

Some old ideas of life and mind

Knowing and doing	1
Personal identity	5
Nature's life	7
Constituting qualities	13
Five elements	16
Meaningful experience	19
Seeds of action	22

Knowing and doing

What is there to be learned from old ideas? They have a way of using ordinary words to raise far-reaching questions. Such words have a habitual meaning that we take for granted. But they are used in a way that calls for a reflective questioning of everyday assumptions and beliefs, to take a clearer and a harder look at our experience.

One particular example is the Sanskrit word 'purusha'. In its everyday sense, purusha means a 'man' or a 'human being' or a 'person'. But, for thousands of years, this same word 'purusha' has also been used to open up a relentless investigation, which asks just what a human being or a person really is.

This investigation is reflective. It asks just how we know ourselves directly; and so it requires a change of direction. Instead of picturing a world of objects, as we do habitually, it reflects back from the pictures, in order to investigate beneath the assumptions on which they are built. Thus, it looks for a direct experience, where no distortions of belief come in the way of direct knowing.

In an old conception recorded in the Upanishads, that direct knowing is called 'purusha'. Here, the word 'purusha' is being used in a rather special way. It is not used to describe a particular person, who is identified as different from other people. Instead, this word is used to point towards an inner essence, which we all share in common, beneath our outward differences of body and of mind. And that inner essence is further analysed as consciousness. It is the knowing light that shines in every one of us. It shines through all experience, illuminating anything that may appear, no matter where nor when.

Usually, we think of knowing as something that we do, through the personal actions of our bodies, our senses and our minds. In effect, this divides our experience into three parts. First, there is a person who knows. Second, there are perceptions, thoughts and feelings, which take part in the activity of knowing. And third, there are objects that we know, through our knowing faculties.

This usual way of thinking is thrown into question by the idea of purusha, as consciousness. It points out that all our personal activities are part of what is known. So, when we think of them as knowing, we are confusing two quite different things. We are confusing what knows with what is known. In everyone's experience, what really does the knowing is just consciousness. All personal activities are part of nature's functioning. They must therefore be included in the total functioning of nature, which produces all the appearances that we see.

The functioning of nature is called 'prakriti'. It includes everything that's known. Nothing is left out, to make it partial or incomplete. It isn't just an external world,

leaving out the internal perceptions, thoughts and feelings that make the world appear to us.

Such an external world is incomplete. It does not show itself to us. We see it in an artificial way, through inner faculties of sense and mind that it does not itself contain. As we experience it, it's always mixed up artificially, with something it leaves out.

But nature is quite different. It contains both outer world and inner faculties. So, unlike an external world, nature shows itself. There are no activities outside it. Its own activities produce whatever may appear, in anyone's experience, throughout the entire universe.

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That's what makes nature 'natural'. Since it contains all the activities that make it function, it is never driven artificially, from outside. Instead, it always acts of its own accord. In other words, it is entirely spontaneous, and it stays always whole and natural. In everyone's experience, different things appear and disappear, as attention turns to them and then turns on to other things. But all of these appearances and disappearances show only nature's functioning, acting of its own accord, entirely spontaneous and impartial.

Thus, all experience is described by two ideas. *Purusha* is consciousness, illuminating what appears. *Prakriti* is nature, producing each appearance that consciousness illuminates.

Habitually, we picture our experience in three parts. The first part is ourselves, as knowing persons. The second part is our activities, as knowing things outside. And the third part is a world of known things. But, beneath this habitual picture, there is a deeper way of thinking, where experience is divided into two. And that division is made by a careful distinction between knowing and doing. This is described by the old distinction between *purusha* and *prakriti*. On the one hand, *purusha* is the *knowing* of consciousness. And on the other, *prakriti* is the *doing* of nature.

At first, it seems that knowing is a physical and mental activity: made up of perceptions, thoughts and feelings towards objects in the world. But, a more careful consideration shows that our perceptions, thoughts and feelings are not knowledge in themselves. They are just actions which produce appearances, in the course of our experience. As each appearance comes and goes, it is illuminated by consciousness.

That illumination is essentially subjective. It is an inner illumination, which shines by its own light. That knowing light is not an act which consciousness puts on, for some limited period of time. It is not an act like walking or speaking or listening, which someone starts doing at some point of time and stops doing later on. Instead, to shine with knowing light is the very existence of consciousness. Its knowing is not what it sometimes does, but what it *always is*.

Here, the word 'consciousness' is being used in a rather special way. Habitually, we use this word to describe the changing stream of perceptions, thoughts and feelings in our minds. For example, suppose that some enjoyment gets interrupted by bad

news. Then, there is a change of feeling that makes consciousness seem different. From our habitual point of view, we could say that consciousness has changed, from a previously enjoyable experience to an unhappy one now.

But we can also speak of consciousness as that which knows the change. Then we are speaking of an underlying consciousness which has continued underneath the change, knowing both the enjoyment that appeared before and the unhappiness that has replaced it now. As states of mind, the enjoyment and the unhappiness are obviously different. But underneath, there is as well a consciousness that keeps on knowing quietly, remaining present through the change. That is how the change is known.

That underlying consciousness continues at the background of experience, beneath the changes which come and go at the forefront of attention. When we speak of consciousness like this, it is an inner ground of knowing, entirely unmixed with any changing acts. As it continues through experience, it does not *do* anything that changes it at all. Its *knowing* stays completely unaffected, shining always from within. It is a self-illuminated knowing, which shines out through the appearances that cover it.

All our perceptions, thoughts and feelings are limited and superficial appearances of that underlying consciousness. They express it personally, through our limited bodies and minds. But, in itself, it is found at a depth of experience where change and difference have no effect. So it is utterly impersonal, with no way of distinguishing it in different personalities. It is our common ground of communication and understanding.

Is there really such an impersonal consciousness that we all share, beneath the differences and changes of our personal experiences? Or is this just a theoretical idea, called by the name ‘purusha’? Well, this isn’t an easy idea for most people to understand, but it is certainly not meant to be just theoretical. The whole point of the idea is to achieve a truer knowing, detached from the partial actions of limited personality. And the detachment is very definitely meant to be achieved in practice: through mind-expanding exercises of meditation, through a philosophical questioning of one’s own mistaken assumptions, and through a spiritual devotion that surrenders all personal attachment.¹

As the detachment is achieved, it is reported to give a more comprehensive view of what is known. And that comprehensive view is described by the idea of prakriti or nature. Literally, ‘prakriti’ means ‘continual doing’: from ‘kriti’, meaning ‘doing’; and from the prefix ‘pra-’, which implies an underlying continuity.² Thus prakriti includes all acts that keep on being done. And it also includes a continuing basis, called ‘mūla-prakriti’ or ‘root-nature’, from which all acts are done.

