

## *Where thought turns back ...* *A skeptical approach to truth*

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### **Building up and asking down**

Many people think of philosophy as a highly theoretical subject. It asks questions and reaches conclusions that can seem very far removed from practical experience. But this is only when philosophy is seen from the outside. If a book describes some school of philosophy, as a system of ideas, then that of course is a theoretical description.

But when the questioning turns back, upon one's own assumptions, then one's own understanding is at stake. Such questioning is then no longer just theoretical. It has an inherently practical effect: upon one's understanding and one's attitudes, and hence upon the way that one interprets things and acts in the world.

This reflective questioning is the actual practice of philosophy. It requires a change of direction. Where a philosophical question is genuinely raised, one is no longer going ahead and *getting on with things*, on the basis of habituated beliefs. Instead, one is asking for a way down, beneath mere habits of belief, in order to *get to the bottom of things*.

There is a distinction here, between two different ways of knowing:

- At first, it seems that we know things in pictures, which are made from smaller pieces of perception. We have to picture what we see, because our senses and our minds are partial. They see things only in bits and pieces, from various different points of view. Our pictures put these bits and pieces together, so as to represent what has been seen.
- However, our pictures can be misleading. What they show is sometimes proved wrong. Then it becomes evident that our pictures are not straightforward knowledge. Instead, they each present us with a limited and superficial show of perception, which contains an obscuring element of imagination and make-believe. So we look for a second way of knowing, as we investigate what lies beneath the show.

Of these two ways of knowledge, the first is directed towards many particular things. It is our way of knowing as we get on with things and get ahead with our lives. For then we use our pictures of the world to help us choose what we want, and to show us how to get it. These pictures get built up in the course of long habit, as we go after our various limited objectives. So the pictures get limited and biased, by the limitations and the bias of our chosen objectives.

In fact, the pictures that we use are already partial and prejudiced: from their previous development, extending far back in history, over many generations. Thus, from our past, we inherit an accumulated prejudice, which is driven by blind habits of assumption and belief. In so far as these habits stay unquestioned, they constitute an inbuilt basis of historical conditioning, affected by the limiting conditions of each person's history.

It's on the basis of such blind assumption that our current objectives are chosen and our current pictures are built. In the course of long habit, our beliefs and assumptions have become ingrained. We have an ingrained habit of taking them for granted: to such an extent that they get hidden away, and we fail to take them into account. We are thus largely ignorant of the hidden, but crucial part they play, in all our pictures of the world.

This ignorance inevitably compromises all of our constructed learning. It undermines all the descriptions that we form from names and symbols. It further undermines all our interpretations of the forms that we perceive, and all our judgement and cultivation of valued qualities. It undermines all common sense, all myth and ritual, all religion, art and science. All such learning has an artificial base. It's always built upon beliefs and assumptions that have to be taken for granted, as we build pictures and use them to achieve our varying objectives in the world.

Wherever learning is constructed, there is an inherent compromise with ignorance. In what is taken to be knowledge, an undermining element of ignorance is always present. The compromise begins with the very first assumptions that the construction implies. It continues with the building blocks of name and form and quality. It carries on into the changing appearances that get constructed, and into the varying objectives that are pictured and pursued. This approach to knowledge is shot through with undermining compromise. It is the way of compromise: when one is ready to do business with a greater or lesser degree of undermining ignorance.

But, there are times when people do not wish to make this compromise. They find it getting too confusing or too indirect. Then they reflect back into their assumed beliefs, to look for a knowing that is more straightforward and less compromised. They thus investigate the undermining compromise, in search of knowing plainer and more direct truth.

This questioning of compromise is needed in all disciplines of learning. It's needed in the mechanical disciplines that we call 'modern physics', in organic disciplines that are concerned with living activity, in the cultural and artistic disciplines that we call the 'humanities', and in meditative disciplines that are used to deepen powers of intuition and to purify our personal characters.

But there is one discipline that centres on the search for truth: beyond all compromise with any personal or cultural belief, or any system of ideas, or any cultivated art or meditative discipline. Just that uncompromising discipline is called 'philosophy'. Its one concern is to keep asking questions: until what's plainly true is found, beyond all possibility of doubt.

This view of philosophy is found described by the ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides. He made a most uncompromising distinction: between two approaches to learning. One he described as inherently uncertain and confused. He called it 'the way of belief'. And he insisted that it must be given up completely, by turning to the 'way of truth'. The word he used for 'belief' is the Greek 'doxa'. From it come English words like 'dogma', 'doctrine', 'orthodox' and 'paradox'. As this derivation suggests,

the ‘way of belief’ includes the build-up of all dogma and doctrine: in each picture that we develop, of named and formed and qualified things in the world.

Where the ‘way of belief’ is followed, one looks at things within some current picture of the world, on the basis of accepted belief. The picture serves to identify desired objects and to help achieve them. As it is used like this, the picture goes on being built; and its assumed beliefs get buried further down beneath it.

