

## *Doing and knowing*

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### **Personal perception**

As persons in the world, we do things with our bodies, our senses and our minds. Thus, through our physical and sensual and mental capabilities, we interact with objects that we think about and see. But what about our consciousness? What sort of capability is it? What is the knowing that we do through it?

We usually think of consciousness as a personal capability, whose knowing is a personal activity towards the objects that are known. But this activity – of physical and sensual and mental knowing – gives us a curiously distorted picture of the world. Each person is then pictured, in her or his own view, as a knowing island of personal experience, surrounded by a known world. Figure 1 shows an illustration.

The evident distortion here is that the knowing personality is given far too much importance, as the centre of the world. Seen from this apparent centre, our views of world get personally coloured and distorted, by partialities of personality.

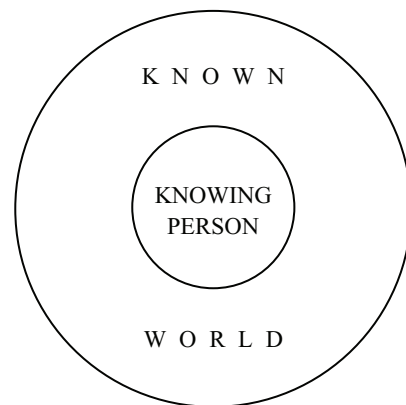
When the world is examined objectively, some of our distortions are questioned and discarded, through further pictures of the world that are developed by objective science. However, such objective pictures have problems of their own. They are each built from limiting assumptions, which makes them specialized. The more a picture is built up objectively, the more specialized it gets. So there is an inherent problem of putting the specializations together. For that, and to correct mistaken assumptions, we sometimes do reflect from our objective pictures, into a more direct experience that is essentially subjective.

### **Subjective experience**

What happens when experience is examined subjectively? There too, a questioning is possible, to uncover and correct mistakes. In particular, we can ask how far it's true that knowing is a personal activity.

For a start, is knowing an activity of body? Do our bodies and their brains know anything themselves? From a subjective point of view, the answer is no, not quite. Our bodies and brains are physical objects, interacting with other such objects. That interaction is not knowledge in itself, but only a means of knowing. Each body is only a physical instrument. As things are experienced subjectively, they are not known *by* anyone's body, but only *through* it. So this body cannot be the subjective centre of anyone's experience.

*Figure 1 – Knowing island*



Then what about our senses? Do they know anything themselves? Again, not quite. Through our bodily interactions with objects, the senses form perceptions, which appear in mind. Our senses are thus instruments, producing sights, sounds, odours, flavours and sensations of touch, which our minds interpret as perceptions of objects. In our subjective experience, things are not known *by* any faculty of sense, but only *through* it. No such faculty can be the centre of subjective experience.

And what about our minds? How do we know things here? As we investigate our mental experience, a rather different picture of how we know appears. Here, no surrounding world is seen, around a knowing body. In the experience of our minds, no one sees the whole surrounding world, in all directions all at once. That isn't how the mind perceives. At any point of time, the mind's attention is limited to some particular object, which then appears perceived.

Over a period of time, many things may be perceived, as attention turns to them, one after another. Then, later on, these many things may be conceived together, in a further thought. Or, conversely, the mind may see a single thing and later analyse it into many things, in the course of further thoughts. In either case, it takes time for different things to show up in one's mind.

In the present moment, as it is immediately experienced, there is no time for different things to show or to be analysed. What appears is just one object, at the tip of mind's attention, which the present object occupies.

