

Where thought turns back...

A skeptical approach to truth

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 one asks questions for oneself, about one's own assumptions, then one's own understanding is at stake. If the questioning is a pretence, put on for the sake of some academic argument, then it is just a theoretical exercise: which helps to construct some system of ideas, or to demonstrate some picture of the world. But if one's own assumptions are genuinely in question, then that is inherently practical. 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 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 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 inbuilt prejudice: which is expressed in our underlying beliefs and assumptions. They are built into our attitudes and into what we feel and think and see and do. Accordingly, they constitute an inbuilt basis of historical conditioning, affected by the limiting circumstances of each person's history.

It is on the basis of these beliefs and assumptions that our current objectives are chosen and our current pictures are built. But, 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 undermines all our constructed learning. It undermines all the descriptions that we form from names and symbols, 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 depends 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.

The other way is to investigate the compromise, in search of what is plainly and simply true.

These two ways were described by the ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides. He called them 'the way of belief' and 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 buildup 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 is used to identify desired objectives and to help achieve them. As it is used like this, the picture goes on being built; and its accepted beliefs get buried further down beneath it.

But when a current picture is genuinely questioned, 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 appearances that we see in them. This is a second way of knowing, which Parmenides called the 'way of truth'.

Where truth is examined, there is a shift of concern: away from our habitual pursuits, which go after many pictured objectives. The picturing is itself in question: in order to find out how far it is true, and how far it is mistakenly constructed upon inaccurate belief. So one is looking for a truth that cannot rightly be preconceived, in one's current picturing.

Such a truth cannot be achieved in any technical way: as a prescribed objective that our theories and pictures have already conceived. Instead, it can only be investigated reflectively: by a progressive examination that takes our beliefs and preconceptions into account, on the way to clearer understanding.

The concern here is purely educational. It is not to decide or to achieve any preconceived 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 one's 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. It is not directly concerned with philosophical questions of reality and truth. Its 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 an explicit and systematic 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. They too were stated explicitly and systematically, and 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. The

top of the building is 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 up things from below.

If we only peep down from holes above, we see very little of what lies underneath. As we look deeper, the darker and more remote things seem. However deep we look, there seem to be deeper foundations, lost in obscurity.

If we use our digging apparatus to bring things up, we may learn a little more. But how much can we bring 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, as 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 examination 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 scientific 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 patterns of energy, 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, where it is filled with virtual particles that cannot be themselves 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 of quantum particles and an irreducible uncertainty of physical measurement. 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.

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 direct aim is not to develop descriptions and pictures; but to reflect from them, towards a clearer understanding of truth.

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 ap-

pear 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: which keeps on spoiling the intellectual environment, with 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 turnaround: 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 last-

ing 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 'lakṣhaṇa' 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 'prakriya' 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 'prakriya'. 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 examines 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: 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. Through a variety of limited desires, the ego seeks out superficial objects, which are not quite sufficient in themselves. Each object is sought for the sake of something further, to which it leads. In the end, all of the ego’s objects and pleasures are desired for the sake of happiness, in which the separated ego is 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, taking place unforced, of nature's own accord. When nature is considered in all 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 all the happenings that take place, in the whole physical and mental 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 every-one's experience and in the entire world.

As the Taittirīya Upanishad 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?

from
2.7

An affair of love

As happiness is analysed, it shows up the limitations of intellectual analysis.

For, when happiness is actually approached, dry ideas give way to deeper feelings, which express it more directly. The separated ego turns out to be a superficial self-image: which gets dissolved in the depth of its own being, beneath its narrow thoughts and limiting desires. That depth of feeling may be conceived as 'love'. It is the essence of philosophy. As it is said in a verse from Shri Shankara's *Viveka-cūḍāmaṇī*:

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.

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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 described here is not any theoretical construction, nor any transforming 'trip', but a simple love affair.

Most love affairs are complicated by wanting things that one does not already have. Some sort of need is felt to possess more, in order to achieve a change for the better. 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 possessive wants seek 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 look for any prescribed 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 minds perceive in the world.

When questions are asked about philosophical truth, the asking starts with the preconceived ideas and 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 deepening love for truth. Clearer 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 withdrawal from ordinary life: from usually accepted beliefs, and thus from ordinary goals and enjoyments.

But this withdrawal of philosophy is not essentially ascetic or mystical. It does not have to be cultivated in an ascetic or mystical way: through any special disciplines of self-restraint, or through any meditative exercises that lead to mystic states.

In an essential sense, the withdrawal of philosophy is neither physical nor mental. It is not achieved by isolating either one's body, or one's mind, from the world that they perceive. It is not a detachment *of* body, or *of* mind. Instead, it is a detachment *from* body, and *from* mind. The detachment here is from both body and mind: thus freeing knowledge from their partialities, and leaving them free to take part in the world where they belong.

In short, a philosophical detachment is one of knowledge. It is a liberation of knowledge, achieved by questioning the partialities of one's own physical and mental perceptions. The questioning reflects attention back: from the usually accepted world of physical and mental appearances, towards the foundations of knowledge.

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, 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 it's understood implicitly: as expressed in everything that's said and done. All feelings, thoughts and acts get seen as partial and limited expressions of truth. All experiences get to be used as ways to truth. They all work, in various ways, as means to clearer knowledge and deeper love.

Beneath all seeming 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 Upanishad says:

It's that from which
all words turn back,
together with the mind, *from*
unable to attain it. *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.