CHAPTER 24

Is the Inanimate World an Interior Reality?

In the earlier parts of this book, while learning about organisms and their evolution, we found it necessary to use terms such as *agency*, *purposive*, *intentional*, *end-directed*, and *telos-realizing*. We saw that every animal's life is the spinning of a wise and thoughtful *narrative* (however unconscious), more like a striving or a pursuit of interests or a satisfaction of needs than a mindless chain of causes. Things happen for a *reason*, where "reason" encompasses all the potential significances we may find in the telling of a story. The *meaning* of an activity rather than its "mechanistic" causal interactions — its higher-level organization and direction rather than its physical lawfulness — is our most reliably predictive guide to what will happen next. We found ourselves recognizing how the living organism acts by giving continual, directed expression to its own *interior* way of being, where the idea of interiority is quite foreign to our usual scientific conception of a world that can be understood without reference to sentience, will, or mind-like qualities.

But how far dare we push this notion of *interiority*? The question may arise, perhaps not forcefully but at least at the edge of our minds, when we consider that, throughout almost all human history, our ancestors believed they lived in a cosmos alive with spirits of every sort, a cosmos expressing inner being rather in the manner we experience a human face as the expression of a person — or, in our present vocabulary, a cosmos alive with interiority.

As we saw in Chapter 23 ("The Evolution of Consciousness"), this was not their theoretical understanding of the world, since they had not yet become modern individuals capable of looking out at, and theorizing about, a world wholly external to themselves. Rather, it was how the world immediately and intimately presented itself to their unquestioning experience. The question for us now is this: What, if anything, was the truth of that experience? How could a non-theoretical, impossible-to-question experience of interiority even have arisen from the ground of an essentially impersonal, psychically inert, mindless world in the first place? And is there any way at all in which we still today need to recognize an interiority of the inanimate world?

And here we need to distinguish between two complementary aspects of "interiority". A simple illustration can make the point.

A novel may be genuinely expressive of the author's interiority, and, as an interior expression, it can be brought alive only within our own interiors. When we do bring it alive in that way, we gain intimate access to the author's mind. But no one would say that this makes the pages of the book, or even the meanings expressed on the pages, into a mind or self capable of its own action. So, while we can speak of the novel — the story — as existing crucially within an interior dimension (which is the only "place" where we could possibly encounter it), we must not treat it as if it were itself a living being or agent.

In the same way, we would not want to regard our thoughts as agents, or to confuse them with our own thinking agency. All of which is to say that we can make a useful distinction between at least some of the contents or products of a mind and the mind itself.[1]

It appears, then, that when we speak of “interiority”, we can refer either to the creative powers, or activity, of living agents, or else to the meaningful products of that activity. We shouldn’t confuse the two — shouldn’t confuse act and product, spiritual creating and spiritual creation — even if both belong to the interior realm. We needn’t think that the products of living agency are themselves possessed of the agential powers by which they came about.

Having recognized these complementary aspects of interiority, we can ask again, “What, if anything, was the truth of the experience of the ancients? Is there any way in which we still today need to recognize the interiority of the inanimate world?”

I’m afraid we may not be very close to disentangling all the issues we stumble into when we begin enquiring about the relation between our own or other organisms’ interiors and the inanimate world in which we find ourselves. But stumble around we must if we want to make even the vaguest possible approach to the question.

I will begin by expanding the very brief discussion of perception in Chapter 13, “All Science Must Be Rooted in Experience”. Then, with open minds, we will see how much further we can go.

How the world lends itself to our knowing

Stand anywhere in nature and observe the scene. It can be a mountain or meadow, sea or sky, lake or desert — or a city street. Then ask yourself: what would remain of the scene if you were to remove every sensible (sense-perceptible) quality from your surroundings? The question has to do with the character of the world we know through experience and routinely take as real, from the luxuriant Amazon rainforest to the barren surface of the moon. Wherever you and I manage to get to, what would exist for us if there were no perceptible qualities? Does any *material thing* in the known cosmos present itself other than through qualities?

It is not a difficult question. Would that tree be there for us as a material object if there were no color of the leaves, no felt hardness of the trunk, no color and texture of the bark, no whispering of the breeze among the leaves, no smell of sap, wood, or flower, no possibility of song from birds flitting among the branches? Do we see, hear, touch, smell, or otherwise sense anything in the world apart from its qualities? Could we speak of a thing’s form, substance, or even its existence if it did not present a qualitative, sense-perceptible face to us?