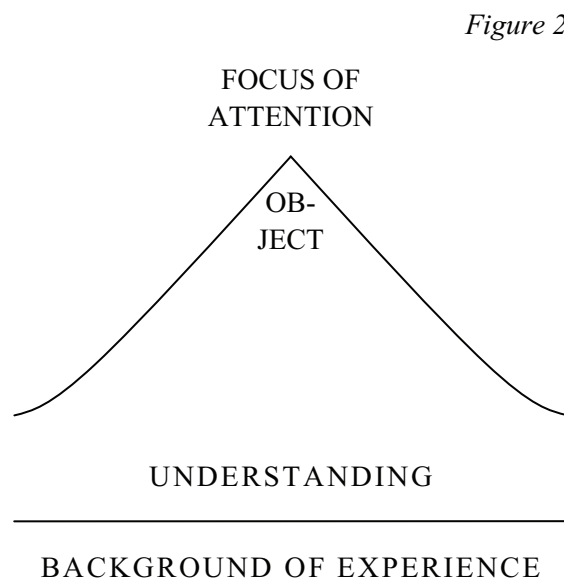
In each such perception, the object seen is at a focus of attention, narrowed to a single tip. And, in this attention is understood everything that is known about the object: its location, its relationship with other objects, and how it is part of a larger world. Thus, while the object is perceived at the front tip of attention, this narrowed perception is built upon a broader basis of understanding, at the background of experience.

For example, suppose a driver notices that his car is sounding a little odd. Many things go into this perception: like how the car sounded before, the various other things that have been happening with the car, what sort of car it is, the uses for which it is needed, the other people who are going to drive it, the driver's previous experiences with cars and machines and mechanics, and so on. All these things are understood at the background of experience, while attention is focused on the sound of the car. The background understanding provides a subjective basis, upon which the driver listens to the sound.

We have here a mental picture of experience: as rising from an underlying background, so as to focus on a particular object. Figure 2 shows an illustration.

What is this subjective basis, at the background of experience? It is evidently the underlying depth of our minds, beneath the apparent surface of limited attention.

As attention turns to different objects, they appear one after another at the surface of the mind, in a changing



stream of limited perceptions. But we know more than this limited and changing surface. As we see an apparent object, we somehow take other things into account, in our understanding of what is seen. So we do not just *see* things at the front tip of the mind's attention. We also *understand* them, and thus take different things into account, at the background of experience.

In effect, we seem to have two different kinds of knowledge in our minds.

- On the surface, we have a limited and changing perception, through which particular objects appear and disappear.
- Beneath the changing surface, there is a background knowledge that continues quietly, without distracting attention from the apparent objects which come and go at the surface. This quiet, continuing knowledge enables us to take into account what our minds don't make appear.

At first it seems that both these kinds of knowledge are activities of mind. The first is an apparent activity, displaying a successive stream of changing show, rather like the moving pictures on a video screen. The second is a hidden activity, often called 'unconscious' mind. Here, beneath the surface, the mind stores data and processes it; thus acting rather like the inner workings of a computer, behind the information that is displayed.

However, neither of these activities is knowledge in itself. Nor are the two together, in any combination. They cannot be experienced without the light of consciousness. In everyone's experience, that light is always present, illuminating each of the appearances that come and go in mind.

At the tip of mind's attention, objects keep appearing and disappearing, in a stream of superficial, passing show. But as appearances thus change, at the surface of the mind, consciousness stays always present, lighting up what comes and goes.

As known by the illumination of consciousness, the mind is an objective activity. Through its storage and processing and display of information, it produces the succession of appearances that make up the changing surface of each person's experience. Each appearance is a seeming object, including the entire activity of mind. That too is a object which appears and disappears, as attention turns to it and then turns on to other things.

Accordingly, our minds are only instruments of knowledge, like our senses and our bodies. As we experience things subjectively, they are not known *by* mind, but only *through* it. Consciousness is not an activity of any mind. Instead, it is the knowing light by which the mind's activities are illuminated. It lights the mind from deep within, where there is light alone, unmixed with any changing act. That is at once the inmost centre of experience and its deepest ground as well, beneath all limited appearances.

### **Unmixed light**

At the changing surface of our minds, whatever comes into appearance must disappear again, as attention turns away from it. But consciousness does not appear and disappear like this. It carries on beneath the surface, at the underlying background of experience, staying always present there. At that background, objects don't appear; for all appearances and disappearances occur above, at the surface of the mind.

Beneath the surface, in the depth of our experience, there is an underlying consciousness from where illumination comes. But there, no objects or appearances are

seen. Whatever's known is understood, unmixed with any clamouring appearances. There's nothing else but consciousness, shining always unconfined and undisturbed, all on its own. In short, the background of experience is just consciousness, supporting all the differing appearances that different and changing minds keep superimposing upon it.

