the energy and scale of the probe used, compared to the tiny things probed. What we can learn from these scientific discoveries is that similar considerations apply in daily life. As observers, we are unavoidably also participants. Our own state makes a difference in how we see the world and relate to it. Our

actions can affect the situation we observe. And our view on a given situation is rarely transparent, but usually involves intermediaries that carry and distort the information, such as news and social media. Objectivity is potential only when we recognize these limitations.

For most people, for all practical purposes, their map works well enough that it can remain transparent in daily life. It serves us to live apparently in an external world that we naively perceive as real and independent of us. Since we all naturally embrace this illusion, we operate on a level playing field. What advantage could there be in thinking otherwise?

To answer that question, we need only note that living by this illusion produces the specific world that we live in, which is hardly perfect and in many ways is a world of great injustice and suffering. What drives people to desire more than they have, or more than others have, or to dominate and control each other? What drives the quest for status, sex, or family? We may call these impulses instinctual, natural, or built-in, which only means that we find them compulsive. In turn, that is only to say that such impulses are *believed* and followed regardless of consequences.

On the other hand, to perceive such drives as illusory is to question them, which is the first step to conscious intervention in our natural programming, in such a way that it is possible to actually choose a path. It is to realize that appearance serves natural purposes, which can be at odds with what we otherwise conceive as ideal. While we accept and take for granted the premises of nature required for our existence as biological beings, this does not necessarily or always lead to our happiness, nor support our existence as conscious agents.



We dwell literally on the surface of things when, for example, we take the attractiveness of other people literally at face value. And we know better when we acknowledge that “beauty is but skin deep.” The saying means that people should not be judged only on the merit of socially constructed standards of physical appearance, but also on the basis of character and other factors. Yet, it would be very sobering to take this saying literally. The beautiful woman or handsome man would have little appeal, or even individual identity, without their skin. (Anatomical drawings give a hint!) To see with enhanced vision the microscopic creatures that normally live *on* the skin would be equally off-putting. But, of course, we do not think of our lover’s entrails or the invisible monsters living inside them and on their surface. That would interfere with the illusion, not to mention nature’s purpose in making sexual partners attractive to each other.

Of course, the biology and parasites of a body are not more *real* than its superficial appearance. *Both* are illusory in the fundamental sense, since they are both products of cognition, which is determined by our biological and social needs as well as by the external world. Both are features of the map, involving judgment and interpretation of sensory input. To judge a person on their character rather than their beauty may be wiser in some cases, but the judgment is still self-serving. It is about predicting or managing the experience that will come to oneself from the external world, which still reflects a consumer attitude toward experience. This attitude may be necessary for ordinary life, both individually and collectively. But it may not be sufficient for extraordinary life—that is, for a life lived intentionally from the inside out. It may not be enough for the long-term viability of human life.

The basic dilemma for humanity is that we are no longer entirely natural creatures and not yet gods, but something awkwardly between. We are literally mediocre, which means in its etymology *half-way up the hill*. We have attained some godlike powers but not the wisdom to use them properly. We are collectively stalled in a dangerous phase without guarantees. We have a *degree* of consciousness, but not enough to take our species' destiny confidently in hand. Instead of reasoning objectively, we remain driven by archaic instincts and short-sighted parochial concerns. Instead of uniting to act in concert, we divide to wage war.

To understand how this can be so on a global scale, we need only look at our own lives. We assimilate and adapt to the world we are born into. But how many of us deliberately plan and successfully guide our own development and the course of life from the onset of maturity? Who makes it their explicit purpose to insure the future well-being of the species or the planet? Rather, we mostly bumble along, acting in self-centered and short-sighted ways, (perhaps in the name of spontaneity) passively letting "life" determine our course.

It is one thing to use technology to reduce the effort needed for improvement; it is another to use it to increase one's share of the improvement. Humans take more than their fair share of natural food resources, for example, depriving other species and indirectly destroying our own food supplies. Overfishing or depleting soils and water tables through overuse are effects of overpopulation multiplied by unreflective use of technology.

What minimum number of human beings would be required to produce and sustain modern civilization and

technology? A trivial answer could be: the entire current world population! But that number of people is now part of the problem as well as being a potential resource for its solution. If overpopulation was necessary to get us where we are, it has also brought us to the brink of self-destruction. If we think of modern civilization as the effect of global human productivity, we could ask how that productivity could have been more efficient, in a comprehensive sense, and how it could become so in future. Could far fewer people produce and maintain the same level of civilization? Perhaps not, if they are no more reflective and intelligent than humanity has been on average so far. Whether in business, government, or personal lives, lack of self-possession results in mediocrity and mismanagement. To take the reins effectively requires the ability to discern and hold to the objective good out of the many distracting appearances promoted by divergent interests. Anyone who has cultivated that ability is better positioned to more efficiently serve humanity.



## Chapter Six: Being Good

“Why can’t I be good?”—Lou Reed

Parents admonish children to “be good”—meaning not to do anything they would not approve. Their principles most often reflect the customs, laws, morality and religion of their society, which may vary from society to society. Even when official moral and ethical precepts are similar across religions, followers of one religion may behave inconsistently toward followers of another. Ethical principles were articulated in the first place because human beings do not always behave well toward one another. Our dispositions seem inconsistent. For example, the individual may compete with others for natural and sexual resources; yet, the needs of the group can take precedence over those of the individual, for good and for bad.

Is there an absolute standard of goodness, which can transcend parochial differences and the inconsistency of our nature? Perhaps not, if left to that nature itself! Natural evolution has no premeditated direction, no intention at all. It does not destine us to become more ethical, kind, objective, or “spiritual.” While laws and ethical principles are often functional for a given society, helping it to cohere and prosper, this has often been at the expense of other societies or groups, whose members may not receive the same consideration. Even in Christian and Muslim countries, slavery was nearly universal throughout history before the industrial revolution, which allowed machines to replace human labor.