The hardest part of all this talk about qualities for most people lies in their feeling that the solid external reality of things is being questioned. But to point to the qualitative nature of the sensed world need not be to question its reality, or its felt solidity (which is one of its qualities), or its objective existence beyond the privacy of any single person’s interior. It can, in fact, be just the opposite. We can say, with common sense, that the solidity we all feel is the real thing. Real solidity — the crushing weight of a boulder, the solidity we are given in experience and can collectively attest to when pursuing an experience-based science — is always and only *felt solidity*.[2] The sensed hardness of things is no less a perceptible quality than the taste, color, or

sound of things. If we did not encounter that hardness, so that we passed right through things as if they were not there, then this would be another aspect of the material world's not existing for us if it were shorn of all qualities.

Figure 24.1. A natural scene.[3]

So we come back to the perfectly straightforward question: "Does anything exist materially, available to an empirical (experience-based) science, except as a presentation of qualities?" Would we have quantities to play with if there were no qualities from which to abstract them? And would we know what our mathematical formulae were about — what they meant — if we could not restore to our thinking the qualitative contexts from which those formulae were abstracted? Numbers alone do not give us a material world.

I think the conclusion you will come to is inescapable: whatever knowledge of the world we manage to gain is rooted in qualitative appearances, and the world would lose its reality for us — it would no longer be there as a content of experience or a subject for scientific investigation — were its qualities to vanish.

Given the more or less determined yet never fulfilled resolve among scientists from Galileo onward to have a science without qualities, it would seem that the integrity of science as a respectable knowledge enterprise rather than an empty pretense hangs on our answer to the question, "Would anything be left to investigate if we could be true to our ideals and remove all

qualities from our science?" If the answer is as clearly "No" as I think it is, then we must learn to integrate the world's qualitative aspects into a truly experience-based science.[4] (On the potentials for a qualitative science, see Chapter 12, "Is a Qualitative Biology Possible?")

We know the world through thinking as well as sensing

There are two primary portals for our experiential knowledge of the world: first our senses, and then the thinking that conceptually orders the contents of the otherwise inchoate sense reports, bringing them to meaningful and coherent appearance. If we could not perceive qualities through our senses, as I suggested in the previous section, we would not have a world. But it is equally true that without a conceptual ordering of whatever it is we receive through the senses alone, we again would have no world.

The thinking I am referring to here is not merely our theorizing *about* the world of objects. It is also the thinking that constitutes this or that thing as an object in the first place — a grain of sand or a cloud or a mountain. The common assumption that our perception gives us "things" directly and mindlessly, about which we then think and form theories is an untruth widely recognized by those who study cognition. We have no "things" at all except through an activity of thinking. In the case of familiar objects, this thinking typically becomes automatic and unconscious and, as such, may have informed our perception of those objects since childhood. But, with proper attention to perception, it is rather easy to catch this thoughtful, formative activity of thinking "in the act" so as to become aware of it.[5]

And so the general truth is this: if we are truly to recognize anything — a *this* of a particular sort as opposed to a *that* — we must be able to form *some* conception of what we are beholding. Which is to say: we must grasp the ideas that inform and are inherent in what we are beholding. The phenomenon can present itself to us as a given reality only so far as its real and inherent thought-content becomes at the same time *our* thought-content. To see a soaring hawk while having no idea of organism, bird, wing, flight, raptor, eyesight, predation, rodent, air, gravity, matter, and so on, would not be to *see a hawk*.

We would not recognize a tree if, in looking up toward a cluster of green leaves, we had no ideas to tell us that the relation of the leaves to branch, trunk, and roots is very different from their relation to the visually adjacent patch of sky-blue color. We could in general recognize nothing of the tree at all if we had no idea of the thought-relations constituting a tree as what it is.

To stare in absolute, thoughtless incomprehension at the scene around us would be to stare at a meaningless blur — or not even that, since, in our thoughtlessness, we would lack even the concept of a "blur". Things come to meaningful appearance only by virtue of their distinct and interwoven meanings; we recognize them by means of the ideas lending them specific form and significance, through which we can identify them as being the kind of things they are. ("Oh, *that's* what I'm seeing!")

In only slightly different words: we could have no idea of things that, in their own nature, were entirely non-ideational. The traditionalist metaphysician, René Guénon, expressed the correspondence between thing and idea this way: “If the idea, to the extent that it is true and adequate, shares in the nature of the thing, it is because, conversely, the thing itself also shares in the nature of the idea” (quoted in Burckhardt 1987, p. 14n).

One way to approach the inherent idea of a thing is to realize the intimate relation between idea and form. The form of a thing is not itself a thing. We observe it only by apprehending it in thought. The form of a rose or skyscraper, reflects the thought through which the thing has become what it is — through which it has gained its specific, internal relationships and meaningful appearance. So one way to grasp the inseparability of sense and thought is to see how impossible it is even to imagine a material thing that is not already an expression of significant form. We never encounter a material substance that is not a manifestation of specific, intelligible form — or that is somehow separable from its own form.