So, where purusha or consciousness is the subjective principle of knowing, prakriti or nature is the objective realm of doing. In this division of experience, consciousness does nothing. No changing actions are mixed into it. All actions and all changes are

¹ In Sanskrit, these three approaches are called ‘yoga’, ‘jnyāna’ and ‘bhakti’. The way of meditation is called ‘yoga’ (‘harnessing’ or ‘joining’). The way of questioning is ‘jnyāna’ (‘knowledge’). And the way of devotion is ‘bhakti’ (‘sharing’ or ‘partaking’).

² The Sanskrit ‘pra-’ has a double meaning, etymologically associated with the English ‘pre-’ and ‘pro-’. Like ‘pre-’, it implies a prior basis. And it also implies, like ‘pro-’, a continuation forward.

contained in nature's functioning: which produces all phenomena, throughout the physical and mental world.

Thus conceived, nature motivates itself, impersonally. It is not an artificial instrument or a technical process that anyone designs and operates, in order to get something done. Such instruments and processes are motivated from outside, by the persons who design and use them. But nature does not work like that. It is not made to order, according to someone's personal design. Nor is it driven by any act outside itself. All persons and all acts are driven by nature, not the other way around. So nature acts from within. It acts spontaneously, of its own accord. That is its inner 'naturalness', from which all actions finally originate.

This spontaneity of nature is essentially impartial, unlike the seeming spontaneity of personal habits that get ingrained by repetitive conditioning. As limited persons, we must admit that we act partially, from our conditioned and biased faculties. But, when nature is considered, as a whole, its impersonal completeness underlies the partial appearances that it produces through our limited perceptions, thoughts and feelings.

Thus, an underlying completeness is only partially expressed in each of the appearances that nature's acts produce. The actions always come, eventually, from that impersonal completeness, underneath. Yet, at the surface, nature's acts produce appearances that are each partial and personal, to some extent.

All our pictures and descriptions of the world are inherently misleading. For they are artificial constructions, built up from personal perceptions. Thus, through artificial means, they try to describe an underlying nature that is rather different. It is essentially quite unconstructed and impersonal; beneath all artificial pictures and descriptions that our faculties construct, in their inevitably compromised attempts to somehow represent it.

Here is what the *Bhagavad Gītā* says about nature and consciousness: as two differing, but complementary aspects of experience.³

You need to know that consciousness
and nature are both unbegun;
and that all changes and all
qualities are nature's happenings.

13.19

In doing, doership and what
is done, the underlying principle
is spoken of as 'nature'.

In the experience of
enjoyments and dissatisfactions,
the underlying principle
is spoken of as 'consciousness'.

13.20

³ The translations in this essay are rather free, each giving only one of many possible ways in which the old texts may be interpreted.

In manifesting nature, it
is consciousness that stands within,
experiencing the qualities
born forth as nature manifests.

For good or ill, as wombs give rise
to passing births, in every case
the cause is an association
of some manifesting qualities
with consciousness itself.

13.21

It is the witness, looking on,
confirming and supporting what
is seen. It is the subject of
experience, the boundless Lord
to whom all that's experienced
belongs. It is the truth of self,
with nothing to be found beyond.

But these are only ways of speech:
describing consciousness here in
the body, and yet quite beyond.

13.22

Personal identity

If consciousness and nature are both basically impartial and impersonal, then how do partiality and personality arise? This question is answered by the idea of 'ahankāra' or 'ego'. In Sanskrit, 'aham' means 'I' and '-kāra' implies 'doing'. So, the name 'ahankāra' describes the ego as a doing 'I'.

The sense of ego mixes up two different things. By calling itself 'I', it claims to be a knowing self, at the centre of experience. And it identifies that self as a doing someone, who is an object in the world. This is a false identification, a confusion between subjective knowing and objective doing. The subjective knowing of an unaffected consciousness is here confused with the objective doings of a driven body, whose faculties of sense and mind are very much affected from outside.

Thus confusing unaffected consciousness and driven body, the sense of ego brings about a seeming personality, with faculties made limited by an external conditioning. This personality is partial, producing the appearance of a degraded consciousness, whose knowing is the personal and partial action of conditioned faculties. What's thereby known appears to be a world of partial things.

In sum, the sense of ego is a mental confusion which thinks that mind and body *know*, when in fact they only *do* things in a rather partial way. True knowledge is essentially impartial and impersonal, but the confusion of ego makes it seem that our knowing is a partial and personal activity of limited bodies and minds.

Through ego, we identify ourselves as physical and mental persons, whose perceptions show us only bits and pieces of a much larger world. Through our thoughts and feelings, we put the bits and pieces together, in complex pictures of the world. And we identify our knowledge as the building of these pictures, through the technological capabilities that we develop along with them.

All such constructed knowledge is built up from bits and pieces of personal perception. No matter how broad and intricate our picturing may become, no matter how sophisticated the technology that builds and uses our theoretical pictures, this whole enterprise of theory and practice is based on seeming bits and pieces: which are first partially perceived by driven senses, and then dubiously related together by thoughts and feelings compromised by prejudice and expectation.

There is a basic problem here, in our approach to learning and technology. As we learn from experience, it is only natural that we should try to achieve the independence of knowing things correctly, detached from the driven biases and prejudice of personal partiality. But, through the sense of ego, we think of ourselves as doers and achievers, whose knowing is a part of what our individual and collective doings have achieved. So, in the process of learning, as we look for the detachment and the freedom of clear knowledge, we try to find it in our personal and technological achievements.

In many ways, that search for freedom is the driving force of what we do and what we manage to achieve. But, through ego's confusion of independent knowing with our dependent doings, the urge to freedom makes us think of our personalities in opposition to nature: as though our actions could somehow go against the nature that they manifest. This confusion makes us look at learning and achievement in a way that is all too often merely technical and artificial. Then we forget that our accomplishments are carried out by acts of nature, from beneath the appearances produced through the technical instruments and artificial faculties used by our personal identities.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* puts it simply.

Everywhere, all acts are done
by nature's constituting qualities.
Mistaking ego for the self,
a person thinks: 'I am the doer.' 3.27

Each particular doer is inevitably limited, by particular faculties and capabilities of action. If one identifies oneself as a doer, one's perception becomes inevitably limited, and therefore partial. There's no escape, the *Gītā* says, through technical sophistication; nor through personal restraint.

One acts according to one's own nature.
A learned, knowledgeable person
is no exception. Beings follow nature.
What will holding back achieve? 3.33

Here, 'holding back' is treated as a negative action. Accordingly, the driven partiality of action cannot be avoided by doing or not doing anything, by any action or restraint towards some limited object. To attain impartiality, a deeper understanding is required, beyond our senses and our minds.

