Nature and life – Old ideas, new questioning

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Traditional knowledge – problems of interpretation

In traditional society, before the use of printing and other modern media, knowledge was expressed and interpreted in a way that is rather different from what we are used to today.

First, traditional forms of expression tended to be rather intensive and condensed: compressing a great deal of thought and perception into the relatively few short aphorisms and verses and other forms of expression that could be passed down by oral memory and personal transmission from generation to generation.

And second, traditional learning was didactic and authoritarian. It was taught through bare assertions and prescriptions that were hard to understand at first, but had to be accepted on authority. On the part of a student, this required an attitude of obedience and trust: in order to accept and painstakingly learn the condensed and often difficult forms of traditional expression, before interpreting them and arguing from their authority.

Because traditional expressions of knowledge were so condensed, they require special interpretation. Accordingly, within each tradition, knowledge was often explained and developed through commentaries on the classic texts of that particular tradition. Such traditional commentaries are obviously useful and have to be taken into account; but, from a modern point of view, they have an unfortunate limitation. They tend to argue from authority, in a way that is no longer appropriate. In particular, they tend to argue from the authority of divine revelation in special states of mystical experience, metaphorically described and esoterically cultivated through traditional disciplines of ritual and religion and meditation.

In the modern world, through the widespread use of printing and other media, recent advances in education and science have significantly developed our ability to reason directly from common experience. Our education no longer requires us to think in mythical, religious and mystical metaphors that must be accepted on the authority of tradition. Instead, we are educated to question accepted ideas and beliefs, on the basis of our own experience. And, through modern scientific enquiry, we are educated to question directly, by abstract and analytic reasoning about the common principles of experience that underlie different appearances: perceived at different times and by different people, from different points of view.

Thus, traditional knowledge needs to be reinterpreted, by approaching it in a new way. It is no longer appropriate to prescribe thought didactically, through an authorized creed of mythical, religious and mystical metaphors. Instead, traditional conceptions are open to question, to ask what they might mean, through a direct, analytic enquiry into common experience. That is the approach attempted in this paper.

Nature and consciousness – objective and subjective

The English word ‘nature’ comes from the Latin ‘natus’, meaning ‘born’ or ‘produced’. This derivation reflects the sense of creativity and dynamism that is associated with the concept of nature. On the one hand, the concept refers to *underlying* nature, from which arise the changing phenomena or appearances that are perceived in the created world. And, on the other hand, the concept also implies the creative *activities* of nature, through which perceived phenomena or appearances arise.

Essentially the same meaning is carried by the Sanskrit word ‘prakṛiti’: which is a compound of the word ‘kṛiti’, meaning ‘activity’, and the prefix ‘pra-’. This prefix has an interesting richness of meaning. It carries the meanings of both the English prefixes ‘pre-’ and ‘pro-’. It means not only ‘prior to’ or ‘before’, but also ‘continuing on’ and ‘going forth’. Thus, on the one hand, the concept of prakṛiti refers to an underlying something which comes logically before activity or appearance, and which continues on beneath activities and appearances as they take place. And, on the other hand, the concept of prakṛiti also carries a sense of ‘acting forth’, thus including the manifesting activities and appearances through which underlying reality is perceived.

In short, the concepts of ‘nature’ and ‘prakṛiti’ both refer to that part of experience which underlies perceived appearances and which contains activities that produce the phenomena and appearances we perceive. This is the part of our experience that we call ‘objective’; because we think of it in terms of objects which act upon each other.

In modern physical science, nature is conceived as an external world, outside the minds of human beings and other living creatures. For the specialized purposes of physical science and technology, this conception has obviously proved its use; but, for the broader and subtler needs of living experience, it has its limitations, as our present environmental and human crisis is beginning to show. The trouble with this narrowly physical conception is that it creates an artificial opposition between mind and nature: making nature seem a lifeless collection of dead objects to be manipulated and dominated by our minds.

In traditional religion and philosophy, nature was conceived to be ‘animate’; and hence it was taken to include not only physical objects but also living actions, perceptions, thoughts and feelings. In other words, mind and mental functions were taken to be a part of nature and its objective activities through which perceived phenomena and appearances arise.

But this raises a delicate philosophical question. How can the mind and its activities be known objectively as a part of nature’s functioning? Viewed from a person’s mind, consciousness appears to consist in a stream of perceptions, thoughts and feelings, which come and go in mental experience. This mental appearance of consciousness is obviously changing and personal: it changes from moment to moment and is different from person to person. But, if one asks how the changing appearances of mind are known, then it becomes clear that there must be an underlying basis of consciousness which continues at the background of experience, while perceptions, thoughts and feelings appear and disappear in the limited focus of attention at the surface of the mind.

For example, suppose that I come out of a warm house on a cold day, and previous perceptions of relaxing warmth give way to rather different perceptions of invigorating or numbing cold. How do I know this change and variation of differing perceptions? Clearly, I do so on the basis of an underlying consciousness that continues through the change, thus enabling differing perceptions of cold and warmth to be

compared and co-ordinated into a coherent knowledge of temperature. Without such an underlying basis of consciousness, knowledge could not continue through time, and different perceptions, thoughts and feelings could not be put together in coherent knowledge.

Moreover, each time we form any conception of other people, with minds other than our own, we can only do so by assuming a basis of consciousness which we share in common with them, and upon which we form whatever conception we may have of their perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Thus, there must be an underlying basis of consciousness that is shared by different persons; otherwise there could be no communication between people, no knowledge of other minds, and hence no notion of other people at all.

In short, the changing activities and appearances of mind can only be known on the basis of an underlying consciousness which is unchanging and impersonal: in the sense that it is shared in common by different moments of time and by different people, beneath the variations of time and personality.

In the Vedānta and Sānkhya traditions of Indian philosophy, the word 'puruṣha' is used to describe the changeless, impersonal principle of consciousness that underlies each changing personality. In ordinary Sanskrit usage, the word 'puruṣha' means 'a man' or 'a person'; but in its special philosophical usage, the word 'puruṣha' refers to a changeless and impersonal consciousness as the underlying principle of personality that is the true essence or the real self of each person. As it is put in the *Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad,* 4.3.7:

katama ātmeti; yo'yam	'What is the self?'
vijnyānamayah prāṇeṣhu	'It is this *puruṣha*:
hṛidyantarjyotih puruṣhah;	which is just consciousness
sa samānah sann ubhau	in living faculties,
lokāv anusancarati,	the inner light of heart.
dhyāyatīva lelāyatīva;…	Staying the same,
	it journeys through both worlds,
	seeming to think and move….'

The central question here is the identification of a person's self. There is a widespread and usually unquestioned tendency to identify the self as a personal ego, consisting of body, senses and mind, which manifestly change over time and vary from person to person. If this personal identification is taken for granted, as it so often is, then of course the subjective or knowing part of experience must appear to be changing and variable, and the word 'subjective' must be taken to mean 'personal'.