Thus, consciousness is like a background screen, upon which changing pictures are drawn. It is an ever-present screen, behind our mental picturing. But this screen is not an object that transmits or reflects light. Instead, as consciousness, it *is* light. In itself, it is just light, unmixed with anything else.

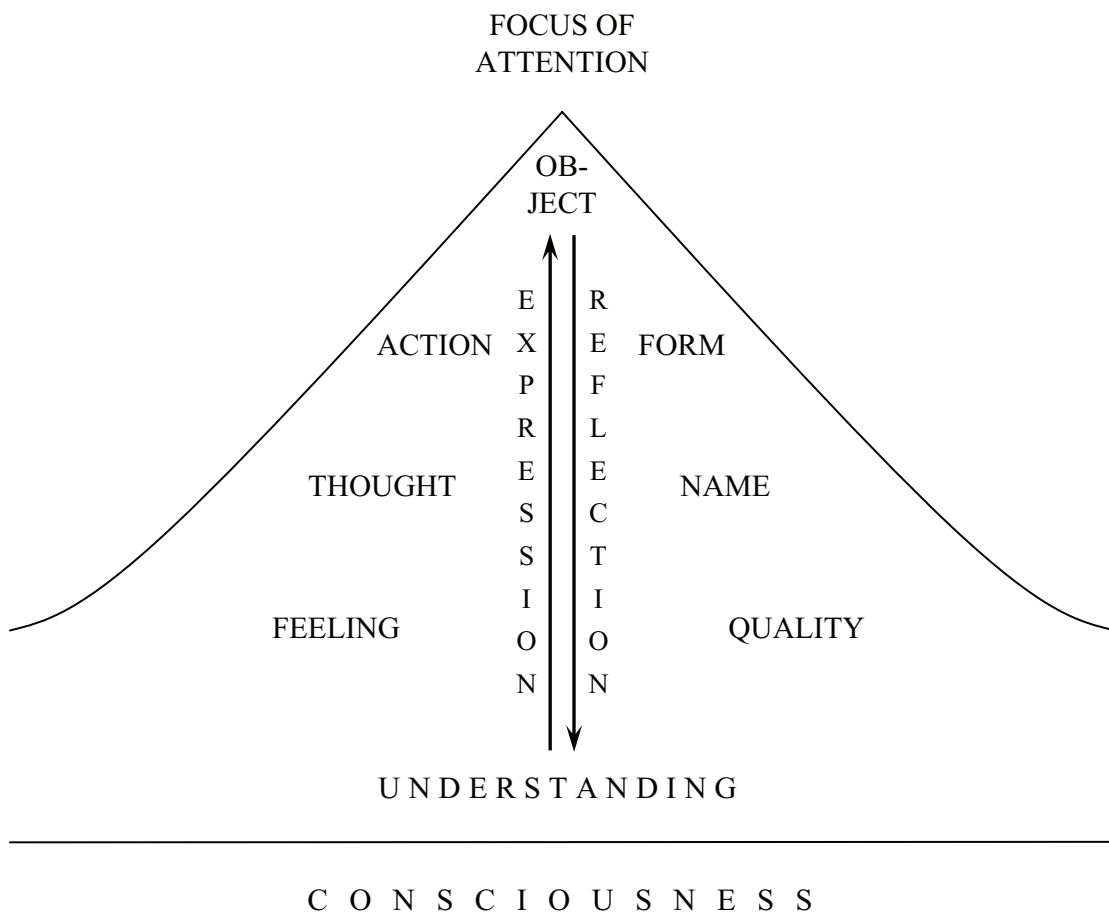
In the pictures that we see, this pure light of consciousness seems mixed with changing qualities and objects. Beneath the pictures, consciousness is their unpictured background and their unmixed light as well. These are two ways of looking at it.

### Life and learning

How are the pictures drawn, upon the screen of consciousness? How does its light get mixed, to form the pictures that we see? These questions may be answered through the idea of 'life'. This is yet another way of looking at consciousness. Here consciousness is seen conceived as underlying life. It is the inner source of life, expressed in all our feelings, thoughts and living acts.