Our senses are transcendent, it is said.
Beyond the senses is the mind.
Beyond the mind as well is understanding.
Beyond the understanding is just 'that'. 3.42

At the depth of understanding, all faculties are known objectively, as nature's happenings.

As truth is known, one who joins into it
can understand: 'I don't do anything.

'Sight, hearing, touch, smell, eating,
going here and there, sleeping, breathing,
speaking, holding on and letting go,
eyes opening and closing...

'these are just faculties, acting
towards their various objects.'

5.8-9

Thus, an unaffected witnessing is utterly detached from doing faculties. That detachment is meant to uncover a pure impartiality of knowledge: as Krishna tells Arjuna, in the last chapter of the *Gītā*.

Pure knowledge is just that by which
one changeless principle
of undivided nature
is seen in all divided things.

That's what you need to know.

18.20

Nature's life

By thus detaching an impartial consciousness from partial personality, a more positive and delicate relationship is described, between subjective knowing and objective nature. They are related through the idea of 'prāṇa' or 'life'. Very simply, life is how consciousness becomes expressed, through nature's functioning. In our bodies and our minds, consciousness seems personally expressed, through the sense of ego. So it seems that we have separate and independent lives, possessed by our personal identities. The idea of prāṇa looks beneath this appearance, through the metaphor of 'living breath'.

The Sanskrit word 'prāṇa' comes from the root 'an', which associated with 'breathing', 'sound' and 'life'. As we speak, breath flows and vibrates, so as to produce the meaningful appearances of spoken sound. This bodily experience is used as a metaphor: which describes how a more subtle energy vibrates and flows, so as to produce the gross appearances of the material world.

In one way, the idea of prāṇa is rather like the energy of modern physics. It says that matter is only a concentrated or coagulated form of energy. Thus, material objects are made up of energy patterns which are not really separate. These patterns, which we see as gross objects, are essentially interconnected, by subtle vibrations and radiations of fluctuating energy. All objects are made up of subtle particles (called 'anus'), which are not just pieces of gross matter. Instead, they are tiny elements of a dynamic energy, organized in interconnected patterns of vibrating and radiating fluctuation. As the *Kaṭha Upanishad* says:

The universe of changing things –
 whatever may be issued forth –
 it is all found in living energy, whereby
 it moves and oscillates and shines.

from 6.2

But in another way, the energy of *prāṇa* is quite beyond the scope of modern physics. For *prāṇa* is essentially alive. It is a *living* energy, expressing consciousness. Like the flow of breath producing words and speech, the energy of *prāṇa* expresses a living meaning that is understood subjectively, by reflecting back to consciousness within one's own experience.

Modern physics is specifically restricted to a world of objects that are observed through material instruments, used by our material bodies. Subjective reflection is used intuitively, to develop theories, but it is not a valid way of observing the objects that are studied. So living meaning cannot be observed as an expression of subjective consciousness. Here, the energy considered cannot act from consciousness, but only from one object to another.

In the idea of *prāṇa*, energy is differently conceived. As objects act upon each other, they are considered instruments of nature's functioning. And *prāṇa* is the energy through which nature expresses consciousness, in actions and phenomena that we find meaningful or intelligible.

Thus, *prāṇa* is an energy of meaningful expression. It does not act from any object, physical or mental. Nor does it act from any faculties of physical or mental personality. Its action is essentially a natural inspiration, which rises up spontaneously from underlying consciousness. In this conception, nature is inspired to act by its own inner principle of unaffected consciousness, which is at once subjective and impersonal. As the *Sāṅkhya-kārikā* puts it:

All qualities belong to nature,
 as she acts in many ways:
 not for the sake of objects gained,

 but serving only for the sake
 of that true inner principle
 which has no qualities itself
 and is not moved by any act.

60

The inner principle of consciousness is thus what Aristotle called the 'unmoved mover'⁴, inspiring nature's actions in our personalities and in the world outside. It is

⁴ In *De Anima* (408b), Aristotle describes the unmoved mover as an inner principle of 'soul', of which we cannot rightly say that it 'feels anger' or 'thinks' or 'weaves' or 'builds' or is thus engaged in any personal act: 'Nor is it correct to say that the soul is itself moved, as in anger. It is even scarcely correct to speak of the soul as feeling anger. For this 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 a person does so in virtue of the soul. And by this we would not mean that movement is ever *in* the soul. But rather, we should mean that movement is sometimes *from*, and sometimes *towards*, the soul.'

(The above translation is adapted from two sources. First, from the translation by R.S. Peters, in *Brett's History of Psychology*, edited and abridged by R.S. Peters, George Allen and

...*footnote continued on next page*

all nature's source of life, the underlying source and ground of every living person. In the *Kaushītaki Upanishad*, it is described as life itself.

But then, in truth, life in itself
is consciousness, the real self:
which holds this body all around
and causes it to rise, alive.

from 3.3

It's from this ground of consciousness that life is expressed, in ongoing actions. And the expression is through mind. Here, a brief description is provided by the *Prashna Upanishad*.

It is from self that life is born.

But as, on consciousness, there's a
reflected play of light and shade;
so too, on self, there is this [play
of life] that gets extended out.

Through the activity of mind,
it comes to be in body here.

3.3

In this passage, mind is conceived as a mediating process, between consciousness and objects. To understand the mediation in modern terms, it may be conceived as a repeating cycle: of expression and reflection.

- 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.