The major religions and philosophies have helped to universalize an ethic based on the concept of *personhood*,

so that strangers of different culture, race, or class can be considered worthy of basic respect, to have rights. The theoretical “circle of humanity” has greatly expanded over time. Along with a scientific definition of homo sapiens, we now have charters of universal human rights. These are great cultural achievements. Yet, there are still frequent violations of these supposed rights. Religions may preach not to kill, but we still have wars, murders, and murderous thoughts.

The quest for virtue is age old. Those who are not naturally good can strive to be more virtuous through self-knowledge. That requires persistent inner awareness of one’s dispositions, motivations, habits and limitations; but, also, understanding of our context as biological entities and our conditioning as social entities in the human world. One must at once be self-aware from the inside and also from an outside perspective that strives to be objective. The potential of self-awareness is the triple meaning of “Know Thyself.” To know the subject that one is, the agent that one is, and the object that one is.

That’s not easy, since it’s hard to see oneself clearly. Rather mechanically, we embrace naturally and socially determined perceptions and motivations on a daily basis. Self-awareness may lead one to question those perceptions and motivations, perhaps even to hesitate when they seem to demand action. To thus disengage from received impressions and from naturally occurring motivations can change your relationship to events. It can alienate you from others. Yet, the disruption of natural tendencies can invite a heightened sense of being, since one is required to reconsider things formerly taken for granted. Meaning and identity are less imposed by externals and more determined from within, so that one can live more on one’s

own terms and less on those of society or biology. From such a changed perspective, *being good* could mean something quite different than a conventional notion of morality. While I believe one should always seek to do good, the understanding of 'good' may be less orthodox, or even contrary to convention. Being good does not mean what others think you should be or do. One may or may not agree with the laws one consents to obey.

If virtue is your quest, here is a helpful hint: Take the feedback of others and their opinions of you seriously, but not personally. Do not depend on them for approval or a sense of worth. Correct your course by your own compass, not to change how others view you. Be considerate for their sake, not for how they regard you. Be loving for the sake of your own being, not so that you will be loved. Be generous for the sake of the whole world, not just to those who seem to deserve it. In every difficult situation ask: what is the good I can do here?

Self-awareness fosters freedom of choice within oneself, which enables one to think and act non-mechanically, to *act* and not merely *react*. Ideally, that inner freedom leads to greater objectivity. It is natural for a young man, for example, to experience lust. But it is good for him also to be able to set aside his lust and act for the objective benefit of his lover rather than pleasure alone. If not, he is hardly entitled to claim to *love*. Likewise, anger serves a purpose in some situations; but it is important also to be able to put it aside and consider what is the objectively desirable outcome rather than what one feels entitled to. One must be able to want the best for all concerned.

Seeking the good involves a kind of personal disinterest. When one's goals are not the usual self-centered ones, some detachment is possible regarding their fulfillment.

That does not mean being indifferent or blasé, but patient. While success or failure should not to be taken any more personally than the outcome of a chemistry experiment, the consumer attitude *does* take things personally, because the underlying belief is that events (and, indeed, the experience itself) are all-important for one's personal well-being. Significance is judged in relation to self. However, to paraphrase Jesus, it is not what you consume that makes you good, but what you do and say. While that means outward actions, performed for the benefit of others, it can also mean inward action performed to strengthen your own being, so that you are better able to act for the greater good.

Such inward action is categorically different from the externally-oriented actions we perform to get the satisfactions we want from experience. It is natural to try to get the world to conform to our expectations, just as it is natural to conform to the expectations of others in order to get them to like us or do what we want. But inward action is not a negotiation with the outside. The freedom it seeks is to be able to act independently of pressures from biological or social programming or fear of others. The goal is not to be "natural" but to be self-determining. That does not mean avoiding such pressures by living apart from people, much less by denying genuine physical needs. We can scarcely avoid either. It *does* mean re-evaluating one's considerations, including the relationship to one's own and others' bodies.

We live through the body, which is our interface with the world and others. We may use the body for the experience it provides, both positive and negative. We might reward or punish ourselves by subjecting the body to stimuli that provide pleasant or unpleasant sensations. However, self-



manipulation via the body involves an irrational subject-object relation with oneself. The use of experience for either self-reward or self-punishment merely continues the consumer relationship to experience. It is unjust that the body should suffer for our sins and unseemly that it should be merely an instrument of pleasure. The proper relationship is to use the body as a *sensor*, for information to guide appropriate action. One must literally come to one's senses for this purpose, including feedback provided by the bodily sensations involved in conscience. Ideally, one would know and choose the objective good in the first place, the right attitude for the situation. If not, it is not self-punishment that is required but true remorse, with earnest resolve to correct the situation if possible, and do better next time.

Given that we are scarcely in control of ourselves, much less of external reality, what guarantee is there that we can or will do good? To do the best that we can requires at least the *intention* to do good. But, even with that seeming conscious intention, it often happens that some other motivation secretly prevails and some other character than one's best self may step forth to do something less than one's best. Recognizing this after the fact, we may feel guilt or remorse, with the resolve to improve. Yet, even if one can remember not to repeat the same exact mistake, the *general* problem of how to not fool oneself remains. Is there some way to prevent that sort of self-deception, to guarantee the right attitude?

One is wise to be suspicious of emotion, which is often reactive or reflects no more than the drives and interests of the biological organism. Yet, there is a singular emotion that ostensibly corresponds to the intention to do good. In English, this has been ambiguously named *love*, and perhaps no other word has been so misused because of its

multiplicity of meanings. (The Greek word *agape* is more precise.) The warm *feeling* of love may not be sufficient to guarantee the intention to do good, let alone the outcome. (After all, it is often confused with desire or lust.) But the feeling may help, especially if it is corroborated by reason.