But when a current picture is thrown into question, there is a change of direction: from building *up* to coming *down*. Instead of building pictures *up*, there is an attempt to examine what they show, *beneath* the many differing appearances which we may see in them. That is the second way of knowing, which Parmenides called the ‘way of truth’.

Where truth is sought, there is a shift of concern: away from our habitual pursuits, which go on chasing after many pictured objects. The picturing itself is now in question: so as to ask how far it’s true, and how far it is mistakenly constructed from inaccurate belief. So one is looking for a truth that cannot be known for certain through our questionable picturing.

No properly determined truth can be achieved in this way: as an uncertain object of such doubtful picturing. Instead, it can only be investigated reflectively: by a progressive examination that takes our mistaken beliefs and our mistaken prejudice into account, on the way to a clearer understanding.

Here, the concern is *purely educational*. It is not to decide or to achieve any pre-conceived or prejudged objective. It is only to clarify the basic understanding on which one pictures things, and on which one goes about the business of choosing and achieving pictured goals.

### **Learning about the world**

What then about modern science? Is it a new ‘way of truth’, which can now do away with the superstitions and dogmas of traditional belief?

Not quite. As some thoughtful scientists point out, each field of science is directed towards particular phenomena. Here, in describing such phenomena, there is no direct concern with philosophical questions of reality and truth. What’s of direct concern is to describe observed phenomena: on the basis of theoretical assumptions, or ‘hypotheses’, which have been made explicit.

In this sense, science is included in the ‘way of belief’. It is built from belief, like any other form of constructed learning. The one advantage of science is that it states its construction in a systematic and explicit way. The explicit statement helps to question what is wrong, when a theory does not fit the observed phenomena that are meant to be described.

But here, it must be said that the same applies to traditional sciences. Their construction too was stated systematically and explicitly; and they too were thus used to open up enquiry, in their own way. Before the development of modern communications, the manner of expression tended to be more condensed: so that a greater degree of explanation and intensive thought was required to open up the questioning. At first, this condensed expression had to be learned on the basis of traditional authority. But such initial learning was only a short term preparation, meant for an eventual questioning that was the more profound for all the time and effort spent on reaching it.

In either case, both in the modern world and in traditional societies, major advances of learning take place by throwing accepted beliefs into question. Some

current picture shows up its limitations, and its foundations are opened up to investigation. Old assumptions are found to be inaccurate and superficial. New assumptions are identified, describing more fundamental principles. From them, new pictures rise: incorporating new insights, and expressing a deeper understanding.

The whole process of learning can be described as a repeated cycle, of expression and reflection:

- As current understanding is expressed, we build our pictures of the world and of ourselves. What we observe appears to us in these constructed pictures. And it is through these same constructions that we interpret our observations. In the course of experience, new observations are usually fitted in, as they get absorbed into understanding. Then the absorption passes largely unnoticed, and the new observations reinforce the current construction into which they have been fitted.
- But when an observation does not fit, it calls for a reconsideration. And then there is a marked reflection back to the basis of understanding. Old assumptions and beliefs get thrown into question; and through the questioning, new pictures are constructed, absorbing new insights into the understanding that they now express.

In many ways, our constructed picturing is like a vast and complex building, in which we see ourselves and everything that we perceive. At the top of the building, we find our superficial picture of the world. It is the apparent surface, where our usual life and our usual activities appear.

As we seem to live in this picture, it obscures the building and its foundations below. As we look around us, we seem surrounded by the picture, and the appearances that it shows. So our perception is incomplete. We do not see what lies beneath. We cannot tell what the picture is founded on: and we do not know quite what it means.

How can we look down, into the foundations of our constructed picture? Our usual way of doing this is to construct a little further. We build some further form of constructed learning – some further branch of science or art or religion or mysticism – which functions as an apparatus for digging or drilling down. And then we use this apparatus to make holes in the building of our constructed learning, in order to look down and bring things up from below.

By merely peeping down from holes above, one sees very little of what lies underneath. In staying up above the holes and trying to look down, it seems that things get darker and more remote, the further one looks down. However deep one looks, there seem to be deeper foundations, lost in obscurity.

If one uses some digging apparatus to bring things up, one may perhaps learn a little more. But how much can be brought up thus, to the surface? As more and more is brought up from below, the picture on top gets more and more confused. There seems no end to the complication, so long as the foundations are investigated in this way.

The problem with digging things up is that it breaks them away, from where they belong. One remains oneself at the surface, looking there at things that have been torn away from underneath. One is still looking only at the surface, though now at a surface that has been complicated by the destructive interference of digging up things whose proper place is underneath. This method of investigation is essentially limited and distorting. It can never make a proper examination of what our pictures show, beneath their superficial appearances.

If one genuinely wants to examine the foundations of knowledge, it cannot be done by remaining at the surface. One has to go down oneself: through an explicit or implicit questioning that reflects one's whole attention downwards, beneath one's own beliefs.