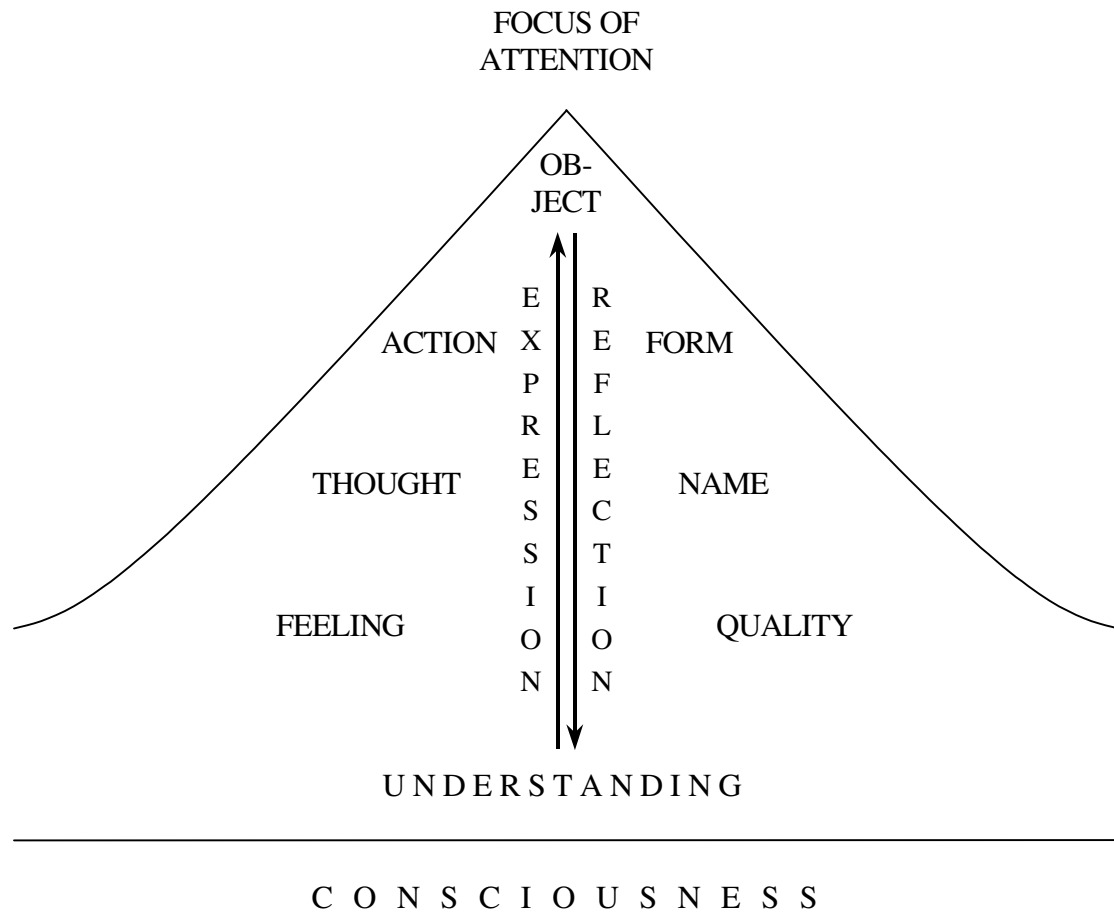
There is thus a movement up and down, through five levels that are illustrated in figure 1 (next page), within the broken triangle formed by the three lines. At the uppermost level, objects keep appearing and disappearing, as attention turns to them and turns away from them. At the second level, actions 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.

All five levels are supported by consciousness, which is their final ground. All levels and all living faculties depend on it, but it does not depend on them.

By repeatedly expressing consciousness and returning back to it, we learn from experience. It is thus that misunderstandings can get exposed and clarified, and that our living faculties can get developed and adapted. But, throughout this process of learning, consciousness continues quite unaffected by the achievements and failures of our dependent faculties. Beneath them, it is fully independent, on its own.

Unwin, London and Macmillan, New York, 1962. And second, from the translation by Hugh Lawson-Tancred in *Aristotle: De Anima (On the Soul)*, Penguin Classics, London, 1986.)

Figure 1



As our faculties perform their living functions – like feeling, thought, perception, speech – we experience in them a subtle sense of living energy, which expresses consciousness. This is the expressive energy conceived as ‘prāṇa’. It is not just a subordinate possession that belongs to objects, which knock it on – or project it on – to one another. Instead, it is an energy that rises up from its subjective source, in consciousness. And there it keeps returning to renew itself, and thus to rise again, refreshed.

Accordingly, the living energy of prāṇa cannot be reduced to the mutual interaction of perceived objects. It can only be described through a subjective reflection back, to a common ground of consciousness. To see an act as living, there must be a sense of kinship with it, that it expresses some common principle of life, in which one shares oneself.

The sense of kinship is most obvious with like-minded people who share similar attitudes and ideas. It is less obvious with those whose ideas and habits are unfamiliar; but there is still some sense of kinship that enables us to recognize them as human, like us. There is even some rudimentary sense of kinship with living creatures of all kinds; though the more primitive they are the more rudimentary is the sense of kinship that enables us to recognize them as alive, like us.

Eventually, there are objects – like a table or a rock – that are not recognized to be alive at all. They do not have anything that even remotely resembles our sense faculties, and their behaviour does not show even the most rudimentary kind of purpose or intention that we experience in our minds.

So it seems that life is a special property belonging to living creatures, with faculties of sense and mind that look at least a little bit like ours. Outside the bodies of living creatures, there seems to be no reasonable basis for seeing nature as alive. Beyond the fanciful imaginings of myth and fiction, we fail to see a living kinship with most objects, like a table or a rock.

Thus, we take consciousness to be an exclusive privilege, which belongs primarily to our minds and bodies; though we concede that it is also expressed, most often to a lesser extent, in some few bodies and minds that look to us like ours. Our view of life and consciousness is rather narrowly dependent upon our particular faculties, and so we can only see a very small and special part of nature as alive. We find no rational basis for seeing otherwise.

However, in many spiritual traditions, past and present, all nature is conceived to be alive. And the conception is not just a matter of religious faith or mystical intuition. It is also reasoned, very carefully, through a skeptical enquiry into the nature of experience. Here, the conclusion reached is that anything in the world may be perceived as alive. Or it may not. Whether something is alive, or not, depends on how one looks.

For example, take a person's body. When it is seen to be made up of physical parts, interacting with each other and the world outside, then it is 'jaḍa' or 'lifeless matter'. But when these interactions are seen to express an inner consciousness, then the body is taken to be alive, animated by the subtle energy of living faculties.

The same analysis applies to a person's mind. When it is seen as an objective process, with previous states producing later states, then it too is jaḍa or lifeless. Mental states may be more subtle than physical objects; but they too are lifeless matter, if we consider only the relationships between them. However, if they are seen to express a consciousness from which they rise, then the mind is taken to be alive. It is then a 'jīva' or a 'living psyche': which experiences what happens, as it goes on living in the world.

A similar analysis applies to an object that seems merely physical, like a rock. As something made of interacting parts, or as itself an interacting part of world, it is lifeless matter. But if we see some further meaning in its interactions and relationships, then the rock says something to us; and we listen to what it has to say, thus treating it as an expression of life.

If a rock has been sculpted into some implement or work of art, then it obviously expresses the living consciousness of those who sculpted it. But what about a natural rock: where no person has interfered, to impose an artificial meaning from outside? Here also, for a natural rock, there are two ways of looking at it. One can picture it objectively, as an external shape or as a structure made of grains and molecules. But one may also look beneath the picture, wondering how it expresses nature's functioning. Then one is listening to what it has to say. And so it comes alive, evoking basic intuitions of natural order and meaning and continuity.

As one looks more deeply, mere pictures and descriptions are left behind. Alternatively pushed and pulled, by feelings of puzzlement and beauty, one is led to find correspondences and symmetries; which show an underlying kinship and harmony, between the rock and other things. Then nature's life is seen, there in the rock, reflecting back to that same life in one's own experience.