The body is external to consciousness as an object of attention, even though consciousness is created in and by the body. That puts the self in a tricky situation, as both a function of the body and as something potentially transcending it. Human beings have long resisted the body's impositions, which seem to provide disagreeable experience along with the agreeable. The body can seem to impinge on an ideal of disembodied freedom to act as we please and consume what experience we please. The self is thus conceived as something apart from the body and even opposed to its nature and needs. There can be suffering when there is disappointment of our expectations, or of our fantasy of limitless freedom. Such suffering is "mechanical" insofar as it results from forces that we do not consciously initiate or control.

There is a different kind of suffering, which paradoxically does not "hurt" in the same way as the usual variety. For one thing, one cannot feel victimized or sorry for oneself, since this "suffering" is deliberately embraced. It involves a quest for inner rather than outer freedom. This is known as *intentional suffering*, since it results from the deliberate confrontation between one's nature as an intentional being and one's inherited nature as a product of mechanistic forces and habit. It results from purposefully struggling with the "knee jerk" responses that ordinarily inform our identity and limit our actual inner freedom. Whether one succeeds or fails in the details of this struggle, the effort itself reshapes one from within. This is not a

matter of resisting impulses because they are bad or immoral (although they may be). Rather, the issue is whether one *reacts* mechanically or *acts* by conscious choice. It is not an effort to be good, or even to do good, any more than physical exercise is. For the purpose of this “work on self,” one could as well struggle against innocuous habits that society approves or ignores.

Disapproval by others can even be deliberately provoked in order to enhance one’s freedom from their approval. This may alienate others from you, though it mustn’t alienate you from them. Success at this experiment means that you do not succumb to seeing yourself as bad or good, neither feeling righteous nor feeling shame or embarrassment, much less blaming others for their disapproval. You do not react negatively or defensively to attacks, whether provoked or not. This does not, however, mean that you have succeeded at being good or doing good, which is not the goal. Such an exercise is for your inner benefit, and it should only be minimally at the expense of others. Doing good, in contrast, means acting positively for *their* benefit, which could be at some cost to yourself.

The archaic meaning of *suffer* is to allow, while the modern connotation implies resistance. (We are for pleasure and against suffering, but can there be one without the other?) To be free from feelings of guilt is a modern idea. But guilt is an important signal, an internal memo. The issue it raises must be resolved, not ignored. Some internal tribunal must decide, for example, whether the accused is truly guilty or simply being manipulated by others or by one’s own insecurities. If the guilt is just, the solution is true remorse, attended by self-forgiveness, determination to do better in future, and reparation when

appropriate. If the latter, the solution is forbearance of one's false accusers and vigilance in future.

Intentional suffering allows negative experience that comes either uninvited or provoked, but does not wallow in it. One struggles against one's programmed responses, disengaging from the desire for positive experience and from the aversion to negative experience. The relationship to experience is renegotiated in the moment, which strengthens the self and cultivates realistically possible inner freedom.

# Chapter Seven: To Be or Not to Be

“If you come to a fork in the road, take it.”—Yogi Berra

**M**omentary experiences of “awakening” can occur spontaneously. These self-conscious moments may open our eyes to the possibility of a more pro-active and more fully present state of being. Such unsought intrusions tend to be subsumed as part of the flow of interesting experiences *until they are intentionally sought out and cultivated*. Then the exercise of intentionality may change one’s being. Self-remembering intentionally seeks that state of self-consciousness.

What exactly happens in the moment of self-remembering? Simply put, focus shifts—either spontaneously or deliberately—from “out there” to “in here,” in such a way that one becomes acutely aware of being a perceiving agent. It is then not just that the world exists, or that thoughts exist, but that you exist in relation to them. Because the normal outward focus is by nature entrancing, there is a sense of waking up, or stepping back, or snapping out of a trance. One may become aware of sensations in the body, for example, in addition to whatever had occupied the focus of attention. Something in experience serves as a cue to one’s presence as a subject. There is a sense of *I am*.

“What it is like” to be in this state may seem only subtly different in terms of actual sensations. You could, for example, simply become aware of the outline of your nose or eye socket, making your existence as a subject literally as plain as the nose on your face. Or, it could be simply feeling the blood coursing in your veins or the sound of your own breathing. Yet, the implications for one’s

behavior can be huge. Feeling your existence as a subject implies awareness of your existence as an agent. There is a heightened sense of responsibility for one's comportment, as for one's experience, and for the shape of one's life.

The demands on our attention, and the inertia and exigencies of daily life, tend to prevent self-remembering. The glimpse of a deeper level of responsibility can be discomfiting and intimidating. There can be regret and anxiety at losing a familiar and comfortable identity and relationship to experience—a little like a loss of innocence and regret for the passing of childhood. The hold of the familiar can be strong, the dream world can seem too engaging to interrupt. But sometimes one is awakened involuntarily, as from a nightmare.

A spiritual teacher can help in this quest for intentionality, especially by setting an example and by engaging the student in a confrontation that forces the mind out of ordinary considerations and rationalizations. However, the teacher-student relation can also be a crutch that keeps the student (and perhaps the teacher) within the confines of a consumer attitude toward the teaching. Ultimately, students must set their own example, embracing the responsibility to force themselves out of their habitual mentality.

When that responsibility is embraced, intentional life resembles a “three-ring circus.” One arena concerns everyday interactions in the world: family, career, social life—the pleasures and satisfactions required to keep the organism alive and healthy. Another arena is “work on self”—training and self-discipline to develop an objective attitude. The third arena is using one's characteristic skills to further the general good. These are not necessarily

sectors distinct in time, but can, with effort, be integrated aspects of intentional life.