Similarly, our laws of physics are *ideas*, mathematical or otherwise, that we find inherent in the material world. Typically, they come to expression in the dynamic relations between things.

Despite all this, the spirit of our age makes it easy for us to overlook the obvious: if we, with our human thinking, can *make sense of the world*, it is because the world itself is in the business of *making sense*. The fact that thoughts are not merely the private property of individuals, but also come to manifestation within the world around us, remains virtually unapproachable for most of us today.[6]

I don’t suppose there could be a more startling disconnect than when knowledge seekers aim to *articulate a conceptual understanding of a world they consider inherently meaningless*. A conceptual articulation, after all, is nothing other than the working out of a pattern of interwoven meanings. A truly meaningless world would offer no purchase for this effort.

My repetition in this section has been intentional, because the truth so easily escapes us. Let this be the sum of the matter:

> *Anything whose objective and true nature we can apprehend only through revealing description, including scientific description, can hardly be said to possess a nature independent of mind, thought, language, or meaning.*

Finally, whatever the processes of human cognition, we should not think that the world itself has distinct “parts”, the sensible and the thoughtful. We can no more imagine a sensible thing without thought than we can imagine substance without form. We can, of course, distinguish between the two aspects. But as soon as we ask “what is the sense content as such, apart from thinking?” we have a problem. To say anything at all about what the sense content is in itself — this would already be to characterize it with thought, so we would no longer be talking about a sensible content apart from thought.

I don’t think there is any way around this, nor need there be. The world is a unity. It resists every rigid dualism. But surely we can say — as a matter of distinction rather than dualism — that whatever meets our senses must be inherently bound up with thinking, much as every substance is inherently bound up with form.

The interior dimension

We have seen that the only world we could ever know is known interiorly, through qualitative sense perception and thinking. It is a "marriage of sense and thought" (Edelglass et al. 1997), and we might surely ask: "If that is how the world presents itself to our understanding, and if our understanding is at all genuine, might this not tell us something about the nature of things?" Of course, our knowing of the world requires other interior capacities as well as sense and thought, such as those of imagination and will. The appreciation of qualities such as color also seems to require an activity of feeling. But the main point at the moment is the rather obvious one that all our knowing calls upon interior capacities — powers of inner activity that presuppose consciousness (in which I include the "subconscious", and even much of what we mean by "the unconscious").

This idea — that the only world we are ever given is an interweaving of sense and thought — will be taken by those of a so-called "post-modern" bent as proving that we cannot talk about a "real" world, which is (they will say) hopelessly obscured behind all the relativizing subjective and cultural aspects of human existence. But this is actually a quintessentially modern approach born of Cartesian dualism (see next section) and doctrinaire materialism. Overlooked is the fact that we might also respond in an opposite way — not by denigrating the world as a "merely human construct", but instead by celebrating humans as true natives of the world that has brought us forth, natives naturally equipped with the cognitive means for experiencing the terms of our own existence.

In other words, we can take the foregoing discussion of the role of sense and thought in human cognition as telling us, not only about our interior selves, but also about the objective character of the world in which we live — *because this world also possesses an interior, and our own interiors, historically derived from the world (as we saw in the last chapter), put us in the deepest possible connection with the universe around us.*

It certainly stands to reason that whatever is required for understanding the world tells us something about the nature of the world being understood. If we can apprehend the world only through a marriage of sense and thought, and cannot even conceive any other way of apprehending the world, and if we all, in our practical, day-to-day lives, act as if the manifest world is the real thing — a world with which we routinely, materially, and consequentially engage in the immediate terms of our experience …

But let me interrupt myself right here and emphasize the dishonesty of (1) behaving in accord with the practical conviction of the world's accessible reality throughout our daily lives while (2) at the same time intellectually professing radical skepticism about whether the world is actually there in the form in which it appears. At the very least, let the person taking this position point to *something* fake or unreal about the appearances (but preferably only after reading the considerations about human experience in Chapter 13, "All Science Must Be Rooted in Experience"). The simple fact is that we all find the world as we actually experience it to be

perfectly natural and consistent, so that, hour by hour, it provides us with the effective reality principle of our lives.

So, then, continuing where I left off: … the most straightforward and consistent conclusion in the absence of contrary evidence is that the world itself, *in its own nature*, is just what it appears to be. It consists of the full and inexhaustible range of its potentials of appearance. Its true being lies in its potential to *appear*, to take form in the full-fleshed terms of our conscious experience. Or again: it is in the nature of the world to manifest interiorly. The interior experience could be our own or that of any creature capable — if only in the slightest degree, and whether with self-awareness or not — of bringing to manifestation within itself some experiential potential of the cosmos.