But the word 'subjective' does not just mean 'personal'. More precisely, it refers to the self as the knowing subject of experience; and it thus distinguishes the knowing self from the known or objective part of experience. In order to know the world correctly, it is necessary to know the body, senses and mind; for these are the instruments through which each person knows the world. But, to know the mind, it must be included in the known or objective part of experience; and hence the knowing self must be detached from it.

Can the knowing self be detached from the mind? One way of doing this is to think of the mind as the activity of creating mental appearances: of creating the apparent perceptions, thoughts and feelings that come and go in each person's experience. If a person's mind is conceived in this way, it becomes part of the objective activity of

nature; and nature thus includes all the physical and mental activities through which it is manifested in experience. This is essentially the traditional conception of nature, as the animate principle of all activities which produce the phenomena that appear in the world of our experience.

If nature is thus conceived to manifest itself in a person's experience, what is the knowing self before which the manifestations of nature appear? It is pure consciousness without any activity in it, for all activity has been included in objective nature. It is consciousness which does not act, but only knows, as it continues through a person's experience, illuminating the perceptions, thoughts and feelings that appear and disappear in the mind. This illumination is not any kind of act that consciousness starts doing at some time and stops doing later on. Instead, it is the essential being of consciousness, which shines and illuminates appearances simply by being what it is. In the same way, by merely being what it is, as it continues unchanged at the background of experience, it provides the underlying, impersonal basis upon which people communicate and put together perceptions, thoughts and feelings in coherent knowledge.

As perceptions appear and are interpreted by thoughts and feelings, they are absorbed by understanding into this knowing basis of consciousness at the background of experience; from which arise further feelings, thoughts, actions, perceptions and interpretations. When current conceptions and theories fail in their descriptions and predictions of observed phenomena, so that people enquire back to underlying assumptions which have been taken for granted at the background of experience, then it is from this same subjective and impersonal basis of consciousness that clarifications and more accurate conceptions arise.

In sum, traditional conceptions of nature and consciousness can be interpreted as a philosophical division of experience into objective and subjective parts. The *objective part* is nature as a self-manifesting whole: including all physical and mental activities in the perceived world, and also all the perceiving activities of the body, senses and mind through which the world appears in a person's experience. Thus nature manifests itself before consciousness, through perceived and perceiving activities that together result in the stream of appearances which come and go before consciousness in each person's experience. With all activities of perceiving personality thus taken into the objective part of experience, the *subjective part* remains as pure, impersonal consciousness: which continues unchanged throughout experience, illuminating the changing appearances that come and go.

This distinction of consciousness and nature is explicit in the 'puruṣha-prakṛiti' conception of Sānkhya and Vedānta philosophies; and it can also be found, explicitly or implicitly conceived, in other traditions as well. In Aristotelian philosophy, nature is conceived as 'self-moving';[1] and there is thus a delicate contrast here with the conception of the 'unmoved mover', which is used to describe God in the external universe and the essence of soul in living creatures.[2] In mythical, religious and mystical traditions in general, the objective principle of nature is represented by conceptions of divine immanence in the changing manifestations of creation; and the subjective principle of consciousness is represented by conceptions of a transcendent spirit, both as a transcending God in the macrocosm of the external universe, and as an inner or spiritual essence of soul in the microcosm of individual experience.[3]

Life – the expression of consciousness in nature

If objective nature is taken to contain all physical and mental activity, and subjective consciousness is taken to be pure, impersonal illumination, then what is the relationship between these two parts of experience? In particular, how do the activities of nature relate to the impersonal and unchanging illumination of consciousness?

This question is answered by the traditional concept of 'life', as the vital breath that animates the activities of nature. Clearly, this conception of living breath does not refer only to physical respiration. Instead, the physical respiration of living bodies is used here as a metaphor. In modern terms, traditional concepts of life as 'vital breath' or 'breathing spirit' or 'aspiration' or 'inspiration' are metaphors for the expression of consciousness in living behaviour.

In Sanskrit, the ordinary word for life is 'jīva'. In particular, the word applies to the living personality of an individual creature. The jīva or living personality expresses consciousness; but this expression is part of nature's activity and is thus to be distinguished from the impersonal principle of pure consciousness that is each creature's real self. The distinction between consciousness and its expression in living personality is described in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣhad,* 3.1.1:

dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā	Two birds, in close companionship,
samānam vṛikṣham pariṣhasvajāte	are perched upon a single tree.
tayor anyah pippalam	Of these, one eats
svādv atty	and relishes the fruit.
anasnann anyo	The other does not eat,
abhicākashīti	but just looks on.

The two 'birds' are *jīva*, the living personality, and *ātman*, the self. The living personality expresses consciousness by acting and by tasting the fruits of action through its mental activities of perception, thought and feeling. But the self is only consciousness, unconditioned by the physical and mental activities that express it.

A parallel is sometimes noted here with the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The name 'Adam' comes from the Hebrew 'ādām', meaning 'a human being' or 'a man'; and hence it could be interpreted to represent the essential principle of consciousness in each human being (just like the Sanskrit word 'puruṣha'). The name 'Eve' comes from the Hebrew 'havvah', meaning 'life' or 'living'; and hence it could be interpreted to represent the living faculty of expression, which makes consciousness seem conditioned and thus produces the tempting, but false appearances of personal ego in the physical and mental activities of personality.

However, if life thus expresses consciousness in objective nature, a further question arises. What is this special activity of living expression, and how can it be understood? In Sanskrit, this expressive activity of life is described by the concept of 'prāṇa:' which is derived from the word 'ana', meaning 'breath', and the prefix 'pra-', meaning 'prior to' or 'continuing on' or 'going forth'. As before (with the word 'prakṛiti'), the prefix 'pra-' creates a characteristic richness of meaning. On the one hand, the concept of 'prāṇa' implies an underlying principle of consciousness that comes before and continues through all living expression. On the other hand, the same concept is used to describe the activity of life that goes forth from consciousness to its living expressions in nature. As it is put in the *Kauṣhītaki Upaniṣhad,* 3.3:

atha khalu prāṇa eva	But then, in truth, life in itself
prajnyātmedam sharīram	is consciousness, the (real) self,
parigṛihyotthāpayati	is consciousness, the (real) self,
	which holds this body all around
	and causes it to rise alive.

Here, the word 'prāṇa' has been translated as 'life'. The essential principle of life ('prāṇa eva' – 'life in itself') is consciousness, which is the supporting basis and the unchanging cause of the living activities of the body. This is, in essence, the same conception as Aristotle's 'unmoved mover'.[4]

Thus, the living faculty of expression (traditionally called 'prāṇa' or 'the breath of life') is a special kind of activity that rises from consciousness. It is not an action of one object towards another; for it does not start from any object. Instead, it starts from consciousness, which is not an object and which neither acts nor is acted upon.