“Work on self” takes effort, of course, and effort is tiring. At the end of a normal day of employment, there may be little surplus energy for it. In addition, it can interfere with normal activities that we believe are necessary or desirable and have priority. This is no doubt a reason for the traditional division between monk and householder. The one is devoted to spiritual practice, the other to domestic life—family, career, etc. It is possible to do both concurrently: to be in the world while not entirely of it. In an integrated path, self-remembering is cultivated even while one is engaged in daily activities. Attention is shared between ordinary tasks and work on self, and may also present opportunities to further the general good.

Unpleasant surprises and realizations can provide motivation for change. Old age and mortality are hardly surprises, but they can serve as triggers for change when squarely faced. At any age, wakefulness must be weighed against the potential loss of pleasant dreams. Whatever your stage of life, and whatever your circumstances or disposition, at each moment you are afforded the choice of how and how fully to *be*.

Though one may try to self-remember, one inevitably forgets. So strong is our conditioned nature, so intoxicating the addiction to experience, and such a party-pooper is self-consciousness, that it is a constant struggle to stay awake or sober. In fact, it is simply too hard to remain “awake” all the time. Furthermore, it isn’t necessary. What is necessary is to awaken when wakefulness is needed. One also needs the periodic respite of “sleep.” Yet this means living in a state of contradiction. The inevitability of dozing off must be met with patience and

forbearance, in the context of ongoing vigilance. But, just as one is more vulnerable during literal sleep, so there is the danger of automatic behavior while figuratively sleepwalking, leading possibly to regretted words or actions—not catching oneself soon enough. Yet, that danger is only recognized because of the commitment to wakeful responsibility.

Addiction to experience spells helpless suffering—the lesson of the Buddha. An alternative is to suffer consciously in the frustrating effort to kick the habit. If this applies metaphorically to the consumer attitude, perhaps it applies more literally as well to self-defeating patterns of behavior associated with common addictions. The consumer relation to experience potentially involves a sense of being trapped in a cycle, which is often perceived as victimhood. Indeed, addicts are often victims of childhood abuse. Their past and present circumstance may render it very difficult to escape the pattern, especially if the same inner story is repeated incessantly in a self-inducing trance. Yet, in principle, the fundamental choice of relationship to experience is present at each moment. If one can perceive the choice, there is a realistic basis for hope.

Emotional suffering, like physical pain, is a signal that something is amiss, which needs the conscious attention of the self because it cannot be righted automatically. Physical pain persists during the healing process, as a reminder to take special care of the injured part to facilitate healing, or at least to prevent further damage. Pain normally lessens over the course of tissue repair. Perhaps emotional suffering persists over time for similar reasons: to prevent further damage (to oneself or others), and as a



reminder that the healing has not yet been fully accomplished.

If the will is not strong enough, the self is not in a position to oversee the process of emotional healing. It is good strategy to strengthen the will—not so much to be rid of the emotional suffering per se, much less to ignore the trauma, but to position oneself better to supervise the healing. As with the ubiquitous addiction to experience at large, healing requires patience, self-forgiveness for momentary set-backs, and—above all—persistence.

Healing is not a process separate from living but an experience *of* living. It is not necessary to “fix” oneself first so that one can then proceed to “genuinely” live. One may wish for a normal life; but as the saying goes, ‘Be careful what you wish for.’ Everyone has to be *someone*, with some particular experiences and memories. What matters more than the content or history of your experience is your relation to it. It is never too late nor too difficult to change that relationship.

At the opposite end from the shame of victimhood lies spiritual pride and ambition. A teetotaler might feel superior to a drunkard on skid row. A “seeker” on a spiritual path might feel superior to the uninitiated. Such feelings are delusions and distractions, because they indulge comparison and judgment in order to sidestep the real issue: *to be or not to be conscious, right here and right now*. The risk is always that the spiritual path itself becomes a distracting new entertainment, a new form of sleep.

People pride themselves on their accomplishments and possessions, and spiritual aspirants are no different. As soon as there appears to be a goal, one is tempted to measure one’s progress and compare oneself to others. On

the one hand, that can invoke envy; on the other, pride. In either case, there is a consumer attitude toward a quality, state, or power to acquire and possess as though it were a thing outside one's own being. If you don't have it, you need to get it. If you do have it, you need to hold on to it to prove your status, and you may fear to lose it. Such possessiveness has appropriately been dubbed 'spiritual materialism'. It is the paradoxical bane of seekers.

The only spiritual power is the power to do good. To exercise it one must see clearly what is needed. In our culture, "objectivity" trivially implies the power to manipulate nature and others, often through lack of feeling narrowed by self-interest. Yet, feeling—not sentimentality but sober discernment and sensitivity to larger concerns—is the basis of doing good. It must become the basis of a personal *practice* of objectivity. All that may sound abstract and pretentious. In fact, it is a personal challenge and potentially transformative. The world is objectively changing. One way or another, no one can expect to remain the same person with the same life. One must continue to live, of course, providing the body and mind with their needs. But the world can no longer afford for us to be primarily *driven* by those needs, doing only what comes naturally.

## Chapter Eight: Being Objective

“He who loves the world as his body may be entrusted with the empire.” —Lao Tsu

We humans are conflicted beings. We think of ourselves as organisms and also as gods. We conceived the concept of *rational person* to distinguish ourselves from the category of *animal*, which we projected upon other creatures and even upon other human tribes, only eventually to realize that *homo sapiens*, too, fits within the animal category and is driven by primate biological nature. We also conceived the concept of the *divine*, which was projected upon idealized beings such as Jehovah, Allah, Christ, Buddha, along with diverse angels, saints, and spirits. In the same spiritual framework, the unsavory aspects of our animal nature were projected upon malevolent beings, such as demons and the Devil. That is, aspects of our nature, both good and bad, were *disowned* through the psychological mechanisms of externalization and reification.