Thus, through an attitude of listening, a rock or any other thing may be taken to express an inner meaning, as a manifestation of nature. And that inner meaning is un-

derstood by reflecting back into the depth of one's own experience, thereby implying a profound kinship between the rock and oneself. Then, the rock is understood on the basis of its kinship with oneself, and so is all of nature. Both rock and nature are then treated as alive.

What is that common kinship, which one shares with all of nature? It's what one finds at the depth of all experience, beneath the differences that come and go above. Thus, it cannot be different from that changeless ground of consciousness to which each one of us reflects, whenever we take meaning in from what has been perceived. That is our common ground of life, found everywhere expressed, in all of nature's many acts.

In each particular creature, that knowing ground appears expressed through a particular mind and body, with limited faculties of mental and physical action. In the world as a whole, it is expressed through nature's underlying order, with all the meaning and intelligibility that enables our conceptions of the world. As consciousness continues through experience, so also nature's order extends throughout the world.

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Krishna speaks in the first person, about the delicate relationship through which an unaffected consciousness inspires nature's life.

Just from my own established nature,
I give rise, time after time,
to this entire multitude
of beings: motiveless itself.

All motivation is from nature. 9.8

Actions thus arise, but they
do not restrict me, Arjuna.
While present in the midst of actions,
I am present there apart:
in that same unaffected state
where I am always unattached. 9.9

As I look on, it's by this
witnessing that nature urges forth
what's made to move or stay in place.
This witnessing, Arjuna, is
the motivating cause by which
the changing world goes turning round. 9.10

In this passage, Krishna identifies himself as an unaffected consciousness, expressed by nature everywhere. As elsewhere in the *Gītā*, there are two interpretations here: one religious and the other philosophical. From a religious point of view, it may be understood that Krishna is an incarnation of God, who must be approached through worship and belief.

But there is also a philosophical interpretation, which asks what Krishna means when he says 'I'. What is the 'I' whose witnessing inspires all of nature's actions? Is it Krishna as opposed to his friend Arjuna, to whom he is speaking? Clearly not. Since that 'I' inspires everything, it must inspire Arjuna's actions as well as Krishna's. In the end, their different acts of mind and body are inspired by a single

‘I’, which is the knowing ground of everyone’s experience. As Krishna speaks from that ‘I’, he is raising questions for Arjuna and others to ask for themselves. Krishna is thus throwing into question what we mean by words like ‘I’ or ‘consciousness’ or ‘life’ or ‘nature’.

The questioning is meant to go beneath all artificial pictures that are built by persons and communities, from habits of convention and belief. So long as anything constructed may remain, the questioning is not complete. Where anything built up is taken artificially for granted, there nature’s life has not been found.

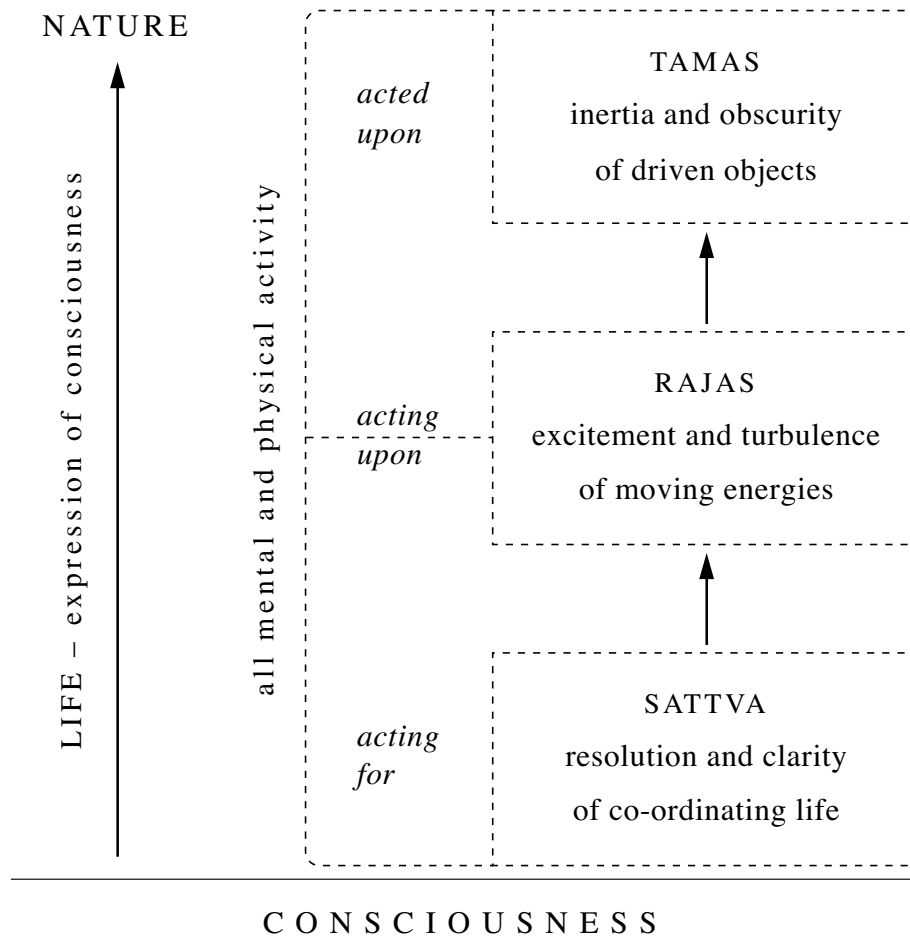
Constituting qualities

Unlike the knowing of consciousness, the doings of nature are affected by quality. Where there is action, it acts against reaction. As nature manifests a world, our partial minds and senses don’t see everything at once. They see the world in bits and pieces, which resist our partial faculties of mind and body. These bits and pieces of resistance are the objects of the world.

When an object is perceived, it occupies attention and obscures our view of other things. Thus, along with its resisting inertia, an object is inherently obstructing and obscuring. As objects act in the world, they are driven from outside, by other things that they obstruct and obscure. Their predominating quality is one of *inertia and obscurity*. In Sanskrit, this quality is called ‘*tamas*’.

In the course of time, objects move and change, as their blind inertia is overcome

Figure 2



by the excitement of moving energies. Patterns form and are transformed, relating things in new and different ways. Old relationships become disrupted; new relationships bring conflict as they form. In the process, as moving energies bring change about, their predominating quality is one of *excitement and turbulence*. In Sanskrit, this quality is called ‘rajas’.