As one goes down, the picture at the top is left behind; and other pictures appear, at lower levels of construction. It is a little like examining the structure of a multi-storeyed building: by starting from the top and going downwards, through its different floors. At each floor, a pictured world appears; but it too gets left behind, as its underlying construction is investigated below.

### **A descent through modern physics**

Since our constructed picturing is highly varied and complex, it can be descended in very different ways, depending on where and how one goes down.

For a particular example, consider an ordinary dining table: as it might be viewed through some descending levels that modern physics has investigated. From an everyday point of view, the table is believed to be a solid piece of matter, with a smooth and flat top. It is on this basis that the table is used to eat upon, and it is kept appropriately clean.

But if the table is examined more precisely, with magnifying instruments, our everyday belief turns out to be inaccurate. The table is not really smooth and solid, as it appears to our senses. A microscope shows it to be irregular and porous, beneath its seeming smoothness and solidity. Upon further consideration, another picture appears: in which the table is not even still, but in constantly agitated motion. It is made up of molecules: which keep vibrating rapidly, in a way that our senses register as temperature.

If one continues going down, to the atomic and subatomic levels, a very odd picture emerges: quite contrary to many firmly held beliefs. The table is made up of atoms, each of which is mainly empty space: with electrons orbiting a highly concentrated nucleus, rather like planets orbiting the sun.

Moreover, both the electrons and the nucleus appear to exist in a most peculiar and confusing way. They are not definite bits of matter, but mathematically governed systems of interacting energy. In these systems, energy is often raised and lowered rather mysteriously, through sudden jumps called 'quanta'. On the one hand, these quanta travel and evolve like waves, with a highly complex mathematical precision. On the other hand, they interact like uncertain particles, whose position and speed and energy are no more than probable measurements.

In this quantum picture, it isn't matter that is precisely determined, but only a probability distribution for the inherently uncertain results of making a material measurement. An unseen cloud of probability is pictured to travel and evolve, through a wave motion that is mathematically defined. When a measurement is made, there is a sudden jump: from unseen cloud to a particular material measurement. And the result of the jump is not certain in advance. There is only a probability distribution of what it might be. So matter is reduced to a mathematically evolving cloud of probability: which springs unpredictably into the appearance of a particular measurement, whenever an observation is made.

Strange though this quantum picture might be, modern physicists go down further, to a quantum field picture, which is even more confounding to everyday belief. The quantum field picture arises from considering the forces of interaction, between



subatomic particles. This interaction is pictured as the result of even smaller entities, called ‘virtual particles’. They are conceived as present everywhere, filling up all space with unlimitedly large fluctuations of momentum and energy.

These virtual particles can never be directly seen; for they break the fundamental laws of conservation that govern particles which *can* be seen. The laws are broken by virtual fluctuations of such rapidity that each break is rectified before it can be observed. However, the virtual particles and fluctuations do have an observable effect, in that they carry out an exchange of momentum and energy between observable particles. It’s this exchange that produces the appearance of force.

Thus, in the quantum field picture, there is no empty space at all. Space only *appears* to be empty, although it’s everywhere found filled with virtual particles that cannot be directly observed.

Beneath their current picture of quantum fields, modern physicists are looking for a still more fundamental picture: which will reconcile the microcosmic interactions of quantum fields with the macrocosmic interaction of gravity. This is a tall call, which may be difficult to work out; because it requires a basic reconciliation between two radically different points of view. On the one hand, quantum theory takes a view that assumes an inherent discontinuity and an irreducible uncertainty of physical measurements. On the other hand, relativity theory takes a view that assumes an underlying continuity and a complete determination of space and time, in the description of gravity as a purely geometric curvature of the space-time continuum.

In the relativistic view, a table isn’t pictured as a piece of matter existing in space, at a particular moment of time. Nor is it pictured as a quantum system, made up of discontinuous and uncertain particles. Instead, it is a continuing path of definite events, in a four dimensional geometry of space and time. It thus replaces a material mechanics with a completely immaterial geometry, where it turns out that all show of matter moved by force is only a superficial appearance. Whenever it’s perceived that some material object is forced to accelerate, this is a superficial appearance of something much deeper and much less material.

That deeper something is a purely geometrical curvature of the space-time continuum, which immaterially connects the different point-events of which it is made up. Taken as a whole, the continuum is the same for everyone, for all observing persons and all their acts and instruments of observation. All difference and change are relative observations made through instruments that function as a part of one same continuum.

All instruments show that continuum only partially. When all its parts are considered together, as a geometric whole, one same continuum must logically be taken to exist ‘all at once’. When understood thus – as a single whole – it must exist beyond all differences of space that appear between its partial objects. And it must likewise exist beyond all changes and uncertainties that appear in the course of time: as its point-events are seen connected geometrically, in their continued paths of happening.

The jury is still out on any fundamental reconciliation between these quantum and relativistic views.