Recognizing our biological nature can help us to understand our own troubling behaviors and thoughts and those of our kind. It doesn't, however, tell us how to pursue the divine, the Ideal that is latent within us. On the other hand, even religion tends to disown this Ideal by projecting it outside us, onto a heavenly host. Of course, we are admonished to imitate Christ, the Prophet, or Buddha. These were exceptional people, who embodied the Ideal far better than the rest of us. Yet, the very gulf between our ordinary selves and these extraordinary figures serves to shield us from the moral obligation to try to live in their manner, pursuing the Ideal. The very

attitude of *worship* keeps us safely distant from them and from the obligation to embody the Ideal ourselves. After all, *we* are mere mortals and sinners: not saints but beasts at heart. It is highly presumptuous to seek to *be* divine, since the Ideal, by definition, is beyond human reach.

The dividedness of our nature helps to explain how profound spiritual teachings are eventually perverted through the institutionalization of religion; and how great social ideals are perverted through secular institutionalization. Opposing intentions are involved, with a compromise between our spiritual and our animal natures. For example, Jesus preached high ideals of humility, universal love, generosity, and non-materialistic values. His style encouraged original thinking about moral issues. The church that others formed in his name from these teachings ironically became rich, arrogant, warlike, cruel, self-serving, and dogmatic, demanding blind faith—effectively because these qualities are more compatible with our animal nature than the high ideals. Social and political revolutions similarly begin with ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, and then degenerate into state terror and the pursuit of greed. We can recognize in these patterns the influences of our biological nature, which result in a disappointing compromising between the Ideal and our animal nature. The human world *is* this compromise. We strive for principles such as universal human rights, justice, equality, rationality, and kindness. But the reality of the world is rife with injustice, growing inequality, violence and abuse of rights. The irony—that these unsavory realities emerge even *in the name of our ideals*—shows the degree of perversion.

With one foot in each of two worlds, the human tendency is to seek the *power* of gods more than the benevolence,

justice, or wisdom also projected upon them. This is literally natural, since one foot is planted firmly in biological necessity, driven by genetic advantage. Our more ethereal “best foot forward” has only a tenuous foothold on the far side of our being. We barely grasp the possibility of genuine objective consciousness, for example. The potential is to intentionally build the Ideal world upon the scaffold of the highly parochial animal brain. We’ve had our saints and colonizers, but have planted no flag signifying determination to think and act like a species capable of moral godhood. In the face of the now dire need to be truly objective—in order to secure a future for humanity—we remain pathetically subjective, reactive, divided, self-centered, self-pitying, bickering, greedy, myopic, and mean. A fitting epitaph for a planet-ruining creature!

Our divided nature—half animal, half god—explains the compromise at the heart of our world, but not entirely why it occurs. That is, we can view the dilemma as a phenomenon that occurs *out there*, independently from us, and be curious about its causes in a detached way. But the dilemma occurs also *in here*, as a result of our choices and affecting our experience. Each of us participates in it intimately, and can suffer from it personally. The collective result is civilization as we know it, for better and worse. It occurs *through* us, and we sometimes experience the compromise as an internal moral struggle. It is a sobering thought that the precise and shifting balance of animal and god is established at each moment within each of us personally. If so, only through individual self-knowledge, conscious self-struggle, and persistent will can the collective outcome be expected to improve.

Objectivity is one name for the needed attitude and the will to bring about that outcome. Ironically, the term is often associated with the power to manipulate nature and others, and hence with a lack of feeling. But *dispassion* does not preclude *compassion*. Feeling that is habitually biased and self-centered must be relearned as a desire to serve the whole, the basis of a stance that is fundamentally no longer self-oriented. Initially, that feeling might be conviction, guilt or remorse. It must not become another entertainment to consume, reinforcing helpless passivity and contributing to the compromise.

We must indeed first admit that we are often only partially and hazily conscious during literal waking hours. We must recognize ourselves as creatures of habit, zombie-like, who scarcely take possession their own nervous systems. Like those insect brains hijacked by parasites, we may find ourselves living by goals and values that are archaic or not really our own. For lack of practice, we hardly *know* how to think objectively in the required sense. Those are discouraging realizations, but they are not paralyzing. We can, after all, imagine what being objective should be like. We can stand back from the hypnotic screen of daily experience to snap out of the trance. And thereby to sense genuine choice.

We can also recognize that conventional goals and “normal” values are no longer appropriate in a world teetering on the brink of destruction. Collectively, we cannot afford to carry on “business as usual,” even if that business seems natural or self-evident—such as family and career, pursuit of wealth and status. The world does not need more billionaires. (It does not need more people at all!) It *does* need intelligent minds and hearts dedicated to solving its problems. Objective thinking is necessary but may not be sufficient. It does not guarantee solution of

these problems, nor consensus. Yet it does provide a better basis for agreement and therefore for cooperation. To be objective requires recognizing one's actual motivations in a given moment and re-aligning them with objective needs. Objectivity is not deciding *which* among parochial values are best and should prevail in the future. It means transcending such values in favor of an Ideal that implies consensus and long-term survival.

Objectivity literally means "objectness." It is like walking around something to see it from all sides rather than a single spatial perspective. Our natural visual sense provides a metaphor. As individual perceivers, we see any given thing at a given moment from a literal perspective in space. The brain naturally tries to identify the object that one is seeing, against a confusing background. That means identifying its properties, such as shape, size, location, distance, and solidity. We call these properties objective, meaning that they inhere in the thing itself and are not incidental to our perspective or way of looking. This process is helped by viewing the thing from different angles, against changing backgrounds. It can also be helped by seeing it as though through different eyes.