Here I must insist that the reader take seriously his or her own experience. To say that the world is essentially an appearance to consciousness — something we *experience* — is not to say it is insubtantial or a mere wisp of subjectivity. If you think this, you are forgetting your own experience, shared with others. To recognize that the world is a world of appearances, a world of experienced qualities, is only to say that it *really does* have the solidity we all encounter in experience — a solidity we can't help taking at face value in practical life. This is the real thing, an actually *experienced* solidity.

Admittedly, it is (for us today) a radical idea: qualitative and thought-informed, the world comes to its own characteristic expression — achieves its own reality, or fullest existence — as a manifestation within what we might call the *interior dimension*.[7]

There are many ways to speak of this interior dimension, none of which rings quite true in our culture. To say, as I have above, that the world consists of "appearances to consciousness" may be true enough, but the idea of an "appearance" has a falsely anemic and insubstantial feel for most people today. It *should* be taken as referring to the full, undiminished reality of the perceptible world as muscularly given in actual experience. The tree of our experience is an appearance, but it is an appearance of the sort we might crack our skulls against if we make a wrong move while skiing. We don't lose that solidity simply by recognizing that it presents itself as a content of experience. If it didn't present itself that way, we could never know about it.

One proposal for how we might think of the material world in relation to its interior aspect comes, I've been told, from the philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who referred to materiality as condensed or coagulated spirit (*coagulum spiritus*).[8] The analogy might be with ice forming in water as the temperature drops.

The problem is that, although "coagulated spirit" may provide a mental image that some find helpful, we are still left wondering, "What exactly does the phrase mean? What is one trying to get at with the phrase "coagulated spirit" if not exactly our familiar physical matter?" Actually, the best answer may be that what "coagulated spirit" is trying to get at just *is* the matter of our ordinary experience. At least, we might see it that way when we learn to take our sense perception more seriously in its own terms, with greater openness to the actual qualitative and interior character of our encounter with the material world.

In any case, the main point of this chapter is indeed simple, and does not require us to range far afield in abstruse philosophical territory. The point is only that we cannot separate the concept of matter from that of mind, or interiority, or spirit. The idea that our perception of the

world gives us a mind-independent reality is a strange importation into modern thought with no evident support and everything against it. The world, so far as we could ever know it, manifests itself within an interior space. We cannot even imagine it otherwise, given that the space of imagination is itself interior. Since nothing in our experience of the world gives us fundamental reason to distrust that experience (Chapter 13, "All Science Must Be Rooted in Experience"), and since we all find it impossible to avoid taking our experience (properly understood) as reality, it seems reasonable at least to test out in our thinking the hypothesis that what our experience gives us upon the stage of consciousness is the foundational substance and matrix of reality.

We can put this in either of two complementary ways. We can say, in the first place, that our interior experience of the world occurs not merely "in here", in some purely private space, but rather occurs in the world itself, which we encounter via our interior participation in its interior — via, that is, what I have referred to as a marriage of sense and thought. After all, that hill over there really isn't hidden inside my head; many others experience it much as I do. Or, secondly, we can say: the world itself naturally occurs within a cosmic *interior dimension* of experience in which we all, with our own interiors, participate.[9] And perhaps we can add, as I believe Owen Barfield has somewhere said, "There is only one interior". I will come back to this in the section below on language.

I realize that all this way of speaking is problematic in the extreme for contemporary thinkers. But I hope in the course of this chapter to provide enough context (all perhaps problematic itself!) to open our minds just a crack, so as to let in the light from some unexpected possibilities we might allow ourselves to explore.

Meanwhile, perhaps we can momentarily reflect on an observation by the respected French mathematician and physicist, Henri Poincaré, who once wrote: "A reality completely independent of the mind which conceives it, sees or feels it is an impossibility" (Poincaré 1913, Introduction).

The Cartesian diversion — is there a way to bypass it?

But the conclusion that the world in its fullest reality occurs within an interior dimension — that no world we could ever know exists independently of the union of sense and thought — collides with a centuries-long mental habit that tells us we look out upon a world of mindless objects utterly other than, and unlike, our cognizing selves — objects wholly alien to our own interior being.

The common suggestion, then, is that we have two different worlds: the *subjective* world of appearances — appearances not only mediated by, but also unknowably transformed by, our nervous systems — and a world of *real things* somehow hidden behind the terms of our experience. From this point of view, untrustworthy appearances are all we have, at least in any direct sense. Objective reality, on the other hand, is — well, it is presumably out there *somewhere*.