### **Ways to truth**

How then is a descriptive science different from philosophical enquiry? Is there no distinction to be made, between the phenomenal descriptions of science and the reflective questioning of philosophy?

Of course there is. When a descriptive science descends to deeper levels, its explicit purpose is to develop better descriptions, in our constructed pictures of the world. In a philosophical enquiry, the aim is not directed at the construction of any pictures or descriptions. The aim, instead, is quite the reverse. It is to reflect back down, beneath all theoretical construction, towards a clearer basis of understanding.

It is the business of science to construct theoretical descriptions, which are used through corresponding capabilities of observation and application in the described world. Each branch of science constructs a theoretical basis: upon which it depends, as it develops the special capabilities that test and apply its theories. When a science goes down to deeper levels, it is deepening its theoretical foundations: on which its observations and applications get built. It goes *down* in order to construct more fundamental theories and descriptions; but their application is directed *upward*. They are tested and used by applying them upward: to the surface phenomena that we perceive through our ordinary faculties of sense and mind.

For example, in modern physics, the quantum picture goes down to a description of microcosmic particles and happenings, which are not seen in an ordinary way. They are not directly seen by our ordinary senses, without the aid of special technology. Nor are they conceived by our ordinary thoughts, without the aid of special mathematics. In this sense, quantum theory is a deeper level of consideration, beneath our ordinary perceptions and thoughts. But through its special mathematics and technology, quantum theory is applied to our ordinary lives, in many ways. It applies to the apparent objects and events that our ordinary faculties perceive in many different fields: like nuclear energy, lasers, transistor electronics, computer chips, and the development of many physical and chemical materials.

Similarly, in psychology, psychoanalytic theory goes down to a description of unconscious desires and processes that are hidden beneath the surface of our minds. But, through psychoanalytic techniques, theoretical descriptions of the unconscious are applied: to feelings and thoughts that surface into visible appearance, and to personal behaviour that is seen by our ordinary faculties of sense.

Thus, the deeper pictures of science are meant to be applied in an *upward* direction, towards the superficial objects and happenings that appear in our common-sense views of the world.

In the enquiry of philosophy, all descriptions and pictures are applied reflectively, by asking what they mean. The application is always directed *downward*. Each description is applied by asking what underlying meaning it may express, in the apparent show that is produced by its component names and forms and qualities.

Wherever a description is applied upward, by building up from it, philosophy has there been left behind: for the formulation of ideas and world view. From a doctrinal or scientific standpoint, some statements are fundamental axioms from which particular descriptions and prescriptions are built; and some pictures are basic paradigms, fleshed out by the more detailed picturing that rises up from them.

But, in a philosophical enquiry, no statement or picture is fundamental in itself. It may be found beneath more superficial appearances; but when one gets down to it, then it turns out to be itself a mere appearance, constructed from names and forms and qualities. Its philosophical use is not to construct anything on top of it; but instead to question it, in search of clearer understanding. It is not then an assumed basis for constructed learning, but a skeptical way to underlying truth.

What kind of truth is found like this, by questioning all pictures and assumptions? Does one always find a changing variety of different truths, beneath our many pictures? Or, as one goes on questioning, do all differences and changes eventually dissolve, in a single truth that is found everywhere? As understanding is clarified, does some confusion always remain; or can one ever find a pure, unclouded truth that is completely clear?

These questions can be answered in different ways, through different statements made in different pictures of the world. But no such statement is itself an answer. It is only a description, which must be interpreted, to find an answer that the statement expresses. The proof of the pudding is always in the eating. To understand a statement, one has to get past its pictured expression, to try it out for oneself. And any genuine attempt must throw one's own beliefs and assumptions into question. Viewed philosophically, an answering statement can be seen as a way of enquiry towards truth, just like the question that is being answered.

The very word 'truth' is just a concept, which must come into question. If the concept of 'truth' has any genuine meaning, then one must go beyond the word to find it. If one takes truth seriously, then even a complete denial of the concept is a way of asking for truth; and it may be a very profound way at that. The same word 'truth' may surely be used in different ways, in differing approaches. And if the word is positively used, its positive meaning is found only where the word itself has been completely left behind, when every last remaining trace of it has been completely and utterly destroyed.

It is so with all genuinely philosophical ideas. They are like powerful and highly concentrated pesticides, meant to kill off various pestilential errors of conception. Just like a properly effective pesticide, a philosophical idea requires extremely precise targeting; and when its killing job is done, it must destroy itself, without leaving any trace of residue.

Any kind of half-baked jargon, or inflated ideology, is like an ill-developed pesticide. It produces an impressively devastating show, which covers up a blind and damaging lack of precision. As jargon builds and multiplies ideas, it leaves behind a growing residue of poisonous waste. The intellectual environment keeps getting further compromised, by an undermining corruption that gets more and more ingrained. Such a multiplying ideology may serve to build impressive pictures of the world. But it is not exactly helpful, as a way to clearer truth.