But, if the living expression is not the action of one object upon another, then how can it be understood? A little reflection shows that we do in fact understand our experience in two rather different ways. On the one hand, experience is understood in terms of objects and their actions and relationships towards each other. On the other hand, experience is understood as an expression of consciousness.

For example, a human face can be understood as a configuration of features activated by underlying muscles; but it is also understood as expressing thought and feeling, and hence consciousness. Similarly, a map can be understood as a configuration of marks and lines and colours, printed by a machine; but it is also understood as an expression of perception and meaning, and hence of consciousness. Or, a landscape can be understood as a pattern of geographically formed features; but it can also be understood as an experience of meaning and beauty, and hence as an expression of consciousness.

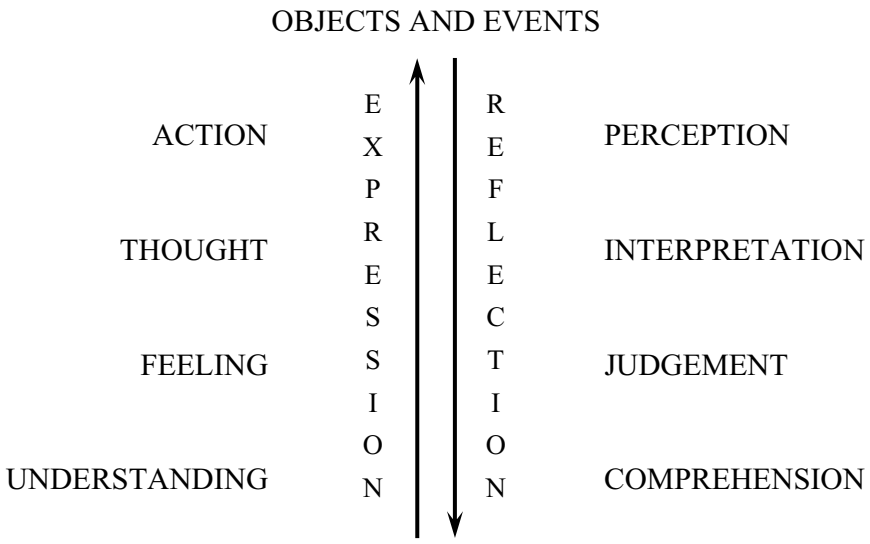
These two ways of understanding experience can be described as 'objective' and 'subjective'. In the *objective* approach, attention goes out from understanding and accepted assumptions towards objects and events and the actions and relationships between them. Here, thought and reasoning are used to formulate descriptions of objects and their relationships, to calculate predictions of events, and to prescribe actions towards desired objectives.

When experience is approached *subjectively*, attention is reflected back towards underlying consciousness – from which feelings, thoughts and actions express meaning in perceived objects and events. This involves a reflection from objective perceptions to background assumptions and understanding, on the basis of which perceptions are interpreted and assimilated into knowledge. Here, thought and reasoning are used to interpret perceptions, to question and correct assumptions, and hence to clarify the understanding through which further expressions of consciousness will arise and further perceptions will be interpreted and assimilated into knowledge.

These two approaches, objective and subjective, are complementary. Together they form a repeating cycle that progressively develops knowledge; by reflecting back and forth between the objective world and consciousness, as illustrated in figure 1 (next page).

Through understanding, feeling, thought and action, consciousness is expressed in objects and events; and this expression continues on through perception, interpretation, judgement and comprehension, which reflect back to underlying consciousness,

Figure 1



as perceptions are assimilated into understanding. Through the new understanding that is thus achieved, consciousness is expressed outwards again, and the cycle repeats; so that understanding can be progressively clarified, and knowledge of the world can be progressively developed, in the course of continued experience.

Unfortunately, there is a habitual and somewhat unexamined prejudice that identifies the subjective with the personal and the objective with the impersonal. This prejudice makes it seem that impersonal truth cannot be approached by subjective reflection, but only by looking out towards objects and events. Accordingly, scientific theories are reduced to the status of calculating machines for predicting events and prescribing technological action. In this view, it is only prediction and technological effectiveness that determine the truth of a theory. Conceptual intelligibility is a secondary matter, left to the personal taste of individual scientists.

This objective view is useful up to a point, when focusing on the predictive and technological aspects of modern physical science. But it is a one-sided view; and taken to extremes, it is clearly absurd. When it is claimed that scientific reasoning can only be tested by making predictions which come true, and when people are convinced that modern science is true just because its technology can work seeming miracles, then this is just fortune-telling and miracle-working pretending to the status of truth.

Even in the physical sciences, an excessive bias towards prediction and technology has its limitations, as developments in modern physics are beginning to show. In particular, quantum theory has made many startling predictions that have turned out to be extraordinarily accurate, and it has also proved very effective technologically; so it is widely accepted, despite serious problems of conception and intelligibility. But, because of these problems in quantum theory, the conceptual vacuum beneath its complex mathematical formalism has become a somewhat mystical free-for-all; with no

underlying basis of intelligibility to show how quantum physics might be reconciled with the general theory of relativity, or with other ways of understanding experience.

And further, in sciences of life and mind, the bias toward objectivity has been a major road-block. The problem is that any expression of life or mind can only be understood by subjective reflection back to underlying consciousness, from which the expression comes. As a result, the study of life and mind has tended either to be relegated to the realm of poetry and imagination, or to be reduced to physical and behavioural science. Hence the continuing obsession with the mind-body problem, and the futile attempts to describe the relationship between consciousness and the body as though it were an action of one object upon another.

The only way out of these difficulties is to question our habitual identification of the subjective with the personal. Must consciousness be identified with the personal activities of perception, thought and feeling in our bodies, senses and minds? Or, beneath the changing appearances that come and go at the forefront of personal attention, does consciousness not continue at the background of each person's experience, as the unchanging, impersonal basis from which changing appearances of perception, thought and feeling are known? If such an impersonal basis of consciousness can be understood, then impersonal truth can be approached through subjective reflection; and reason does not have to be reduced to mere calculation of objective consequences. Instead, reason and science can also be used to clarify understanding and develop knowledge of life and mind, as expressions of underlying consciousness.

Macrocosm and microcosm – the world and individual experience

How can nature be understood as a single whole, beneath the differing activities of world and personality that manifest it in our experience? This question underlies the traditional conception of a 'macrocosm' of the external universe, corresponding to the various 'microcosms' of individual experience.