Objectivity on this literal level helps us to know the real properties of things, apart from our biased opinions. It serves us on other levels, too, when we need to know the right course of action corresponding to the real situation. The striving for objectivity implies filtering out the possibly irrelevant "noise" of nervous system and culture, bracketing biologically and culturally determined preferences and habits of thought. The objectivity practiced by science enables consensus. While it relies on mutual respect among scientists, it depends crucially upon following protocols agreed upon in common and deferring

to the reality of nature to ultimately decide scientific questions through experiment. In the same way, objective thinking in daily or political life *can* enable consensus about the common reality, if we follow the scientific example. We can best come to agreement when there is first an agreed-upon insistence to identify and transcend biases that lead to disagreement. It requires clarity to foresee the experiment that decides a political question and patience to endure the process.

The objective way of being may prove too daunting for mortal animals, but at least it has been glimpsed. Sadly, the glimpse often comes late in life, not to mention late in social history. The real need now is for life henceforth to be founded on it. The only hope for the human race is that enough influential people adopt an intention of objective benevolence, purposing the general good in place of the default of personal good or tribal good. That intention is the only legitimate morality and the only claim to full consciousness. It may be an impossible ideal, and too belated. Yet, it offers possibilities of action within everyone's reach. Whether or not humanity as a whole can set foot on that other shore, at least it is open to individuals to try.



# Chapter Nine: Being Dead

“Life is a sexually transmitted disease.” —graffito

**T**he natural conclusion of the challenges of being alive is death. If my understanding is correct, there is not much to say about the experience of being dead. For, if consciousness is a function of the living body and ceases with its life, being dead will not be a new experience but no experience at all. Of course, the physical body will undergo changes when its ability to self-maintain has ceased. But the self will already have quit.

I find it useful, and not unpleasant, to contemplate mortality. Fear of not existing should be distinguished from fear of the experience of dying, which could be quite unpleasant, since pain normally signals that something is wrong in the organism. Fear of being dead, on the other hand, is little more than superstition, conditioned by religious myths and anxiety concerning the unknown.

Some people may be anxious about dying because they think they might go to hell—condemned to an unending consumption of unpleasant experience. Or because they might lose the chance for eternal bliss. If one cannot, while alive, make up one’s mind concerning what to believe about reality, it will be too late to do anything about it after death. Personally, I trust that experience simply ends with the death of the body. To some people that may be unnerving, perhaps because it is difficult even to conceive an end to one’s experience. For, we can scarcely imagine *not being*. (Try to imagine it, and there you still are, trying!) The uncanniness of *not being* is the other side of the uncanniness of being.

Of course, I could be wrong. Perhaps there is a God and an afterlife. Perhaps I lived before in another body and have simply forgotten. Perhaps the Bible or the Koran is the literal word of God or his prophets. Perhaps God is literally a jealous old man and the universe was created in six days. Perhaps I will burn in hell for not believing so. The supposed ontology of the world depends ultimately on the epistemology we apply to it. What we suppose exists depends on what we trust as reliable information and ways of knowing. Part of the perplexity of being human is the challenge of knowing what to believe.

If you think life after death is a purely academic question, then there is little cause for anxiety. If you think there are personal consequences in an afterlife for what you do and believe now, then the matter is more serious. The apocryphal atheist who goes to church to hedge his bets (“just in case”) is trying to be pragmatic but is acting in bad faith. There is no logical compromise between afterlife or no afterlife. Or between materialism and transmigration of the soul.

Uncertainty about death is part of our inevitable uncertainty about reality. Absolute certainty is simply not within our grasp. Of course, the conviction or *feeling* of certainty is quite possible and is enthusiastically embraced. However, the only absolute certainty concerns what is *defined* to be true: tautologies such as ‘all men are male’ and axioms of mathematics such as  $x = x$ . ‘One plus one equals two’ seems to apply to real situations in the world because it generalizes actual experience of grouping things together. However, generalizations are only conditionally true. (For example, adding one litre of water to one litre of alcohol does not give two litres of liquid!) Only as a *definition* is a generalization *necessarily* true.

People take refuge in claims they hold to be authoritative, such as those of science or religion or their favorite demagogue. But no source of information can be perfectly reliable—including the information provided by one’s own senses (let alone that provided in the news, social media, or scripture). Blind faith in any authority simply dodges personal responsibility for one’s beliefs and claims. Just as experience can be passively consumed, so can information. Let the buyer beware! An alternative is to actively and deliberately do one’s best to investigate for oneself. Thus, one can claim responsibility for choices of what to believe, which are inevitably made in the face of uncertainty.

But on what basis to choose if nothing is certain? For us creatures with our naturally outward orientation, the justification of knowledge or belief is normally presumed to hinge on something external. That presumption is appropriate for many daily practical decisions that depend on information about the world. It rightly emphasizes the external “object” factor that co-determines experience, thought, and behavior along with the internal “subject” factor. However, the mind’s external orientation then inappropriately extends to choices that rather involve the subject factor. While some moral choices, for example, depend on reliable information and have consequences in the world, even so they may reflect and also shape the character of the person along with the outcome. Some questions may be undecidable on the basis of available information. Then the answer must come from within, reflecting the inner being of the person. The question can put one on the spot, requiring self-examination, a reach from deep within to produce an answer based on *who one is* rather than based on dubious facts about the world.

One could despair over the impossibility of certainty, as over the meaninglessness of life. Such a response implies that one is *entitled* to certainty and meaning. The expectation is that meaning and certainty should be conveniently provided by the external world. But reality is under no obligation to meet our expectations. And, beyond the need to survive, we are under no obligation to base our beliefs and actions upon questionable appearances. In truth, one does not necessarily *need* to feel certain or even to feel that life has meaning in order to live. Certainty and meaning are luxuries. After all, as *feelings*, they are properties of the subject, not necessarily properties of the world.