Where truth is genuinely sought, there has to be a turn-around: from building up complexity, to asking simply what it's all about.

### **Altered states**

As philosophical enquiry turns back, from its own concepts, it there acknowledges that it is not the only way of clarifying truth. It is just one particular way: which looks for truer knowledge, by asking questions about conception. And in the asking, it implies another way: which comes to truer states of being, by cultivating better attitudes and faculties. This is the way of meditation and its altered states.

In the practice of meditation, conceptual questions are put aside, or left till later. Attention is directed through a technology of prescribed practices: which are intended to develop special capabilities of perception and special attitudes of character. The capabilities appear in altered states of experience, beyond the usual limitations of ordinary perception.



At first, the altered states are only short term. Their special perceptions pass away. Habitual problems and limitations are transcended only for a short while: in temporary states that are experienced at a distance from the usual course of life. When the usual familiarities of life return, so do old problems and limitations.

However, this temporary distancing can be used to cultivate more lasting attitudes, in the long-term development of character. Through the accumulated effect of long practice, meditation can be aimed at settled attitudes of personal detachment, as character keeps getting purified. In the end, the long-term aim may even be to reach a final state that's altered irreversibly: when all impurities of character have been entirely removed. That final aim is to attain, at last, a natural state of truth: in which no possibility of error can remain, no matter what may be perceived or thought or felt, no matter what may happen in the world.

Viewed from a questioning philosophy, all such meditation is a superstructure. Each kind of meditation is a therapeutic technology, designed to bring about some prescribed improvement of personality. But the technology has been constructed on the basis of particular conceptions, which take particular assumptions and beliefs for granted. The whole technology of meditation is open to question. So are its altered states.

Thus, neither any practices of meditation, nor any altered states can be essential to philosophy. They can of course be used to complement a philosophical approach; and they have been prominently used like this, in many traditions. But that doesn't make them indispensable. They are essentially dispensable, just like all philosophical ideas.

In fact, the altered states of meditation can sometimes be a long way round, for those who are not ready to question more familiar experience. In India, this is illustrated by the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, through its use of yogic samādhis.

A samādhi is a state of mental absorption: produced by withdrawing attention from the ordinary world. Broadly, there are two kinds of samādhi. On the one hand, a samādhi may be 'savikalpa': meaning that it contains some 'vikalpa' or 'differentiated perception'. Alternatively, a samādhi may be 'nirvikalpa': meaning that no differentiated perception is contained in it.

In a savikalpa samādhi, attention is absorbed in some particular perception: like the sound of a mantra, or a vision of God or of some spirit. A classic example occurs in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, when Arjuna has a vision of the universal form of God. In Arjuna's vision, the body of God contains the entire universe, of moving and unmoving things. There is thus an intense perception, which contains everything in itself. This is characteristic of a savikalpa samādhi. It is a state of such intense perception that everything becomes subsumed in it. Then the world of external objects disappears. There is nothing but perception, containing everything perceived, just like a dream.

In its content, a savikalpa samādhi is exactly the same as a dream. There is only pure perception, with nothing seen outside. Perception is no longer directed outward, to external objects. Attention has been turned back in; so that perception is now absorbed, within the mind.

In a nirvikalpa samādhi, the absorption proceeds further. Not only is perception absorbed into the perceiving mind, but the mind becomes absorbed as well: in a state where no perceptions appear at all.

In its content, a nirvikalpa samādhi is exactly the same as deep sleep. There are no differentiated appearances in it. No differing perceptions, thoughts or feelings appear. There is no sense of passing time, in which appearances could come and go. There's

only pure experience: unmixed with any physical or mental things that are perceived in space or time.

In short, a savikalpa samādhi is a special kind of dream; and a nirvikalpa samādhi is a special kind of deep sleep. However, in order to cultivate these special kinds of dream and sleep, a tremendous effort is required; through the discipline of yoga, practised over a very long period of time. According to its own conception, yoga is a very long term discipline. It does not work in the course of just one lifetime, but in the course of many. And it requires a sustained renunciation of other activities, in order to sublimate their energies into its special states of samādhi.

What is the purpose of this extraordinary channelling of energy? It's a training that is supposed to bring an extraordinary development of mental powers and faculties. But yoga warns us that its special powers and faculties are not ends in themselves. They are only passing means to a more fundamental goal, of attaining purity and truth.

In the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, yogic samādhis are used to help direct attention towards more familiar states of dream and deep sleep. To an Advaita philosopher, the problem with dream and sleep is that we take them for granted, because they are so familiar. We enter them naturally every day, without much notice; so we go on looking at them habitually, from the standpoint of the waking state. We do not examine them from their own point of view; and we fail to understand what they tell us, about the nature of experience.

It is here that yogic samādhis can help. Essentially, they are special states of dream and sleep: which are highlighted by cultivating them in the waking state. But this cultivation is a very long way round. For those who are interested to question things directly, it is far simpler to consider our ordinary experiences of waking, dream and sleep.