Like individual personality, the universe as a whole was conceived to express meaning and consciousness, and hence to have a life of its own, beyond the minds and bodies of particular individuals. What are we to make of this traditional idea of a living macrocosm, which expresses a universal consciousness? Must the idea be dismissed, along with a major part of traditional thought, as an essentially unscientific personification of impersonal reality? The answer depends upon how consciousness is identified. If consciousness is identified as a personal activity of the body, senses and mind, then of course it is an unscientific personification to think that the world outside the body, senses and mind could express consciousness in its own right. But, if it can be understood that consciousness is not just personal, then a major part of traditional thought is opened up to impersonal, scientific investigation.

In modern physical biology, life is conceived as the property of a specially complex kind of matter, found in plant, animal and human bodies. This conception is based on a distinction between living and non-living matter; and the distinction is made in terms of molecular and behavioural complexity. As molecular biology and behavioural science have shown, this conception can be useful as far as it goes, but it suffers from two limitations. First, since all matter is more or less complex, it is somewhat arbitrary exactly how and where the boundary between non-living and living matter is drawn in the progression of increasing complexity that leads to evident life. So the basic distinction of living and non-living matter is inherently relative and

can never be entirely clear. And second, without a consideration of meaning, it is not clear how any amount of complexity can express consciousness.

When it comes to a consideration of meaning, our modern conceptions tend to be inconsistent and confused. Objectively, meaning is conceived as the representation of one object (or one complex of objects) by another, through similarity of form: as for example when a map represents a territory. However, this objective conception does not apply to our subjective experience of meaning, as expressing consciousness; because it is not at all clear how objective form is related with the stream of changing appearances in our minds or with underlying consciousness. For example, how could physical forms of expression on a person's face be objectively similar to expressed feelings of happiness and unhappiness, or to the continuing basis of consciousness that knows such differences of feeling?

In our experience of living personality, we obviously perceive some sort of relationship between the body, mind and consciousness; but we have no clear idea as to what the relationship is. So we try to keep this confusion away from our knowledge of the external world; by conceiving that mind and consciousness are somehow confined within the body (or the nervous system or the brain), to which objective signals come from the external world. However, this kind of isolationist conception can never work completely, for an obvious and simple reason. If mind and consciousness were entirely confined within the body, then of course the external world could not be known at all.

In fact, in our perceptions of the external world, we do have subjective experiences of order, purpose, meaning, value and continuity; and all our objective conceptions of structure and function arise (historically and logically) from these subjective experiences. We acknowledge this subjective aspect of knowledge by conceiving that the external world has only objective structure and function in itself, but people attribute subjective order and purpose and meaning and value to it. However, a little reflection shows that there is a curious contradiction here. The concepts of structure and function cannot be entirely objective, but only relatively so. Beneath their objective exterior, they are founded on subjective perceptions of order and purpose that are expressed from the perceiver's consciousness. If subjectively perceived order and purpose and meaning are not there in the world, but are only attributed to it by personal perception, then all our concepts of objective structure and function are founded on lies.

Traditional conceptions of life and world took a broader, more systematic view, beneath their variety of ritual and religious metaphors. The English word 'person' comes from the Latin 'persona', meaning 'a mask'; and as this derivation suggests, the outward personality was conceived as the apparent surface of an underlying, inner principle of life. Thus, traditional conceptions of 'living' and 'non-living', or 'inner' and 'outer', refer essentially to different levels of experience, not to territorial divisions. Life was not essentially conceived to be confined within the personality, territorially divided from a non-living world outside. Nor was life essentially conceived by a territorial division between living and non-living kinds of matter. Instead, matter was conceived as the objective surface of appearance at which life expresses consciousness, both in the individual personality and in the external world.

In this sense, traditional conceptions take matter in itself to be lifeless and inanimate, as described by the Sanskrit word 'jaḍa'. Matter is living or animate only to the extent that it expresses consciousness. And this expression of consciousness is a rela-

tive affair. It is not all or nothing, but only more or less. Consciousness is expressed only partially and imperfectly by human beings, but more by human beings than by animals, more by animals than plants, and more by plants than earth and stones.

The human expression of consciousness is characterized by reflective discrimination ('viveka' in Sanskrit), which questions apparent knowledge so as to distinguish truth from falsity. Animals lack human reflection, but express consciousness through instinctive motivation. Plants lack animal motivation, but express consciousness through purposive growth and functioning. Seemingly inanimate objects like stones lack purposive growth and functioning of their own; but even they express consciousness to some degree, through the part they play in the ordered functioning of an intelligible universe. The ordered functioning and intelligibility of the world was conceived as a universal *expression of consciousness*[5] which is not so obvious as the expression of consciousness in living creatures, but which requires a more delicate and subtle interpretation.

However, if the functioning of the world is conceived to express consciousness, an immediate question arises: Whose consciousness is expressed, and how is it to be understood? In mythical and religious beliefs, this question was somewhat metaphorically answered by conceiving a variety of gods and spirits, or a single transcendent God, by whose divine purposes and will the universe was taken to be ordered and ruled. Such divine purposes and will were mystically described, as beyond the limited comprehension of the ordinary human mind; and so they were not meant to be questioned, but instead propitiated and accepted through ritual worship and religious devotion.

Though traditional conceptions were thus popularly expressed in mythical and religious belief, they were founded on a more philosophical enquiry into universal reality and individual experience. Broadly speaking, this enquiry of traditional philosophy can be described in three stages.

First, an enquiry is made into the changing character of the external world and individual personality. At this stage, it is skeptically observed that everything ultimately changes, in both world and personality; so all their seeming continuity is only relative and cannot provide any final basis of unshifting certainty upon which truth could be securely known. Accordingly, understanding is sought by a knowing detachment, from the changing character of all worldly and personal things. In the Indian tradition, this philosophy of change is generally associated with Buddhist philosophers. In the European tradition, essentially the same position is associated with the early Greek philosopher, Heraclitus.[6]

When it is accepted that everything in the world and personality is subject to change and difference, the question of continuity remains. On what continuing basis can differences be compared, so that changes can be known and understood? This question leads to a second stage of philosophical enquiry, where change and difference are associated with appearances. All changing world and personality are conceived as differing manifestations of the common reality of underlying nature, which thus manifests itself in changing appearances before unchanging consciousness. This is of course the philosophical dualism of nature and consciousness which this paper has already been describing. Here, understanding is sought through a complete distinction of objective nature from subjective consciousness; so that nature is known in all its completeness, and no trace of personal partiality remains in knowing consciousness. Both in the external world and individual experience, nature is conceived

to express consciousness by a very special and delicate relationship between the two. In Aristotelian philosophy, self-moving nature was conceived to act for love of the 'unmoved mover'. In Sānkhya philosophy, nature (prakṛiti) was conceived to manifest itself 'for the sake of consciousness' ('puruṣhārtha').

But, if all nature thus expresses consciousness, does it not follow then that consciousness is the underlying reality which is manifested in all of nature's appearances? Such questioning leads to a third stage of philosophical enquiry, where consciousness is investigated as the underlying reality of all that is known. The resulting philosophy is called 'non-dualism', because it concludes that there is really no duality between that which knows and that which is known.