As energies and objects act and react, they are co-ordinated by shared principles of natural order. Beneath the differing appearances of observed phenomena, we understand such common principles, which enable a co-ordinated order that we find intelligible. Reflecting back to nature’s life within ourselves, we find intelligible principles that we can see co-ordinating nature’s life more broadly in the world. In that co-ordination, of nature’s life, the predominating quality is one of *resolution and clarity*, found by seeing through the obscuring confusions of conflicting appearances. In Sanskrit this peaceful and clear quality is called ‘sattva’.

These three qualities – tamas, rajas and sattva – can be seen to show three levels of nature’s life, in all physical and mental activity. An illustration is shown in figure 2 (previous page). At the level of tamas, nature is made of objects that are *acted upon*. At the level of rajas, there is an energetic process of *acting upon*. And at the level of sattva, there is a co-ordinated *acting for* the sake of an impartial, but inspiring reality of consciousness.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* gives us a clear description of how these three qualities affect our embodied lives, and how freedom may be found beyond them. First, we are told that our embodied state gets limited by superimposing these partial qualities upon a living principle that in itself remains unchanged.

In nature’s happening, there are
three constituting qualities:
called ‘sattva’, ‘rajas’, ‘tamas’.

In the body, Arjuna, they limit
the embodied principle;
though in itself it stays unchanged.

14.5

Next, the qualities are described, one by one, for the limitations that they bring about. *Sattva* limits personality by attachment to embodied knowledge and well-being. *Rajas* colours and distorts experience by attachment to achievement and passion. And *tamas* gets us stuck in carelessness and ignorance.

There, *sattva* is what shines, from
purity, set free from ill and harm.

This brings in limitation, Arjuna,
by holding on to comfort
and to knowledge that is known.

14.6

You should know *rajas*, Arjuna,
as made of passion: rising up
inflamed with craving and attachment.

That brings limitation onto
the embodied principle,
by holding on to what is done.

14.7

And *tamas* you must know as
stupefying, born of ignorance.

It limits all embodied
beings, Arjuna, by blind
intoxication, laziness and sleep. 14.8

From *sattva* comes attachment to
well-being; and from *rajas* comes
attachment to activity.

But *tamas* covers knowledge, and
thus makes for an attachment to
intoxicated lack of care. 14.9

Then, each quality is described as sometimes predominating over the other two, thus giving rise to a variety of changing effects.

Predominating upon *rajas*
and on *tamas*, *sattva* rises,
Arjuna. So also *rajas*,
upon *sattva* and on *tamas*.
And thus *tamas* in its turn,
upon *sattva* and on *rajas*. 14.10

When light arises at all portals
in this body, then it may
be known that *sattva* has matured. 14.11

Ambition, enterprise, exertion,
restlessness and zest: all these
arise in *rajas* growing forth. 14.12

Obscurity, inertia, driven
madness and delusion: these
arise in *tamas* growing forth. 14.13

Where action is well done, its fruit
is pure, called 'sāttvic'. But the fruit
of *rajas* is discomfort; and
of *tamas*, it is ignorance. 14.16

From *sattva*, knowledge comes. From *rajas*,
eagerness and greed. From *tamas*,
madness and delusion come
about, along with ignorance. 14.17

And finally, it is described how nature's qualities and all their limitations may be transcended.

When it is seen that there's no doer
other than these constituting
qualities, and when the see-er
knows beyond the qualities,

that see-er reaches my own state. 14.19

Transcending these three qualities
through which the body has arisen,

one who is embodied finds
undying freedom: unconfined
by being born into a world
where life degenerates and dies. 14.20

For I am the supporting ground
of all reality: undying,
changeless, permanent, held always
good and true, in its own state
of unaffected happiness. 14.27

Five elements

As nature's functioning is analysed into three qualities, so also nature's world is further analysed into five elements: 'earth', 'water', 'fire', 'air' and 'ether'. This is a rather general division of experience, which may be applied in many particular ways.

Most obviously, it may be applied to material experience, by considering a piece of matter like a rock. At normal temperatures, a rock is a solid object with a stable shape, like an earthen pot that has been formed and baked from clay. Thus, 'earth' may be taken as an element of solidity, shown by material objects in their solid state.

When rocks are sufficiently heated, they can melt into flowing lava, glowing with the radiant heat of fire. Thus, 'water' may be taken as an element of liquid flow, shown by matter that has melted from a solid to a liquid state. And 'fire' may be taken as an element of energizing and propagating heat, making matter flow and transferring energy from place to place.

As molten lava is further heated, it can boil into gases that get mixed into the atmosphere. Thus, 'air' can be taken as an atmospheric element of gas and wind and climate, surrounding the solid planet earth and its liquid waters. Beyond the atmosphere, light radiates through space itself, which permeates all states of matter and their propagating heat. Thus, 'ether' can be taken as a pervading element of all-containing and light-bearing space.

So far, the five elements sound like a crude and metaphorical preliminary to modern physics, with the old 'ether' now replaced by the more sophisticated 'space-time continuum' of Einstein's relativity. But the old elements were rather more than that. For they were not restricted to physical experience, in the way that modern physics is. In fact, they were applied to a combination of physical and mental experience, where they require a more subtle and sophisticated consideration.

When mental experience is taken into account, the solid element 'earth' shows something rather more than the solid state of physical matter. It now represents all outward matter: solid, liquid and gaseous. The whole material world is now conceived to be made up from the gross element 'earth'.

Since our outward senses are both gross and partial, they see gross pieces of matter. These gross pieces are material objects. Each of them is particular. It is a particular object, divided from other such objects by boundaries in space and time. Thus, as we look outside, we see a world of matter, divided into particular things. This divisi-

ble matter corresponds pretty obviously to the traditional element 'earth'. Here, the old conception is a little metaphorical. It says that the particular objects of the world are formed from the element 'earth', as pots are formed from clay.

At first, the world of particular objects seems solid. But, upon further investigation, it is not so. As objects interact, they are caught up in a constant process of formation and transformation. When changing time is taken into account, our solid-seeming world is shown to be only an instant snapshot: a momentary picture taken at a particular instant of time. As time flows, the objects of the world keep changing. Each moment that we look, what we have seen keeps vanishing, transformed into something else.

Through this examination, the seeming solidity of objects gives way to a fluidity of changing forms. It is then clear that matter is not the only element in our experience of the world. In addition to the concrete particularity of matter, we experience a second, more fundamental element: which may be called 'energy'. This second element, of *energy*, is manifested in moving activity; and it thus produces the changing forms of objects in the world. It is associated with the fluidity of change, which makes it correspond to the traditional element called 'water'.

Through the changing flow of energetic activity, information travels from place to place. This enables us to observe the world. Each observer receives information that represents other things. These represented things are then illuminated by observing them, from a particular point of view.

So, beyond matter and energy, *information* is a third element of our experience. By representing other things, it throws a particular light on them; and it thus corresponds to the traditional element called 'fire'.