### **Waking, dream and sleep**

In a state of waking, a person is aware of outside things. There is a waking self, with a body and a mind that appear in an external world. Through the waking body, an objective world appears, perceived outside the waking mind. Experience thus appears divided into two. It has an outside and an inside. The inside is a show of perceptions, thoughts and feelings that appear within the waking mind. The outside is a world of objects, which are shown by the subjective appearances of mind.

In a state of dream, perceptions, thoughts and feelings appear within a dreaming mind. A dream body appears, along with other dreamt objects, in a dream world. But the whole dream world is only a subjective appearance. The objects of a dream are often dreamt to be outside the mind that dreams them, but in fact this is not so. The dreaming mind dreams falsely, of a world outside. Each dreamt-up object is a purely subjective appearance, within the mind that dreams it up. In this sense, a dream is all inside. It is only an inner show, with nothing shown outside.

And yet, through all their pretence and falsity, our dreams do show us something more than their appearances. They can lead to many particular insights about the waking world; and they tell us something fundamental about the nature of waking experience.

If one looks at a dream from its own point of view, it is a waking state. In general, a dream seems real at the time. It's only afterwards that one wakes up, and comes to the realization: 'I was dreaming.' Sometimes, this realization can come in the present.

One can think: ‘My mind is only dreaming these things that it perceives.’ In either case, whether dreaming is recognized in hindsight or in the present, it implies a distancing from what is dreamed. One withdraws from the dreamed appearances, to the position of a detached witness.

In fact, any appearance can be seen as waking or as dreamed, depending on whether it is believed to be real. If the reality of an appearance is believed, then it is a waking appearance that shows some current object of belief. If its supposed reality is disbelieved, it is a dream, which needs some further awakening. The disbelief implies a withdrawal from the changing surface of appearance, towards the detached position of a continued witnessing. From there, the objects and events of the world are seen to keep on passing by: in an illuminated show of dreamed appearances.

In the state of deep sleep, no perceptions, thoughts or feelings appear. There are no objects, no events, no world, no body or mind. There is no space or time, no display of differing or changing appearances. There is no outside, no inside. Viewed from the changing surface of dream or waking appearances, deep sleep appears to be a state of blank and empty nothingness.

But how is deep sleep actually known? Nothingness is only a superficial appearance, seen from dream or waking. As this appearance is questioned, one withdraws to the same detached witnessing that continues through the dream and waking states, beneath their show of change and difference. From this continued witnessing, deep sleep is known impartially: as pure experience. It is not darkness, but unreflected light: with no impurities that could enable it to be perceived by sense or mind.

In waking and dream perceptions, consciousness is mixed with physical and mental appearances. In deep sleep, where all appearances dissolve, only consciousness remains: seen there unmixed for what it is, shining as its own light. That is the pure essence of consciousness: unformed, unnamed, unqualified. In the state of deep sleep, consciousness is found alone, shining by itself. In the states of waking and dream, it’s seen reflected by appearances, mixed up with their apparent show.

When appearances arise, consciousness is shown through them, confused with all their forms and names and qualities. But in itself, it stays just as it always is: completely pure and unaffected, beneath all changes of appearance. It is the unconditioned light that shines reflected back, from all conditioned appearances. It is the inner light of which all outward-seeming things consist.

In it, there’s no duality between what knows and what is known. It is at once the self that knows and all of the reality that’s ever known.

That non-duality is not a state. It is the changeless ground of all experience, continuing through all states: of waking, dream and sleep. On it, all learning is constructed, and all appearances arise. Returning back to it, all seeming things dissolve in what they show, all questions reach their final end.

Thus, in Advaita philosophy, a final truth is described: through concepts like ‘pure consciousness’ and ‘non-duality’. Each concept is regarded as a ‘lakṣaṇa’ or a ‘pointer’. It must be left entirely behind, as the enquiry goes on to where it points. And each investigation is regarded as a ‘prakriyā’ or an ‘approach’. It must vanish utterly, without a trace, on the way to finding out what it investigates.

The analysis of waking, dream and sleep is a typical example of such an ‘approach’ or ‘prakriyā’. As the analysis proceeds, it identifies a pure, non-dual consciousness that shines out in deep sleep. Our habitual notions, of waking and dream

consciousness, are thus thrown radically into question. This fundamental questioning is the actual practice of the analysis, as one carries it out for oneself.

## **Happiness**

Why seek a truth beyond appearances? What could there be left to enjoy, when all apparent objects have dissolved, as in deep sleep? Such questions lead to another approach, which investigates the nature of desire and happiness.

When an object is desired, the desiring mind is dissatisfied. It feels insufficient in itself; and so it seeks some object that is thought to be outside. This is a state of 'duality', where experience seems divided into two. Here, a knowing ego thinks that it is different from some object that it knows. It is at *odds* with what it knows. This divided and dissatisfied state is what we call 'unhappiness'.