We have control of our maps, so to speak, but only indirectly and imperfectly do we control the territory, which to some extent we *can* change, though not always in reliably predictable ways. We can be certain of what the map contains because we put it there. We make the map. While it is supposed to represent the territory, exactly *how* it represents is discretionary and symbolic. Maps are human creations over which we have more direct control than over the territory—and therefore more responsibility.

To put off choice among apparent alternatives is itself a choice, which recognizes there could be alternatives one hasn't thought of. Refusing to come to a conclusion can be an avoidance of responsibility. If consciously deliberate, however, that is sometimes the wisest course in the face of inadequate information. I call this refusal the *stance of unknowing*, which could also be called the willing suspension of belief. To choose responsibly exercises and strengthens one's being, literally making up one's mind. So too does cultivating the ability to tolerate uncertainty, defer judgment, and wait for more or better information.

The ever-present meta-choice is whether to live intentionally or mechanically. Apart from that, there is a choice at each moment whether to live at all. The natural inclination of the flesh is to carry on. The mechanical life of habits, especially, has an inertia. Yet, experience can become so unpleasant or discouraging that hope—the driving force that eggs us on—is lost. Ongoing experience may be rejected because it is unbearable. It may seem better to end it—at least on the assumption that experience mercifully stops with the death of the body.

Physical pain or disability drives some people to contemplate suicide. Such experiences may relate to denied hope in the context of an otherwise meaningful life. For other people, suicide represents an escape from meaninglessness itself. (*That* despair is paradoxical—because, if you care enough about “meaninglessness” to suffer over it, then something at least is meaningful to you!) Some people are angry at God (or Nature, Society, or their Parents) because of injustice, which means they actually care deeply. Some may consider suicide out of spite or protest, even as a political statement (as in the case of self-immolations and hunger strikes). And some people come to hate their body as a source of pain or shame.

I believe the choice *not* to live is a fundamental right and should not be lightly thwarted by others unless they can justifiably disagree with the potential suicide’s self-assessment. Of course, a person can be so caught up in a depressive state that their judgment is impaired. On the other hand, our society is so obsessed with the denial of death that we have conceived a policy of preserving life at any cost, however miserable that life might be. That is more an irrational compulsion than consideration for the welfare of the suicide candidate. It is not love. Thus, family members may selfishly override a patient’s wish to

die (or not be resuscitated) because they cannot bear to say goodbye. Their own existence will feel too empty without the presence of the suffering loved one, whose looming death reminds them unpleasantly of their own vulnerability and mortality. Or they may feel guilty if they do not do all possible to save the life, on the banal assumption that life is unconditionally good.

To take charge of one's ending seems a logical extension of taking charge of one's earlier life. On the other hand, for many people, dying can be an experience simply to endure if not to fear, hardly something to take in hand.

Because medical science learned how to prolong life without health, dying can be a painful process of slow decline. Indeed, only now do people live long enough to die of the "diseases of old age." What are now considered remediable conditions in the elderly (such as cancer, heart disease, and pneumonia) were once regarded simply as the details of how a person naturally succumbs. After all, one has to die *somehow*; in some particular way, the body fails. Some people die peacefully in their sleep when the heart stops beating; some suffer prolonged agony before the heart finally gives up. Others first lose their minds. Contemplating these diverse prospects is one reason to think about how to take charge of one's dying, rather than to leave it in the hands of others or chance.

The reason for suicide or assisted death might be to avoid prolonged suffering. The experience of pain could be so unrelenting and overwhelming as to incapacitate the person for any meaningful activity, presence of mind, or desire to carry on. On the other hand, especially with the aid of pain-relieving medication, the experience of dying might be bearable, even interesting to be fully present for. The final days of life might still offer some creative

challenge, some opportunity to work on self; the reduced self might still be productive, or of some use to others. Such prospects can make it worthwhile to carry on even in the face of great discomfort. Indeed, one might simply be curious to see the whole show through to the last. These are existential choices facing the lucid individual nearing death, which no one should judge.

It serves society to cherish individual life, regardless of that individual's asset to society or their burden on it. There may be a collective sense of security when law and custom uphold life per se as intrinsically valuable—even to prolong “life” at any cost, regardless of the quality of that life. It can be unnerving to think otherwise—that this policy could be conditional, as it has been on many occasions throughout history. We may hold the universal value of human life as sacred, an ideal essential to civilization and progress. Yet that is counterproductive from the indifferent point of view of natural selection, and perhaps cruel from the point of view a person who no longer considers life worth living.

The unconditional value of human life is unrealistic for humanity's future, without a simultaneous program of population control. Population growth is partly due to reduced infant mortality and extended longevity, without considering the broader consequences. To manage our affairs on this planet will require that global society intend an overall balance that works toward the greatest long-term good. It may seem to modern individuals that they have the right to simply enjoy “doing what comes naturally,” which for thousands of years included having sex, raising families, competing economically and socially, fighting wars, and generally overrunning the planet. For

humanity to survive at this juncture, however, it must wake up to a new reality.

Through nominally humane social policies, we may be breeding ourselves into senility and overbreeding ourselves to ecological collapse. The intrinsic value of life is also a hypocrisy insofar as we continue to slaughter each other in wars, not to mention the slaughter of animals in meat factories. The implicit ideal of capitalist society (to get ahead of others!) likewise does violence to the other. It demeans the intrinsic value of those lives whose poverty is thereby endorsed and enforced, as we seek more than our share. In numerous ways, focus on quantity obscures attention to quality.