We do not directly observe the matter and energy in the world outside our bodies and our measuring instruments. External matter and energy are only observed through the representations of information that our instruments have received. In this sense, information is more fundamental than matter and energy.

In its turn, information depends on something further still. In order to represent anything, information depends upon a comparison of represented qualities. For example, a map shows some places closer together and other places further apart. Or it may show how various places are cooler or hotter: by comparative shades of colour, or by numbers that spell out the comparison in a more calculated way.

Thus, beneath the information through which the world appears to us, there is a fourth element: of relative *conditioning*. It shows the world as conditioned by varying characteristics and qualities, in much the same way that the atmosphere is conditioned by climate. So there is another correspondence here, with the traditional element called 'air'.

In order to compare the differing characteristics of different places, there has to be an underlying continuity, which extends through space and time. This continuity is understood in a way that is rather different from our perceptions of matter. Where matter is perceived, space and time are distances that *separate* particular objects and events. Where continuity is understood, space and time are not what separates, but what *connects*. Here, distance is not separation, but a connection in between. It is the intervening connection between parts of a world that has been made to seem divided, by our limited and narrow perceptions.

Thus, beneath the differentiated conditioning of the world, there is a fifth element, of pervading *continuity*. This evidently corresponds to the traditional element called 'ether'. It is described as the subtlest element, pervading the entire world.

In this kind of way, the 'five elements' can be interpreted as different levels, which get mixed up, in our experience of the world. These same five levels can be seen in our perceiving personalities, where they are called 'koshas' or 'coverings'.

The koshas are five layers of personality, through which the world is known. Just as the five elements divide the world at large into five levels of macrocosmic experience, so also the five koshas divide our individual experiences into five layers of microcosmic personality. As each level of the world appears, it is perceived through a corresponding layer of personal experience. One by one, these layers are meant to be uncovered, thus going down through deeper levels of both world and personality.

- The outermost layer is called the 'annamaya kosha' or the 'covering of food'. It is a person's body, seen as a material object. Through this body, other objects are perceived, in a world of matter.
- Proceeding inwards, the second layer is called the 'prāṇamaya kosha' or the 'covering of energy'. Here, the body is seen as a living organism, made of flowing energy. The flow takes place in resonating currents, called 'nāḍis'. These currents function organically, as they resonate in sympathy with each other and with the world outside. Thus, they form an organic pattern of living activity, which perceives a functioning world of fluid energy and happening.
- The third layer is called the 'manomaya kosha' or the 'covering of mind'. It is the conceiving intellect, made up of thoughts and descriptions. Through the interpretations of thought, it conceives an intelligible world of meaningful information.
- The fourth layer is called the 'vijnyānamaya kosha', or the 'covering of discernment'. Here, quality and value are discerned. The discernment is made up of our intuitive judgements and our inner feelings. They carry out the contrasts and comparisons that show a qualitative world of motivating value.
- The fifth layer is called the 'ānandamaya kosha' or the 'covering of happiness'. Here, the word 'happiness' refers to harmony and integration. This is the coordinating layer of personality. It is made up of assimilated understanding. Through it, we comprehend the continuity of common principles, beneath the change and the variety of superficial appearances.

Within these five coverings, there is an inmost self, called 'ātman'. In it, there is no trace of body, nor of mind. There are no objects, actions, thoughts, feelings, or states of understanding. All change and difference belong to the coverings of personality.

The self within is consciousness, unmixed with any coverings. It is at once each person's inmost centre and the supporting ground of everything in the entire world.

An illustration is given in figure 3 (next page). The first two columns show the five elements of world. The third and fourth columns show the layers of personality and their examining disciplines.

A further illustration may be seen in the preceding figure 1 (on page 10). In that figure, within the broken triangle formed by the three lines, the same five levels are shown. There, they are described as: (1) Objects, (2) Action and form, (3) Thought

Figure 3

<i>Traditional element</i>	<i>Appearance of reality</i>	<i>Perceiving instrument</i>	<i>Examining disciplines</i>
'Earth'	Pieces of matter	Physical body	Physical sciences
'Water'	Patterns of energy	Living organism	Biological sciences
'Fire'	Meaningful information	Conceiving intellect	Cultural sciences
'Air'	Conditioned character	Intuitive judgement	Psychological sciences
'Ether'	Continuing existence	Assimilated understanding	Philosophical enquiry

Unchanging consciousness

and name, (4) Feeling and quality, (5) Understanding. They correspond to both the five layers of personality and the five levels of world, arising from a common ground.

Meaningful experience

As nature manifests appearances, we interpret meaning in them, thus relating our perceptions into coherent experience. In this sense, as we observe and interpret things, we are listening to what nature has to say. Through our observations of the world, nature speaks to us, in a language that we try to understand, as we interpret what we see.

But, where nature speaks, the language used cannot be just an artificial construction, built from words and symbols whose meaning is a matter of convention. It isn't then enough to see how words and forms have been arranged, by customary usages. Instead, language must be understood more deeply and more naturally, by looking at the living experience of speaking and listening, as people act and interact and learn.

In an old philosophy of language, that living experience is described at different levels: of body, mind and consciousness.

- At the level of body, speech is called 'vaikharī', a Sanskrit term that means 'elaborated'. Here, external sounds and symbols are articulated, as we act towards the objects of an outside world. Our experience of the world is an elaborated construction, built by relating different objects together in space and time.

This external level is described in an old Sanskrit verse, quoted in the *vritti* commentary on Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya*, stanza 1.142.

Elaborated speech is made
of many different syllables
and sounds: produced and carried off
in air, at various places in the world.

As it goes forth from those who speak,
it manifests – in concrete form –
the subtle, living energy
that functions through their faculties.

- At the level of mind, speech is called ‘madhyamā’ or ‘mediating’. As we act towards objects, our minds express and interpret meaning in them. In this experience of meaning, objects are related back to our knowledge of them, as our minds pass through a succession of perceptions, thoughts and feelings.

This intermediate level functions through succeeding states of mental time, as described in a continuation of the previous verse:

The *mediating* stage of speech
is made of mind alone, of forms
that follow other forms, succeeding
one another in our minds.

It goes beyond the subtle
functioning of living energy,
as it becomes engaged outside.

- At the depth of consciousness, speech is called ‘pashyantī’ or ‘seeing’. As our minds progress through passing states, knowledge carries on beneath, at the background of the mind. Here, knowing is an undistracted seeing or a silent witnessing, which quietly illuminates what’s seen and thus assimilates it into unseen potency.

In the course of time, a succession of experiences keeps storing memories and sowing seeds of character. Thus, after our experiences have been absorbed, they carry on in the background: as latent potencies, beneath the noisy occurrences that clamour for attention at the changing surface of appearance.