When a desired object is attained, the desiring mind comes temporarily to rest. For the moment, its division and dissatisfaction are dissolved. This is a state of non-duality. It is a state where experience is no longer divided, because the knower is at *one* with what is known. Here, dissatisfied desire has given way to a non-dual state of fulfilment, as separated ego is dissolved in happiness.

In this non-dual state of happiness, there's only undivided consciousness: entirely self-contained, unmixed with any alien object that is known outside. The object that was previously desired has now been attained, and it is at one with consciousness. The previously desiring mind is now at rest, and is dissolved in consciousness.

What is the source of happiness that shines out here, in this non-dual state? It cannot be the desired object; for the mind soon gets fed up with this particular object, and starts agitating for something else. The moment that the mind thus rises up, the state of happiness has passed; so it cannot be from the risen mind that happiness appears.

All happiness must come from underneath the mind's duality: in which a separated ego seeks out objects of desire. But no such object is sufficient in itself. Each object is sought for the sake of something further, to which it leads. In the end, all objects and pleasures are desired for the sake of happiness, in which the ego gets dissolved. This fundamental goal of happiness continues underneath all changing desires and states. It is not any passing pleasure, but the enduring ground of all value. It is the common background of all different feelings.

Accordingly, we think of 'happiness' in two ways: on the one hand as a passing state, and on the other as a final goal.

In a superficial sense, we think that 'happiness' is a state of mind: which alternates with an opposite state, called 'unhappiness'. To be unhappy is to feel at *odds*, with the circumstances in which one finds oneself. To be happy is to feel at *one*, with the happenings that take place in one's experience.

But does this mean that happiness is just a passing state? Is it just a warm, gooey feeling of sentimental pleasure, which must give way to the cold, hard facts of need and want; as our little personalities get knocked about, in an often hostile and alien world?

The very word 'happiness' suggests that there is something more to it than this. It comes from the root 'hap', which refers to the pure happenings of nature. Such purely natural happenings take place unforced. They are not driven artificially, by any force exerted from outside. As they arise, they happen of their own accord, inspired from within.

When nature is considered thus, in all of its completeness, its happenings are seen to be entirely spontaneous. For nothing is left over then, to interfere from the outside. Quite literally, ‘happiness’ is just that underlying principle which is common to all ‘hap’: to everything that happens, in the entire world.

In this more fundamental sense, happiness is what Socrates called the ‘good’, and what Aristotle called the ‘unmoved mover’. It is the common principle of motivation that inspires all acts and happenings. It’s that for which all acts are done, for which all happenings take place, in everyone’s experience and in the entire universe.

As the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* says:

It is just this essential savour  
that is spontaneous and natural.

It’s only when one reaches  
this essential savour  
that one comes to happiness.

For what could be alive at all,  
what could move with energy,  
if there were not this happiness:  
here at the background  
of all space and time,  
pervading the entire world?<sup>1</sup>

from  
2.7

### **An affair of love**

As happiness is actually experienced, dry ideas give way to deeper feelings, which express it more directly. As feelings thus get more profound, it turns out that ego is no more than a confused appearance. It’s a mistaken sense of separateness, created by confusing self with petty personality.

As feelings get deeper, ego’s pettiness becomes progressively dissolved: as it gets taken back into the depth of its own being, beneath its narrow thoughts and limiting desires. At that depth, what’s felt may be conceived as ‘love’. It is the essence of philosophy. As it is said in Śrī Śaṅkara’s *Viveka-cūḍāmaṇi*:

Among all ways of striving to be free,  
it’s love that is the best, one must agree.  
To question one’s own truth, to ask what’s there:  
that is the love of those who ask with care.<sup>2</sup>

stanza  
31

The word ‘philosophy’ stands just for what it says. It stands, in essence, for ‘love of knowledge’: from ‘philo-’, meaning ‘love’, and ‘sophia’, meaning ‘knowledge’. What’s here described is not any theoretical construction, nor any transforming ‘trip’, but a simple love affair.

<sup>1</sup> yad vai tat sukṛtam, raso vai saḥ, rasam hy evāyam labdhavānandī bhavati, ko hy evānyāt kaḥ prānyāt, yad eṣa ākāśa ānando na syāt

<sup>2</sup> mokṣa-sādhana-sāmagryām bhaktir eva garīyasī .  
sva-svarūpānusandhānam bhaktir ity abhidhīyate ..



Most love affairs are complicated by wanting things that one does not already have. Someone who is lonely wants companionship; someone insecure wants support; someone bored wants excitement; someone who feels weak and inferior wants power and status. Such wanting looks for personal improvement. That kind of search brings competition and conflict, thus complicating love with dominance and opposition.