This secondary dualism of appearance and reality is descended from the primary "Cartesian dualism" of mind and matter. During the first half of the 1600s, the French philosopher René Descartes distinguished between "extended stuff" and "thinking stuff" — and did so as if they were separable and disconnected substances having little or nothing in common. Having echoed down through the last several centuries, dualistic thinking has crystallized especially in what we think of as the mind/body problem and, more generally, the mental/physical dichotomy.

Figure 24.2. René Descartes (1596-1650).[10]

Many scientists and scholars today disavow "Cartesian dualism", yet nearly all live intellectually by means of it. There is a very real sense in which Descartes' cleaving stroke through the heart of reality has been almost universally accepted — perhaps most of all among materialist-minded biologists. That is, they seem to have felt they must accept the stroke as a kind of *fait accompli* and then try to live with the violence thereby done to the unity and harmony of the world. They merely choose: which half of this improbably fractured whole shall they accept and which half reject? And so the "material" they embrace is dualistic material, bequeathed to them by the Cartesian sundering of mind from matter. Likewise, the mind they reject is dualistic mind.

Materialists they may be, but their materialism is defined by the dualism that has been drilled into our habits of thought and perception. Instead of going back and searching for a different, non-dualistic way forward, they have accepted the original, dualistic fractionation of a living, unified reality, and been content merely to carry a torch for just one of its mutually estranged aspects.

It's not that the problem has gone completely unrecognized. John Searle, Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Language at Berkeley, has suggested that materialism today "inadvertently accepts the categories and the vocabulary of dualism". It accepts, he says, terms such as "mental" and "physical", "material" and "immaterial", "mind" and "body" just as they have been handed down through the dualistic tradition. Searle, himself a materialist, went so far as to suggest that the deepest motivation for materialism in general "is simply a terror of consciousness" (Searle 1992, pp. 54-55).

So, then, the legacy of dualism has been extremely difficult to shake off, even as an endless procession of scholars have denounced it. Perhaps the primary symptom of the legacy is the seemingly immovable conviction that we face a mind-independent world. (Is this where

Searle's "terror of consciousness" comes to a focus most easily? If only we can convince ourselves that we live in a mind-independent world, then perhaps we will be spared unpleasant intimations of intelligences other than our own.)

Given the contradiction between belief in a mind-independent world on one hand, and the inescapability of our own minds on the other, we have done our best to get along with two apparently disconnected (dualistic) vocabularies — an objective one for the mindless world and a subjective one for our own minds.

Can we recover the unity of the world?

Instead of a "terror of consciousness", Searle could just as well have cited a "terror of interiority". He also could have said, "We're all materialists now" — because we are. It's built into our experience: we look out at a world that seems to have absolutely nothing to do with our own minds. But this experience is founded on contradiction — fortunately, a contradiction we can recognize and try to get around. True, the recognition may have little power to change our immediate experience. But recognizing and correcting the contradiction in thought may be an important step toward eventually healing the breach between ourselves and the world.

We all know that we are the ones perceiving and experiencing the world. But, at the same time, we experience the world as if it were *out there* independent of our own minds. This is the contradiction: we seem unable to avoid *regarding the world as if it were alien to the interior experience wherein we regard it*.

First of all, this deserves serious reflection until we are thoroughly apprised of the contradiction, or pathology, afflicting our current relation to our surroundings. As part of this reflection, we might want to recall that our remoter ancestors seem to have had a much richer, more participative relation to the world than we do today.[11] Then we can try to resolve the contradiction without compromising the one thing we know beyond any possibility of doubt — that we are the ones having our experience of the world.

The solution is to recognize that the judgment, "What I am beholding is *out there*", is a judgment we make from *within* our experience. That is, our ability to *experience* things "out there" is an objective feature of the world's interiority. It is one aspect of the way the world is naturally constellated upon the stage of consciousness — one aspect of our interior participation in the world's interior.

That we distort such a judgment into a conviction of absolute alienation without any evidence to force the conviction on us, and in apparent contradiction to our awareness that it is we ourselves who are having the experience — this testifies not only to our capacity for erroneous judgment, but also to our confidence in the world-revealing powers of our minds. There is apparently an extraordinary intimacy between the potentials of our minds and the potentials of the world's manifestation of itself. That we cooperate and participate in this manifestation, and are even allowed to distort it against reason, is a profound fact of our existence.

This makes it all the more important for us to become aware of what we ourselves are contributing to that manifestation, for good or ill. We are, after all, fallible — and we can perhaps

be stubbornly willful (if not also terrified) — in the thoughts with which we bring the world to appearance.[12] While we may not be able to change immediately the facts of our experience, we *can* come to recognize distorted judgments embedded in that experience. And our reflection on these less than fully conscious judgments may over time enable us to change them.