This conception may be illustrated by adding to our previous diagram, as in figure 3. The addition shows a repeated cycle of expression and reflection, which keeps me-

*Fig 3 – Learning in the mind*



diating between underlying consciousness and objects of perception, in the process of our lives.

- First, consciousness is expressed: through understanding, feeling, thought and action. But the expression has a limiting effect. It narrows down attention to some limited object, which then appears at the front tip of personal experience.
- As the object appears, it is perceived, interpreted, judged and understood. This is a reflection back: from the apparent object at the forefront of attention, to underlying consciousness, at the background of experience.

There is thus a movement up and down, through five levels that are illustrated in figure 3 (within the broken triangle formed by the three lines). At the uppermost level, objects keep appearing and disappearing, as attention turns to them and turns away from them. At the second level, actions take attention to objects and thus perceive objective forms. At the third level, thoughts direct action and interpret names. At the fourth level, feelings motivate thought and judge qualities. At the fifth level, understanding co-ordinates our faculties and assimilates our changing experiences into continuing knowledge.

By repeatedly expressing consciousness and returning back to it, we learn from experience. It is thus that misunderstandings get exposed and clarified, and that our living faculties can be developed and adapted. Through this process of learning, our faculties and personalities get changed. But consciousness continues, as their final, knowing ground.

### **Impartiality**

At the ground of consciousness, beneath all change, knowing is impartial and impersonal. It is not the partial action of any personal faculty, acting towards one object at the expense of others. Instead, it is a light that shines by virtue of itself. As consciousness illuminates experience, it does not put on any act. Its knowing is just what it always is. Its very being is to know, to shine with knowing light.

Thus, beneath appearances, knowing and being are the same. There, our knowing is just what we are. And, that ground of knowing is the same for everyone. Beneath all change and difference, it has no name or form or quality that could distinguish it as differing in different personalities. There is no way in which it can be different in one person's experience, as opposed to another person's experience.

Different people act in different ways and see things differently. So actions and appearances can differ. But not the ground of consciousness from which the differences are known. It is our common ground, on which we understand each other and communicate.

When consciousness is understood like this, as our undifferentiated ground, there is a change of perspective. Our personalities are then no longer knowing islands of experience. They are just parts of nature, expressing that same ground of consciousness which underlies all happenings experienced anywhere. Consciousness is thus expressed throughout the world, quite naturally and impersonally, in the impersonality of nature's ordered happenings.

It is not just a poetic, unreasoned metaphor that makes us speak of 'nature's life'. Whenever we find the world intelligible, we see order and meaning in it, reflecting back implicitly into a corresponding order and meaning that is expressed from consciousness in our own lives. We are then listening to nature, to what is said by na-

ture's happenings. Then we are treating nature as alive, as expressing a subjective ground of intelligibility to which we may reflect within ourselves.

There is nothing unreasonable or unscientific in this, provided we can recognize that nature's life is quite impersonal, expressing an impartially subjective ground that we share in common with it. For nature is complete within itself. It includes all acts and happenings, with all their instruments and capabilities and motivations. So it needs nothing from outside to manifest it. It manifests itself spontaneously, of its own accord, from its own ground of underlying consciousness, which lights each manifest appearance from within.

By contrast, our personalities are inherently partial and artificial. They depend on other things, which drive them from outside. That's because there is in them an inherent partiality which we call 'ego'.

This ego is a confusion between doing and knowing. It falsely identifies the partial perceptions of a particular mind and body with the impartial knowing of consciousness. Such mental and physical perceptions are only partial doings, producing the appearances of personal experience. And yet, these partial doings are mistaken to be knowing in themselves. A personal doer, made of partial mind and body, is thus mistakenly identified as knowing self.

Then consciousness appears to be a personal possession, belonging to our little personalities. In fact, it is the other way around. Our personalities and all their acts belong to consciousness. They are its limited expressions, just like all else that is experienced in the world.

How can this confusion be corrected? How can we correct this false, but deeply ingrained confusion between our personal doings and their impartial ground of knowing, which they can only partially express?

Such a correction is of course the aim of spiritual endeavour, which goes about achieving it in many different ways. Some of these ways seem quite opposed to science, but they all share a final aim of freeing knowledge from the partialities of personality. That aim is basic to science as well. Without it, there could be no science.