Death poses numerous dilemmas for those who imagine consciousness can be immortal because it is not a bodily function like breathing. There are theological questions, such as what happens to “you” between death and Judgment Day, or until the body is resurrected, or between reincarnations. Other questions are more philosophical, such as why do we even have a body if we are actually immaterial mind stuff? Or: what is the relationship between mind and body, consciousness and matter? There can be practical or social questions, such as how to treat the body after death, if the spirit may still be lingering about. Or: whether your consciousness could or should be downloaded into a new body, or uploaded to a virtual cyber heaven. Or: whether AI can be conscious and still be controlled.

One thing I don't look forward to about being dead is that I will not know the ongoing story of humanity, future scientific discoveries, what becomes of children I know, or what becomes of my own efforts. But such concerns



reflect my present attitude toward experience, which will no longer exist. They may reflect the human attachment to *story*, such that we expect to know how the story ends. After dying, I can neither know those futures nor contribute to them. I will no longer be able to act, either to change the world or to enhance my own being. That makes the present precious. On the other hand, there are things to do now that might continue to contribute to the future post-mortem. That could be a donation, a written testament aptly called a will, a book such as this one, or some other deliberate initiative or legacy.

As an elder, I have no desire to live forever. Civilization seems on the brink of collapse—but perhaps it always has. Perhaps I will continue, in relative health, to think and write for some time to come. But just as one can fear death because of possible bad experience to follow, so one can fear to go on living indefinitely because of possible bad experience to come, or at least diminishing returns on the investments made in living. Is it better to quit while ahead? Even if my personal continuation could be guaranteed benign and constructive, it makes sense to cede place eventually to fresh talent.

As my friends and cohorts die off, what can I say to the survivors whose time will come, like my own, soon enough? Only what I tell myself: Don't be afraid or resentful. Be calm. Be curious. If you can, be cheerful. Go into death loving the life you've had!



# Epitaph: How to Be

“When you were born you cried and the world rejoiced; live your life so that when you die the world cries and you rejoice.”  
—proverb

The verb *to be* is ambiguous in many languages because of a double meaning. On the one hand it indicates existence; on the other, identity. *Who* a person is, or *what* a thing is, are concepts of identity. *That* a person is asserts existence. ‘There *is* an integer between one and three’ asserts existence. ‘One plus two *is* three’ asserts identity.

By now it should be clear that I do not prescribe who or what you should be, your identity. If I encourage you to *be more* or to *be better*, I am not talking about accomplishments, longevity, improving your morals or public profile, or expanding your curriculum vitae or circle of friends. Those are matters of identity. If I mention *how to be*, I do not mean only your comportment in the world, but how to enhance your own sense of being. Here are a few simple things one can do to more deeply *be*. They are examples and suggestions only, not formulas for spiritual, much less worldly, success. They involve developing inner agency, also known as intentionality or will:

1. *Self-remember*. That is the most important practice, which you can cultivate any time or place.
2. Set aside alone time to contemplate or meditate, if only to observe your own state—the comings and goings of thoughts, body sensations, etc. In observing the stream of consciousness without being swept along in it, “you” stand apart from it. By consciously facing experience moment to

moment, you know yourself better and strengthen your sense of being. This is often called mindfulness or meditation.

3. Set a goal to do something arbitrary at specific times (for example, twice a day or on the hour). It could be just to wiggle your left big toe. It is arbitrary, in order to emphasize that the task is purely to develop will or self-possession, by remembering the intention in the midst of other activities. You could start by setting an alarm clock, and then try to do without it.

4. In an appropriate setting (for example, while alone and manually washing dishes at the kitchen sink), slow your motions down to half speed and try to notice every detail of what you see and feel. Then quarter speed. This disrupts “mechanical” habit and focuses deliberate attention.

5. Choose some characteristic feeling, impulse, or behavior that arises repeatedly or automatically. Let it serve for you as a reminder of your “mechanical” nature, and try to resist it. (The point is not to succeed, nor to improve your moral standing or be happier, but to self-remember and develop intentionality. If you are not convinced of your own mechanical nature, this exercise will help to convince you.)

6. Strive to act for the benefit of others, but realize they also present opportunities for work on self. For example, try to catch yourself responding to others in habitual or self-centered ways. That could be when someone disappoints, frustrates, insults, irritates or angers you—or, for that matter, when they praise or honor you. Acknowledge your response and let it go.

7. When going into a challenging situation, ask yourself: what good can I do here? How can I now best use my particular talents for the benefit of those concerned? Toward that end, it helps to recognize your emotional set at the moment. Apart from making the world a better place, this intention encourages objectivity and self-possession rather than reactivity.

8. Be honest with yourself. (Not easy, given our brilliant human capacity to rationalize!) Never make excuses or justify yourself. Admit when you are wrong and don't gloat when you are right. Take responsibility for your feelings as well as your actions. (If you feel lust, don't call it love. If you feel anger or sorrow, don't blame it on anyone or anything. If you feel joy, recall that this too shall pass.) Claim any feeling as your own active response, created in your own body and brain, perhaps occasioned, but not caused, by the external world. This is not to deny the role of others or external reality, but to own your part.

9. Contemplate your death. If you are young, acknowledge that you *will die*, and let your awareness of limited time guide the planning and course of your life. If you are old, let your looming mortality remind you to put your house in order before it is abandoned. Behave appropriately to your stage of life and accumulated wisdom. As Gurdjieff might have said: try not to die like a dog!

10. Pray for others and for the salvation of the world. Pray for your own soul, not because you believe in God (or the soul) but because it is your most earnest desire to be and do the best that you can. To do your part in the world becoming the best it can. Even (or perhaps especially) if

you are an atheist, this will ground your efforts in the “heart” side of your intention to do good and to consciously realize your potential.

While disciplined, be patient with yourself, recalling that (like everyone else) you are a being with one foot in two worlds: a biological creature with the potential for greater self-determination and a more conscious life.

Good luck!