In the present case, we can refuse to forget that we are the ones having the experience, and on that basis we can separate the truth from the falsehood of the judgment that objects of our experience are *out there*. They clearly are not *out there* in an absolute and mind-independent sense. But they truly are *out there* in the sense that they are not private possessions we carry around in our heads. They belong to an interiority shared by all sentient beings — an objective interiority wherein we humans can make an appropriate distinction between our private subjectivity and the publicly shared world.

Further, we can recognize what has led us to distort *out there* to the point where it seems to mean "absolutely mind-independent". The fault lies with the Cartesian legacy whereby we have become convinced, first, that our own interiors are shut up within our heads, and second, that the world itself altogether lacks an interior. So we feel in our bones that any world at all, if we are to share it with others, must reside mind-independently *out there*, so that we can all encounter it, so to speak, "from outside". This contrasts with our actual experience, where everything is encountered within an objective world interior in which we collectively participate with our own interiors.[13]

There are other contradictions we can observe in ourselves on the way to freeing ourselves from implicit Cartesianism and the appearance/reality dualism. For example, our faith in the powers of an experience-based (empirical) science conflicts with the widespread conviction that we live in a world of mere appearances whose relation to reality is unknown. If the conviction were correct, how could we have a trusted science of the real world? But we find ourselves with every reason to believe that such a science is possible.

There is also the fact that the mindless-world assumption has given rise to a long-running perplexity, which is commonly framed as the epistemological question, "How can our minds 'in here' apprehend mindless substance 'out there'?" But this unsupported, dualistic framing of the question is proposed *before* one looks at the actual process of knowing, and *before* one has any ground for judging as mindless whatever is "out there". So the dualistic stance is arbitrarily imposed on the epistemological analysis in advance by our implicit Cartesian dualism, defining (and distorting) the entire shape of the philosophical problem.[14]

I mentioned a moment ago the possibility of going back before Descartes and finding a different way forward. That way forward has already been suggested in the foregoing. Instead of a dualism of incommensurate mind and matter, we can acknowledge the actual process of our knowing, with its marriage of sense and thought, both of which occur on the stage of consciousness. The world thus presented to us is unriven by the Cartesian stroke.

Our own experience testifies that there is nothing dualistically problematic about this intimate union of sense and thought. The perceived world shows itself to be a realm of appearances, or experienceable contents, existing in harmonious unity.

The objective world consists, so far as we could ever know, of knowable stuff (appearances), and we are given no positive reason to doubt that its knowability upon the stage of consciousness is perfectly natural. We ourselves, along with our neural structure and everything else involved in our understanding, are engendered by this world and we are, unsurprisingly, expressions of its character. As beneficiaries of its creative potentials, we are naturally constituted so as to participate meaningfully in our surroundings.

Our eyes do not give us a representation of the world

We are not quite done with our focus on the Cartesian legacy and the way it blocks our awareness of the world's interiority. That's because the appearance/reality dualism and the unbridgeable fissure between mind and world have almost forced upon us the conviction that our perception gives us, not the world itself, but a *representation* of it. And this conviction in turn binds us all the more strongly to the dualism from which it arose.

A representation, by definition, is not the real thing. A map of the city is not the city; a photograph of a tree-covered hillside is not the hillside; a small-scale model of a village is not the village. We cannot walk among the trees in a photograph, birds do not make their nests in the branches, and we cannot carve our initials in the bark. If there were total fidelity between the representation and the thing itself, we would not call it a "representation"; it would be the actual thing. And the actual thing, I would argue, is what we are given in perception.

The proper response to those claiming a gap between appearance and reality might be: "Show us anything in our perception that hints at the existence of a second world beyond the perceivable one — a *real* world contrasting with appearances". A perceived tree appears *itself to be* the tree. So also the stream I sometimes sit alongside. If I pick up a small stone and toss it into the water, I perceive both the object and my own arm in picking up the stone and throwing it, and I likewise perceive the trajectory of the stone in relation to earthly gravity, the wind, and the energy at work in my muscles. I can be sure that, exactly as observed — and exactly where observed — the stone and all the other elements of the scene, from my arm to the water, are fully "respecting" the laws of nature. That is, these elements are lawful *in their own immediate, experiential terms* — without my needing to refer to some hidden, mind-independent non-qualitative, non-experienceable reality behind, or in any way different from, the appearances.[15]

So the world I perceive, while it shows up within my experience and manifests itself upon the stage of consciousness, gives no sign of actually being inside my head, whether literally, or as a reduced representation, or as an illusion, nor any sign of somehow referring to an unknown substratum lying outside all possible experience. Rather, perceived objects testify with overwhelming force to their occurrence, *in their full-bodied presence and reality*, right where and as they are given in qualitative, thoughtful experience — experience that we consistently and objectively enter into alongside other sentient beings.