The non-dualist position can be described as follows. When knowing consciousness is completely distinguished from the partial and changing activities of personality, then the underlying reality of nature is known truly and impartially, from the impersonal basis of consciousness that continues through each person's experience. But, in each person's experience, all appearances of the world arise from this underlying basis of consciousness, and no appearance of the world can exist apart from consciousness. Thus, it finally turns out that consciousness is the entire reality which is shown by all appearances.[7] Consciousness and reality are identical, as that one unchanging principle which is common to all the different appearances that come and go in our experience. When this underlying principle is sought subjectively, by reflecting back into individual experience, it is called 'consciousness'. When it is sought objectively, by looking out into the external world, it is called 'reality'. The two words are thus differing names which result from different approaches to the same thing.

From this non-dualist position, it is much easier to understand the traditional conception of a living macrocosm that expresses consciousness. If the consciousness that underlies individual experience is identical with the reality of the whole world, then this consciousness is the world's own underlying reality, and it is only natural that the world should express it. Quite simply and naturally, it is the perceiver's own consciousness that is thus expressed in the perceived objects and events of the world. But here, it must be clearly understood that the perceiver's own consciousness is neither personal nor changing nor varying. Instead, it is the impersonal, continuing principle of reality that is shared in common with other perceivers and with the perceived world. Thus, understanding and knowledge are sought in two ways. First, by reflecting back to the impersonal basis of consciousness that underlies individual experience; and second, by looking out from this impersonal basis, to see the whole world as an expression of consciousness.

In India, this non-dualist position is represented by the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. In the European tradition, essentially the same position is associated with the early Greek philosopher, Parmenides, who described reality as an indivisible, unchanging unity, where knowing and being are identical.[8]

How can such traditional conceptions be related to modern physical science? Through the correspondence conceived between macrocosm and microcosm, a major part of traditional knowledge is concerned with the expression of consciousness in world and personality. Where this is so, a great deal of confusion could perhaps be avoided by distinguishing different levels of knowledge, through each of which reason enquires towards impersonal truth.

At the level of physical science, the world is described by conceiving theoretical systems of interacting objects and interrelated events. Once these theoretical systems have been conceived, knowledge is used and tested by calculated descriptions and predictions of objects and events. When descriptions and predictions fail, there is a change of direction, from objective calculation to subjective reflection, as scientists question the underlying assumptions and understanding that they have been taking for granted. From this subjective reflection, understanding is clarified, assumptions are corrected, and new conceptions and theories are formulated to be used and tested again by objective calculation. Thus, modern physical science is directly used and tested by objective calculations, which indirectly depend upon an underlying level of subjective reflection.

However, where knowledge is more directly concerned with meaning that expresses consciousness, subjective reflection is more directly used. By its very nature, such meaning is perceived by subjective reflection: in particular where meaning is perceived in human and living behaviour. Where this kind of meaning is under investigation, we are engaged in a level of enquiry that underlies and complements physical science. We are no longer concerned merely with actions and relations between objects and events, but with the meaning that is perceived in these actions and relations, by reflecting back into the basis of consciousness that underlies our minds. At this level, knowledge may be conceived to reflect back to a common, impersonal reality which is shared in common by perceiver and perceived, but which appears differently in different minds and at different moments of time. Here, knowledge is used and tested by interpreting perceptions so as to clarify understanding, and by expressing new understanding in further feelings, thoughts, actions, perceptions and interpretations.

Modern conceptions tend to be rather confused about this second level of knowledge, to which a great part of traditional knowledge belongs. For our modern sciences of life and mind, and for our understanding of the world as a living environment, it might be useful to attempt a little more open-minded questioning of our current confusion. And such open-minded questioning could perhaps lead to a better understanding of the wealth of experience that has accumulated through long traditions of philosophical enquiry into a non-dual reality that underlies both the perceived world and the perceiving personality.

Traditional elements – divisions of experience

Where modern physical science is primarily concerned with a world of external objects and events, traditional conceptions tend to be more philosophical, beneath their didactic and metaphorical manner of expression. They are more philosophical in the sense that they are more primarily concerned with an underlying unity or truth of experience, which appears differently through different aspects and at different levels of experience. However, these different aspects and levels were somewhat metaphorically represented by the constituent principles and elements that were didactically asserted to make up the traditional cosmos. In this philosophical context, traditional principles and elements can often be interpreted as divisions of experience into different aspects and levels.

As already described, experience was divided into objective and subjective aspects: with nature as the objective aspect, including all physical and mental activity, and with consciousness as the aspect of pure, impersonal knowledge.

In Sānkhya and Vedānta philosophies, nature (prakṛiti) is divided into three further aspects, called the three 'guṇas' (more literally 'qualities'). The most objective aspect, called '*tamas*', is characterized by inertia and obscurity. It can be interpreted as describing the objects of nature that are acted upon. The second aspect, called '*rajas*', is characterized by stimulation and energy. It can be interpreted as describing the motive forces that act upon objects. The third aspect, called '*sattva*', is characterized by harmony and clarity. It can be interpreted as describing the underlying order and expression of consciousness that nature acts for.

It can also be noted that these three aspects, sattva, rajas and tamas, form an ascending hierarchy of levels in the expression of consciousness. Consciousness is most directly expressed in the clarity and harmony of nature's underlying order, less directly expressed in the stimulation and energy of motive force, and most indirectly expressed in the inertia and obscurity of objects.

In both European and oriental traditions, nature was also considered to be constituted of five elements: 'earth', 'water', 'fire', 'air' and 'ether'. Though they are called 'elements', they are often described as a series of increasingly subtle levels on the appearance of the world. On the one hand, in a progressive enquiry towards underlying reality, each element is found to overlie the next (in the above order).[9] On the other hand, in cosmological accounts of creation, the same elements arise in reverse order, as a progression of increasingly gross levels through which reality appears.[10]

'Earth' was the traditional element of solidity, whereby objects maintain their separate identities. 'Water' was the traditional element of fluidity, whereby the separate identities of particular objects are formed and transformed. 'Fire' was the traditional element of propagating and consuming energy which causes the formation and transformation of objects. 'Air' was the traditional element of transparent tangibility, through which energy is propagated (as by wind, sound, radiant heat and light in the physical atmosphere). 'Ether' was the traditional element of pervading continuity, which underlies the subtle qualities of 'air', the propagating energy of 'fire', the changing fluidity of 'water' and the separately identified objects of 'earth'.

Accordingly, from a more modern philosophical point of view, the five elements could perhaps be interpreted as a division of experience into five levels, along the following lines.

Earth: When the world is perceived through body and mind, it seems at first to be made up of different objects and events. At this initial level, an element of differentiation and particularity appears in experience. This could well be symbolized by the traditional element 'earth': in the sense that earth is found differentiated into particular objects, like clay is found fashioned into different pots (to use the traditional analogy).