But in philosophy, the search is reflective. It does not look for any unpossessed object that needs to be acquired from outside. Nor, essentially, does it seek any outward change, in personality or world. Instead, it only asks reflective questions: to find out what is really true, beneath the changing appearances that our bodies and our minds perceive in the world.

When questions are asked about unchanging truth, the asking starts with the pre-conceived ideas and the personal desires of a conditioned ego. This ego gets blinded by its beliefs and fancies, as it is driven by its petty desires for personal gain. In search of clarity, the ego has to question its own prejudice. As the search gets genuine, it goes beneath conceived ideas and burns up petty fancies and desires: in a deeper love for truth. Clear truth implies a depth of love, in which the ego's prejudice and pettiness must be surrendered.

Thus, beneath the explicit skepticism of its analytic questioning, philosophy implies a deeply emotional core, of inner dedication and devotion. It's through this core that prejudice and partiality are given up, enabling knowledge to become less personal.

In order to distinguish truth from falsity, philosophy turns back from all perceived activities: by doubting the appearances that we perceive and the objectives that our activities are supposed to accomplish. There is then a detachment from ordinary life: from usually accepted beliefs, and thus from ordinary goals and enjoyments.

But this detachment is not personal. It is not an ascetic or a mystical detachment of some person from the world. Instead, it is an inward detachment of true knowing from all bodily and sensual and mental acts of personality. That inward detachment brings about a change of perspective. There is a subtle standing back, from changing personality to unaffected self. All personal identity turns out to be completely false.

True self is thereby realized as knowing light, whose very being is to shine. That knowing is no changing act, caught up in personality or world. It is no more or less than the unaffected being of true self. That alone is true knowledge, which is utterly impersonal.

In short, a philosophical detachment is one of knowledge. It is a liberation of knowledge, achieved by questioning the partialities of one's own bodily and sensual and mental perceptions. The questioning reflects attention back: from the usually accepted world of confused and deceptive appearances, towards an inner ground of knowing that shines always free and clear.

When the questioning takes place, the usual world is left behind, as clearer truth is sought *away* from ordinary life. This is of course a temporary retreat: from ordinary world into some passing state of special questioning. When the questioning has passed, the ordinary world returns and clarity gets lost again, as one continues with one's accustomed life.

But the whole point of such questioning is to achieve a lasting clarity: which somehow stays alive, beneath the changes of experience. If the clarification is just a dry, conceptual analysis; then of course it must get blotted out, as other experiences

replace it. In order to continue, it must have some living meaning: which takes the enquiry from technical ideas to a more natural and spontaneous life of understanding.

That living meaning comes from love for clearer knowledge. It's love that takes philosophy from dry ideas to living truth. Such love is shown explicitly in states of doubt and questioning, as truth is sought beneath appearances, away from the apparent world. After the questioning has passed, when ordinary life returns, the same love continues implicitly, expressed throughout the natural course of life.

As love continues thus, through natural life, there is a change of mode. Truth is no longer sought explicitly: in opposition to accepted beliefs and everyday activities. Instead, truth is now understood implicitly: as expressed in everything that's said and done. All feelings, thoughts and acts get seen as partial and limited expressions of pure truth. All experiences get to be used as ways to truth. They all work, in various ways, as means to clearer knowledge and to deeper love.

Beneath all attempts at knowledge, there is an underlying depth of love. To know someone or something deeply, one has to be at one with what is known. That oneness is an objectless love: not love for the sake of any seeming object, but in Elizabeth Browning's words 'love ... for love's sake only'.

When love is understood in this sense, it is itself the goal of truth that's sought through questioning. The same goal is called by the word 'love', when the approach to it has passed through superficial thought into deeper feeling. Where there is love, appearances and ego burn away in truth: through all art and poetry, through all science and technology, through all disciplines and meditations, through all religious worship, and throughout our individual lives and our relationships.

But here, as thought returns to its own depth of feeling, intellectual descriptions are no longer appropriate. Love cannot just be thought and spoken. It must be felt, in a way that leaves mere words and thoughts behind. As the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* says:

It's that from which  
all words turn back,  
together with the mind,  
unable to attain it.<sup>3</sup>

*from*  
2.9

Philosophy is thus an ongoing affair: where questions keep on leaving their own concepts behind, as they keep turning back into the love that motivates them. As it goes on, this turned-back questioning can chase itself in circles and tie itself in awkward knots, thus spinning more confusions and complexities. But underneath, it is, essentially, the simplest of affairs. It is a love affair with love itself.

Can this affair come to a final end, in which it is entirely fulfilled? Can it find an unconditioned depth of love where truth is known so simply and directly that no complicating questions can arise? Can anyone achieve a final realization or enlightenment, in which no falsity or ignorance remains?

These questions can't be fully answered by any preconceived ideas, received from any institution. Ideas can help to some extent, but they inevitably lead to further questions. If there are any final answers, positive or negative, one has to hear of them and find them in one's own experience, for oneself.

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<sup>3</sup> yato vāco nivartante, aprāpya manasā saha