So our perception gives us, not a representation of the world, but the world itself — this

is a profound truth we have scarcely begun to reckon with. And the reckoning isn't easy. Perhaps the biggest obstacle lies in the widespread but insupportable conviction that our visual cognition is somehow analogous to the photographs (or moving images) that a camera mounted on a robot might produce. The damage inflicted by this analogy upon our perceptual sensitivity can hardly be over-estimated. We may appreciate this more fully when we reflect on our camera-habituated age — an age when snapping a photograph of a significant event or beautiful sight often seems more important than noticing what it is we are photographing.

And so, sticking to the visual point of view: we need to grasp the difference between our looking externally (from a certain "distance") at a photographic representation of the world, and conjuring the *things themselves*, in all their reality, within our experience. It's difficult to distinguish between these alternatives until we recognize that "conjuring the things themselves", as opposed to looking at representations of them, must mean participating in the creative act of calling them into being, which means realizing them or bringing them to their fullest possible appearance as interior contents.

The idea that our cognition is a participation in creation is so huge and powerful that, I fear, it tends to stun us into a blank stare. If we were to attend to the idea, we would need to picture ourselves, not *looking at* things, but rather participating in a creative act, *much larger than ourselves*, wherein, by means of our perception of the world, we are continually cooperating in imagining or speaking things into being all around us. We would not think our eyes were giving us a picture of things we must interpretively map to some other reality, such as a sub-microscopic, "particulate" one. Instead, we would think of our eyes, together with our other senses and our thinking, as invested with the very same power through which all things have come into being, thereby enabling us to walk and live our lives among them.

This is a thought we need to consider further.

We cognize the world by participating in its creation

There can be no overstating how dramatic and unexpected, for us today, is the view hinted at above. It is one thing to imagine that our eyes are little camera-like devices producing an image that someone, somewhere, somehow, manages to view and interpret as a representation of a mind-independent world. But it is quite another to recognize that, through our eyes and other senses together with our thinking, the world itself takes up its existence *according to its own nature and in the only way it can — as part of lived experience within an interior dimension that we, too, inhabit*.

During the first third of the nineteenth century Samuel Taylor Coleridge had to have come to terms with the difference between reality and a representation of it when he suggested that our power of perceiving and knowing the natural world is an analog within our own minds of the very same creative activity through which the world comes to exist and is sustained. Or, as he put it in his own unforgettable words:

> The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM (Coleridge 1906, Chapter 13).

Along the same line, Coleridge also said that the productive power of becoming which we discover in or above the finished products of nature is a power we can call “Nature”, or “Agency”. And this Agency at work in nature, he claimed, is akin to the “intelligence, which is in the human mind above nature” (Coleridge 1969, pp. 497-98).

Figure 24.3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834).[16]

In other words, so far as we truly and imaginatively perceive the world, we do not merely encounter it from outside. With our cognitional faculties, we stand within it as co-creators, so that the known world is always coextensive with the reach of our informed imaginations. We bring the expressive “words” of creation alive by making them the expressions of our own minds. After all — as I have been suggesting above — it is not that we “snap a picture” of an independently existing world. We have the very world itself through our cognitional activity — and we have it in a kind of “God’s-eye” or creator’s view rather than a camera view. We know it from inside its own way of being — which is inseparable from our own way of being — rather than as an anemic projection upon a screen.

This suggests that, through the creative aspect of our perception, we may “do our own bit” in shaping the world’s coming to reality — its evolving toward the future — just as each of us plays his own role in making human culture and society what it is coming to be. This is not to say that any one of us can flippantly re-make the world (or human culture) at any moment according to his own wishes. The evolution of consciousness upon the earth, and the evolution of earth itself, are matters too grave for such flippancy.

How much we have had to pay for the anemic belief that our senses give us mere picture-like representations of an alien world! But everything changes when we realize that, just as a boulder on a mountainside is fully and seamlessly embedded in the surrounding world of

wind, water, light, and gravity, so, too, our own cognition and expressive powers embed us as knowing participants within a reality of universal expressiveness, and do not confront us with a mere representation of it.

This is not a strange view. It is easy to notice that everything we make into a content of our own experience requires a re-enacting of something like the interior activity that first produced that content. This re-enacting is, for example, the way one human being experiences the content of another's mind. If we attend a lecture (and are paying attention), we follow along by bringing the speaker's thought-content alive as the content of our own minds. So far as we do this faithfully, we live within the same thought-world as the speaker, not a copy of it.[17]

But something like this must also be true of the qualities and thought that constitute the interior dimension of the world as a whole. Here, too, our possibility of seeing and understanding depends on our ability to re-enliven the one world's interior by participating directly in it through the activity of our own interior — in particular, our sensing and thinking.