Water: If particular objects are perceived to exist, then how do their differences and particularities arise? How are objects told apart, and how are they formed? Such questioning leads to an underlying level of experience, where change and transformation become apparent as that element of experience which forms and shapes the world. This could well be symbolized by the traditional element 'water': in the sense that water flows in changing shapes and forms.

Fire: What do change and transformation show, and how do they take place? What is shown by changing forms, and how are they transferred from one object or one place to another? Such questioning leads to another underlying level, where representation and propagation become apparent, as that element of experience which gives

meaning to forms and enables them to move from place to place. This could well be symbolized by the traditional element 'fire': in the sense that fire consumes and illuminates (like meaning consumes its representations to illuminate what is represented), and fire also propagates (by burning its way through things and radiating energy).

Air: How do representation and propagation work? What represented qualities are shown by meaningful forms, and what characteristic qualities and conditions travel along with forms that move identifiably from place to place? Such questioning leads in its turn to a further underlying level, where qualification and conditioning become evident as that element of experience which gives relative character to varying objects and localities in space and time. This could well be symbolized by the traditional element 'air': in the sense that air or atmosphere is an enveloping medium of relative qualities and conditions (described, in one traditional metaphor, as that which can be 'felt but not seen').

Ether: How is experience qualified and conditioned? On what continuing basis are varying conditions and characteristics compared in different objects and localities differently situated in space and time? Such questioning leads to a fifth level of experience, where a basis of underlying continuity is understood: at the common background of experience, which enables differing characteristics to be contrasted and compared, and which thus enables objects to be discerned apart and related together again. This background continuity could well be symbolized by the traditional element 'ether': in the sense that the 'ether' was conceived to pervade (and thus to continue through) all objects and all localities in space and time.

The above division of levels is very general and abstract; and hence it can be applied in somewhat different ways to many particular fields of experience. In figure 2, an illustration is given of how it might be applied in two ways: first to experience in general (including physical and mental aspects), and second to modern physics (where the physical aspect of experience is isolated and focused upon).

In traditional thought, the 'pancīkaraṇa' distinction of five elements has in fact been applied somewhat differently in different fields of experience. As for example in

Figure 2

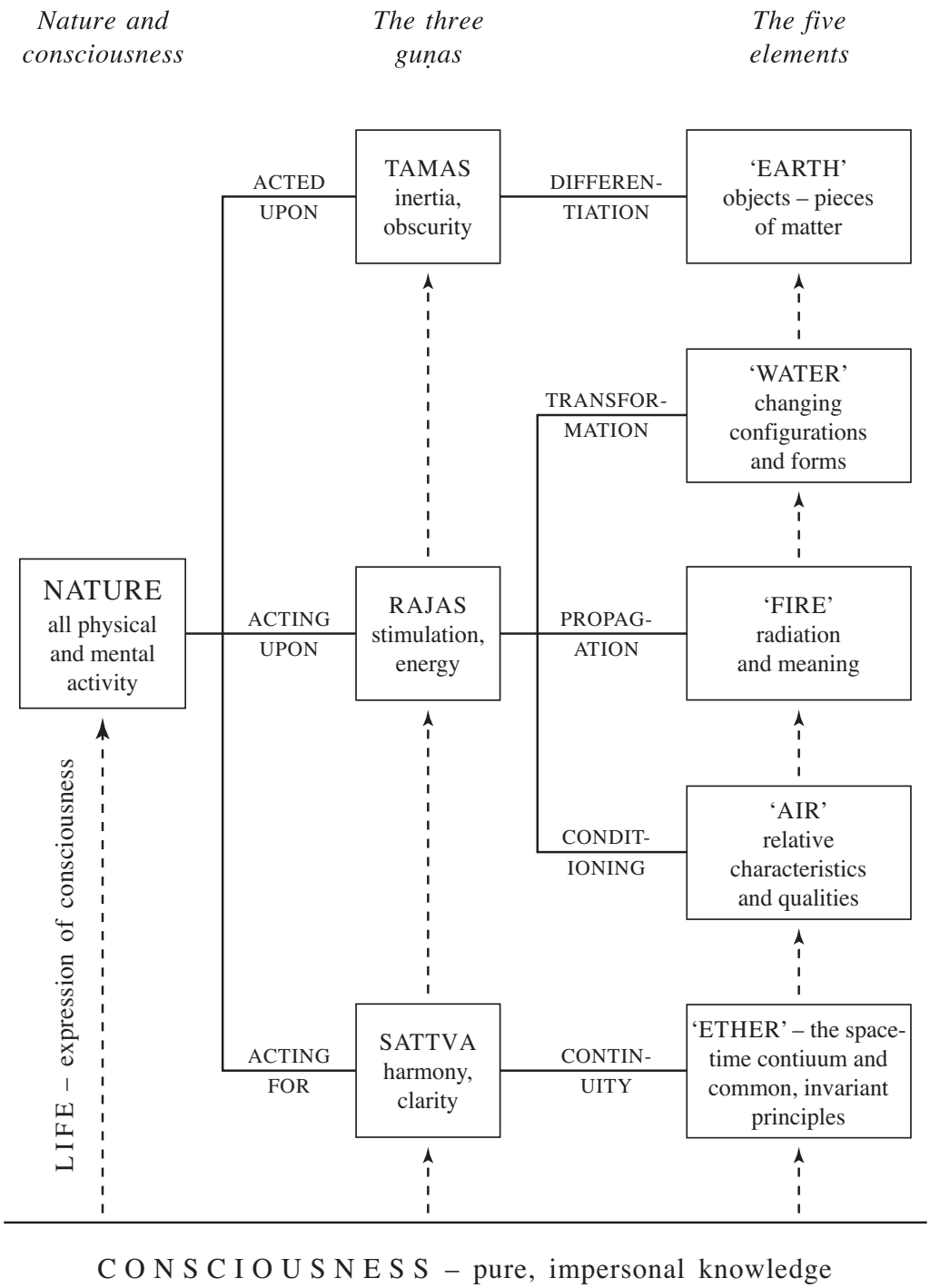
Traditional element	*Element of*	*Level of experience*	*Correspondence with modern physics*
'Earth'	Differentiation and particularity	Particular objects	Pieces of matter
'Water'	Change and transformation	Changing forms	Moving configurations
'Fire'	Representation and propagation	Intelligible meaning	Propagation of energy
'Air'	Qualification and conditioning	Relative characteristics	Fields conditioning space and time
'Ether'	Underlying continuity	Continuing background	The space-time continuum

the five elements (panca mahābhūtas) of the external world, five levels of personality (the panca koshas), five levels of mind (ahankāra – ego or personal identification, citta – will, buddhi – intellect, manas – qualitative mind or sensibility, antahkaraṇa – the 'inner faculty' or understanding), five vital functions (prāṇas), five senses (jnyānendriyas), and five external functions of action (karmendriyas); in the enveloping spheres of Aristotelian and medieval European cosmology (with the sphere of 'earth' progressively enveloped by spheres of 'water', 'air', 'fire', 'ether', all finally enveloped by the infinite reality of God)[11]; and in other ways.