Later on, from the unseen potential of this quiet background witnessing, its latent memories and seeds of character get manifested at the surface. Then they are seen expressed by further actions and happenings out in the seeming world.

That quiet witnessing is in itself an ever-present consciousness, where all appearances arise and are absorbed back in. All that’s seen expresses it and is reflected back to it. Throughout experience, it is what speaks and understands, the essence of all speech and meaning. This is described in a further continuation of the previous verses:

But *seeing* is that partless essence
subtly present everywhere.

In it, succession is withdrawn.
No disappearance can arise.
There’s only light, seen as it is.
That’s what speech is itself, within....

Through its diverse associations,
speech is shown elaborated:
reaching its conditioned forms,
shown coloured by activity.

But as pure being in itself,
it is untouched: quite unaffected
by this show of qualities.

Seen from the world of change and show, the silent witnessing of pashyantī appears to be an unseen assimilation of deep insight, a hidden reservoir of ‘unconscious’ seeing at the underlying depth of mind. This deep insight is at the borderline between mind and consciousness. Its level is beneath the mind, but just above the final ground of consciousness. Deep insight is still a little tainted, with a confusing sense of ‘unconscious knowing’. A further distinction is still needed, to remove the confusing taint.

To make that distinction, Bhartrihari’s three levels were increased to four; and the word ‘pashyantī’ has come to be used in a slightly degraded way. It is the level of deep insight, just above the final ground of consciousness. The final ground is described as a fourth level, called ‘parā’ or ‘beyond’. It is the ground where knowing and being are the same. There consciousness is self-illuminating light, whose very being is to shine. That shining is its knowing and its being, illuminating everything that anyone experiences.

These four levels are illustrated in figure 4. They apply to each person’s individual experience and also to our collective experience of the world at large, as shown in columns two and three.

In the macrocosm of the external universe, the deep insight of pashyantī is an underlying regulation and harmony of nature, connecting different things together. This is the level where nature functions through a subtly intelligible order and causation: which we reflect upon intuitively, at the depth of understanding.

Figure 4

<i>Level of expression</i>	<i>Microcosm of individual experience</i>	<i>Macrocosm of the external universe</i>
Vaikhari (‘elaborated’)	Personal articulation of words and symbols	Changing world of perceived objects
Madhyamā (‘in between’)	Succession of mental states, through which symbols are formed and meanings are interpreted	Flow of happenings, through which objects take shape and convey meaning
Pashyantī (‘seeing’)	Quiet insight and latent potentiality, continuing at the depth of mind	Subtly intelligible order and causation of nature’s functioning
Parā (‘beyond’)	Ultimate identity of knowing and being	

Albert Einstein put it rather beautifully, when he spoke of a scientist as guided by the ‘sense of universal causation’. This sense, said Einstein, is a deep feeling of ‘rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.’⁵

Seeds of action

As nature’s happenings take place, how do causes have effects, in the course of time? How does the past continue, so as to influence the present and the future? This continuing causation is described by the words ‘karma’ and ‘samskāra’.

In Sanskrit, ‘karma’ is a rather simple word. It just means ‘action’. And the word samskāra is used to describe the influence of action and happening on character. Literally, ‘samskāra’ means ‘that which goes along with action’. (‘Sam-’ means ‘together with’, ‘-kāra’ indicates ‘action’.) In particular, a samskāra is a ‘conditioning’ or a ‘tendency’ of character which comes from past actions and happenings. Accordingly, it is conceived that character develops gradually, as an accumulation of samskāras or tendencies which have been formed by past conditioning. This applies in general, to the character of a person or a community or an object or a place.

In everyone’s experience, as each happening appears, it is perceived and taken into the continuing background, beneath the changing surface of appearance. Thus absorbed into the background, the happening continues as a potential aptitude for future action, like a seed that has been planted in the ground. Later, when the conditions are right, such an aptitude or samskāra gets manifested into further happenings, like a seed that sprouts and grows and blossoms into flowers and fruit.

As a description of living experience, this conception of karma is just common sense. If we consider the process of our lives, as each of us experiences the world, then it is only common sense that our actions and experiences result in personal tendencies and inclinations which go into the make-up of each person’s character. As we go about our lives, our actions take us through a succession of experiences, which keep on passing by, appearing and disappearing at the surface of our minds.

But, though they disappear at the surface, our experiences get somehow absorbed into longer lasting attitudes and traits of character and stores of memory, which continue underneath. Thus, as our experiences pass by, they leave their effects behind, in a subtle assimilation of experience that continues unmanifest, beneath the surface of our minds. Through that underlying assimilation, we develop a psychological and human potential, which is expressed in further actions and takes us on to further experiences.

In short, the theory of karma is a description of living development. And the approach it takes is psychological. It says that living creatures develop through subtle inclinations which their actions leave behind. These subtle inclinations or samskāras are primarily mental. They are inclinations of intention, thought and feeling, which result from previous actions and experiences. In the course of our lives, as we pass

⁵ Quoted in Albert Einstein: *Ideas and opinions* (New translations and revisions by Sonja Bargmann), Rupa and Co., New Delhi, 1989. Quoted as taken from *Mein Weltbild*, Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1934.

through many different experiences, these subtle inclinations are assimilated at the depth of our minds, into a developed potential that manifests itself from there.

In this psychological description, our mental processes are not based on any brain or nervous system that manipulates information behind the scenes, like a computer making calculations behind a video screen. Nor are mental processes based finally on any formal language that uses particular symbols and symbolic structures to articulate ideas. Instead, all mental processes are based upon an underlying continuity that carries on through changing mental states. That continuity is a subjective ground, deep within our minds, beneath the changes of apparent objects that come and go at the surface. It's at this underlying ground that actions and experiences leave their effects behind. And it is from this ground that future actions and experiences arise, to carry on the process of experience.

What is this subjective ground? According to the old ideas, it is a common consciousness that carries on through everyone's experience, beneath all differences of time and place and personality. So it is both subjective and impersonal. As such, it is the ground of the entire universe, expressed in everything that anyone perceives, throughout all space and time. Our individual lives express it personally, through our personal egos. The universe expresses it impersonally, through the impersonality of nature as a whole.

This isn't just a mythical or mystical conception, meant only for religious faith or poetic imagination or mind-expanding exercise. It is also a carefully reasoned analysis, meant for a rigorously scientific investigation into knowledge.

But the investigation is essentially a matter of education. Any technology of physical instruments and machines can only be peripheral. In the end, ideas of life and mind work best reflectively, by guiding a reflective education that cultivates and clarifies our living faculties. Old sciences were centred upon such cultivating and clarifying ideas. The challenge is to understand the old ideas today, in modern terms that help us ask their questions in the present, for ourselves.