If the three guṇas are compared with the five elements, an evident correspondence emerges. Tamas (inertia and obscurity) evidently corresponds to ‘earth’, since both correspond to objects of action. Rajas (stimulation and energy) evidently corresponds to ‘fire’, since both correspond to motive energy. Sattva (harmony and clarity) evidently corresponds to ‘ether’, since the harmony and continuity of nature imply one

Figure 3

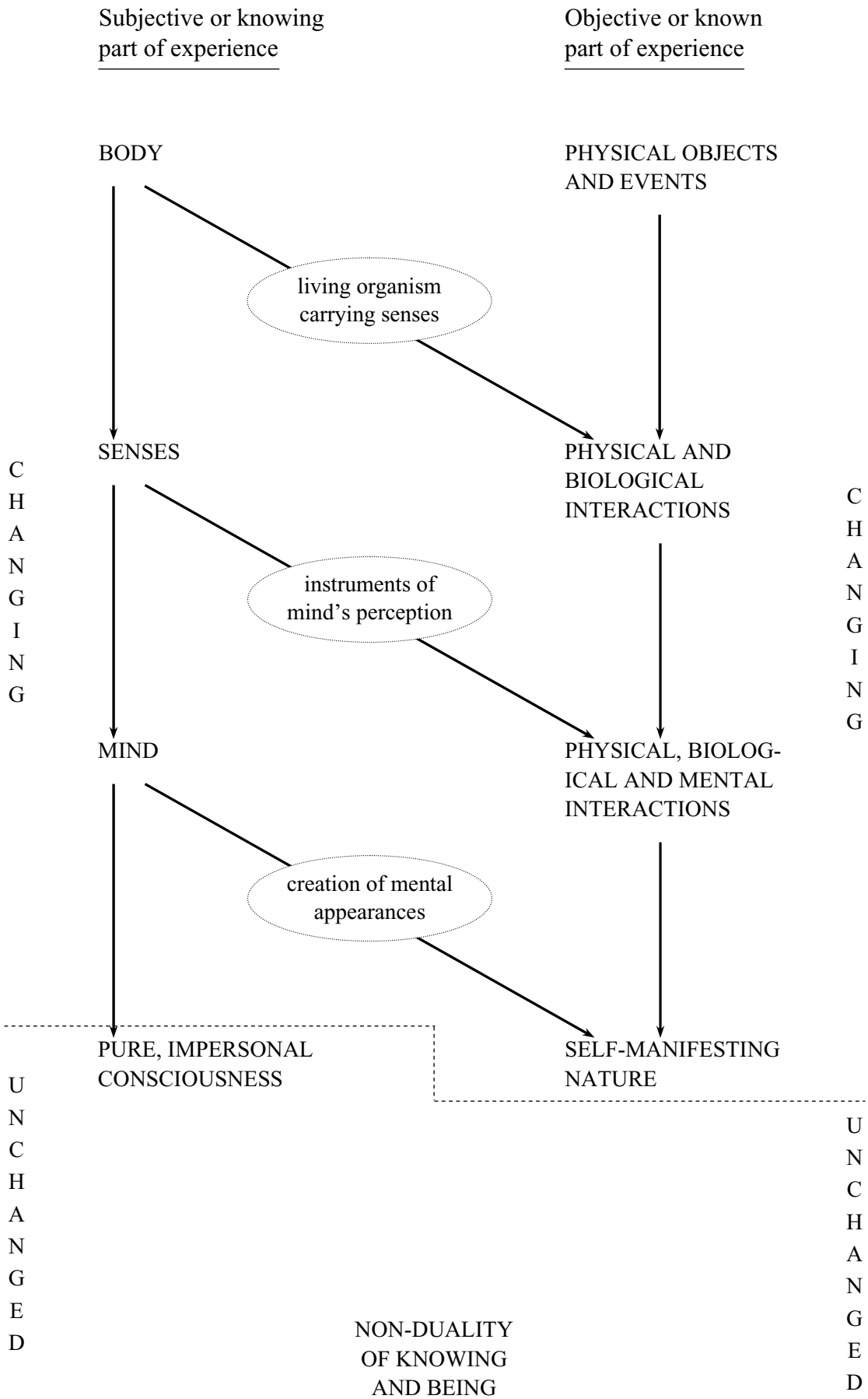
DIVISIONS OF EXPERIENCE



another. Through a little further interpretation, ‘water’ and ‘air’ can also be seen as aspects of rajas. ‘Water’ can be interpreted as the element of fluid transformation, brought about by the motive energy of rajas. ‘Air’ can be interpreted as the element of relative conditioning, through which the energy of rajas is propagated. Hence the five elements can be interpreted as arising from the three guṇas, by a further division of rajas (into ‘water’, ‘fire’ and ‘air’).

A progressive division of experience, ending with the five elements, can thus be summarized in figure 3 (previous page).

Figure 4


Subjective or knowing part of experience
Objective or known part of experience
BODY
PHYSICAL OBJECTS AND EVENTS
living organism carrying senses
SENSES
PHYSICAL AND BIOLOGICAL INTERACTIONS
instruments of mind's perception
MIND
PHYSICAL, BIOLOGICAL AND MENTAL INTERACTIONS
creation of mental appearances
PURE, IMPERSONAL CONSCIOUSNESS
SELF-MANIFESTING NATURE
CHANGING
CHANGING
UNCHANGED
UNCHANGED
NON-DUALITY OF KNOWING AND BEING

Appendix: An interpretation of traditional philosophical enquiry

The diagram in figure 4 (previous page) shows a series of levels, at which experience is differently divided into subjective and objective parts.

At the uppermost level, consciousness is attributed to a person's body, and thus the physical body is taken to be the knowing part of a person's experience. From this point of view, the known or objective part of experience consists in the physical objects with which the body interacts.

However, a little reflection shows that the body itself contains a knowing part and a known part of experience. The knowing part consists of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. The known or objective part of the body is a physical organism which carries the senses. The apparent consciousness of the body comes from its perceiving senses, and it is thus more accurate to identify the senses as the knowing part of a person's experience.

This leads to the second level of the diagram. At this second level (as shown by the slanting arrow that comes down from above), the body as a sensual organism is taken into the objective part of the experience, which is thus expanded to include sensual organisms as well as physical objects.

A little further reflection shows that the senses are objective instruments through which the mind perceives an external world. The apparent consciousness of the senses comes from the selective attention of mind, and thus it is more accurate to identify the mind as the knowing part of a person's experience.

This leads to the third level of the diagram. At this third level (as shown by the slanting arrow that comes down from above), the senses as instruments of mind are taken into the objective part of experience, which is thus expanded to include the mental as well as the sensual and physical phenomena in the external world outside the perceiving mind.

When the mind in its turn is reflected upon, it too can be seen as an objective instrument, which functions to create the changing appearances of perception, thought and feeling that come and go in each person's experience. These changing appearances of mind are known by underlying consciousness, which continues at the background of experience, while perceptions, thoughts and feelings appear and disappear at the surface of mental attention. Thus, the apparent consciousness of mind comes from its underlying basis of continuity at the background of experience, where consciousness is not mixed with any appearance of objects, nor with any personal activities of body, senses or mind. Instead of attributing consciousness to the changing and personal activities of the mind, it is more accurate to identify pure, impersonal consciousness as the knowing part of each person's experience.

This leads to the fourth level of the diagram. At this fourth level (as shown by the slanting arrow that comes down from above) the mind's function of creating appearances is taken into the objective part of the experience, which is thus expanded to conceive nature as a self-manifesting whole, containing within itself the creation of appearances that manifest it before the pure, impersonal illumination of consciousness.

But now, if it is asked what common and continuing reality underlies the differing and changing appearances of nature, it turns out that there is no way for distinguishing this objective reality from subjective consciousness, because both are always present together at every moment of each person's experience. Neither has any existence

independent of the other; and they are just different aspects of a single, non-dual reality, where knowing and being are identical.

Notes

1. For Aristotle's concept of nature as self-moving, see R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of Nature*, first published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1945, republished by Oxford University Press, paperback, 1960. Collingwood points out the opposition implied by the classical Greek concepts of nature (*phusis*) and artifice (*techne*). As opposed to the artificial objects of technical manipulation, the things of nature 'have a source of movement in themselves'. 'When a Greek writer contrasts *phusis* with *techne* (i.e. what things are when left to themselves with what human skill can make of them)… he implies that things have a principle of growth, organization and movement, in their own right and that this is what he means by their nature; and when he calls things natural he means that they have such a principle in them.'

2. For Aristotle's conception of 'soul as the source of movement but not itself moved', see Brett's *History of Psychology*, edited and abridged by R.S. Peters, (George Allen and Unwin, London and Macmillan, New York, 1962). Peters quotes Aristotle as saying: 'Nor is it correct to speak of the soul as being itself moved, as in anger. It is even scarcely correct to say that the soul feels anger; for that would be like saying that the soul weaves or builds. We should rather not say that the soul pities or learns or thinks, but that the man does so with the soul; and this too not in the sense that the motion occurs in the soul, but in the sense that motion sometimes reaches to, sometimes starts from the soul.'

3. For a mythical conception of underlying nature as divinely immanent in change, and manifesting itself through change, see the 'Mutabilitie Cantos' at the end of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. In cantos VI and VII, Spenser describes nature allegorically, as manifested through the Greco-Roman gods and other spirits; but, in the brief canto VIII, he ends with a sudden invocation to the Christian 'God of Saboath hight': who transcends nature, in sharp contrast to the Greco-Roman gods and other spirits through whom nature is manifested. In medieval and Renaissance Europe this was a common and prevalent contrast. On the one hand, there were the Greco-Roman and other gods and spirits through whom nature was mythically and allegorically described. And on the other hand, there was the transcendent God of Christianity, who was the pure and supreme spirit to whom people must turn for the sake of the immortal soul.

4. See note 2 above.

5. This is described in the *Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad* as follows:

From 3.8.9

etasya vā akṣharasya praśhāsane	Under the guidance of this
…sūryācandramasau	same changeless principle,…
vidhṛitau tiṣhṭhataḥ;	the sun and moon are kept in place,…
…dyāvāpṛithivyau	heaven and earth are kept in place,…
vidhṛite tiṣhṭhataḥ;	moments, hours, days, nights,
…nimeṣā, muhūrtā,	fortnights, months, seasons, years
ahorātrāṇy ardhamāsā, māsā,	are kept in place….
ṛitavaḥ, samvatsarā iti	
vidhṛitās tiṣhṭhanti,…	

From 3.8.11

tad va etad akṣharaṁ…	This is that same changeless principle
adṛiṣhṭam draṣhṭṛi,…	which is not seen, but is the see-er,…
avijnyātaṁ vijnyātṛi,…	which is not known, but is the knower.

6. 'You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.' (Heraclitus, fragments 41 and 42, as translated in John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, Black, 4th edition, England, 1930)

7. In modern academic philosophy such a conclusion is often dismissed as a 'solipsist' fallacy on the grounds that the consciousness of a person's body and mind is only a small part of a much larger world. But here it is taken for granted that consciousness is a personal activity of body and mind. So the dismissal does not apply to non-dual philosophy, where the personal identification of a knowing self is questioned and found to be false. As the *Chāndogya Upaniṣhad* puts it:

From 8.1.3

…yāvān vā ayam ākāṣhaḥ,	…Just as great as the space
tāvān eṣho'ntarhṛdaya ākāśhaḥ.	(of all the world) is this
ubhe asmin dyāvā-pṛithivī	inner space within the heart.
antar eva samāhite,	In itself, contained within,
ubhāv agniśh ca vāyuśh ca	are both heaven and earth,
sūryā-candramasāv ubhau,	both fire and air, both sun and moon,
vidyun nakṣhatrāṇi.…	lightning and the stars.…

From 8.1.4

…yadaitaj jarā vāpnoti	…When this (personality)
pradhvamsate vā,	ages or is destroyed,
kim tato'tiśhiṣhyata…	what remains of that (reality)?

From 8.1.5

…nāsya jarajaitaj jīryati,	…By the ageing of this (personality),
na vadhenāsya hanyate.	it does not age.
…eṣha ātmā…	By the killing of this (personality),
	it is not killed…
	it is the self…

8. See Parmenides' composition, *On Nature*. In John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (see note 6 above), Parmenides is translated as saying: '…it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be' (*On Nature*, 5). From Burnet's footnote, it seems that an alternative translation might be: '... it is the same thing that is for knowing and for being.' (By translating *noein* and *einai* as 'for knowing' and 'for being' respectively.)

9. As described in the *Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad,* 3.6 and 3.8.

10. As for example in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣhad,* 2.1.1.

11. For a lively account of the first four elements in European thought, see Edmund Spencer's *The Faerie Queene*, 'Mutabilitie Canto VII', stanzas 17-25. (The fifth element 'ether', of underlying continuity, is the implicit subject of the 'Mutabilitie cantos'; but Spencer does not explicitly describe it as the element 'ether'.) For a more general account of all five elements in European thought, see any standard account of Aristotelian cosmology and C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge University Press, England, 1968-70.