Coleridge's remark can help us keep in mind just how radical all this is. If we, in bringing the contents of the world alive within our own experience, must participate in the creative activity through which these contents are originated and sustained, and if this does not mean creating some kind of representation, but rather being active in the one world's ever-evolving manifestation of itself — well, then, this places us in a position of high responsibility indeed.

The world as a form of speech

Human language gives us our most immediately accessible picture of the marriage of sense and thought. The outer, sense-perceptible sounds of speech are shone through by an inner meaning. Only when we embrace, and are embraced by, the meaning in its own (and our own) interior realm do we have the phenomenon of language at all. And the point of all I have said earlier in this chapter is that this marriage of sense and thought, so easily recognizable in human speech, reflects, however dimly, the general character of the world into which we were born.

We might say, then, that the world has the character of language. It is meaningful expression. Or, in more ancient terminology, it is the Logos on display. The whole universe, in its essential nature, is a continual coming into being — which is also to say, a continual speaking or expression or unfolding of meaning — and we are children of this meaning, and the responsible heirs of it. This proposal hardly seems more of a "reach" than one that says a universe that just "happens" to be scientifically accessible and understandable somehow came about from a meaningless "nowhere" of which we have no knowledge — and which we cannot even conceive, since we can only conceive that which is conceivable, or possesses meaning.

Numerous creation stories from around the globe have pictured the genesis of the world and all its creatures as occurring through the spoken word (or song). As we saw in the chapter on "The Evolution of Consciousness", this is how the ancients experienced the world — as thoughtful expression — and the experience was wholly lost only in relatively recent history.

Language, then, is not a mere tool we somehow invented. Our minds and our speech

precipitated out of language — a language of nature in itself too profound for (merely human) words. We were spoken into being so that we might eventually learn to speak for ourselves, however crudely. All along the way, the meanings inherent in the world nurtured us toward this end.

It would be a useful exercise to trace how, in so many naïve discussions of the supposed origin of language — that is, in discussions about how language is thought somehow to have arisen in creatures initially lacking any form of it — we find a hidden assumption that language already existed before its supposed origin.

For example, a grunt or a finger-pointing or an "excited" state of jumping up and down would typically be assumed (quite rightly) to have some initial, unaccounted-for *meaning*, rather than being merely part of a chain of physical causes and effects. So such actions are, from the very beginning, taken to be significant *gestures*, and therefore are already being imagined as language.

This is fine as long as we realize what we are doing. The grunting and finger-pointing are not the means whereby the non-meaningful becomes meaningful, or non-language becomes language, but stages upon the path by which language comes to ever greater clarity and focus in human consciousness. Human history does not record our moving from no language to language, but rather our learning to possess language rather than be unfreely possessed by it (as we might imagine many animals to be).

This is why Barfield once remarked that to ask about the origin of language "is like asking for the origin of origin". Language just *is* the origin of things. We ourselves had first to be spoken in the deepest and most meaningful language before we could begin internalizing that creative speech and making it our own.

A similar understanding shines through remarks by the German philosopher and linguist, Wilhelm von Humboldt, a contemporary of Coleridge:

> It is my overwhelming conviction that language must be viewed as having been placed in man: For as a product of his reason in the clarity of consciousness it is not explicable. It does not help to grant thousands upon thousands of years for the purpose of its invention … For man to truly understand even a single word, not as a mere physical outburst, but as sound articulating a concept, language must already exist as a whole within him. There is nothing isolated in language, each of its elements only appears as part of a whole. As natural as it may seem to assume that languages develop, if they were also thus to be invented, this could only happen all at once. Man is only man through language; in order to invent language he would have to have already been man.[18]

The interwoven unity and indivisibility of language ultimately extends to all languages, human or otherwise, and even to the entire cosmos as "the book of nature". Just as we heard it said that "there is only one interior", so, too, language is One, and so also is Logos, and so also is the world that allows itself to be brought to light only through language. It is from this all-encompassing matrix of meaning that we, like all other organisms in one degree or another, emerged as meaning-bearers in a world of meaning.

But it is not hard to realize that, as conscious cognizers — as speakers now increasingly capable of giving proper (or improper) names to things — it is we especially who hold on earth the future within the creative fires of our hearts. And there, surely, is where the deepest words

are even now being spoken.[19]

But what about the billions of galaxies?

At the end of any discussion such as that above, a chilling thought will occur to many who were until then interested. They will reply: “The vastness of the universe is so far beyond the customary dimensions of human experience that we can hardly accept your suggestion about human participation in the creative process. Even if we were to credit this thought with respect to familiar earthly realities, it would become vanishingly insignificant relative to the universe as a whole”.

The pre-eminent physicist, Richard Feynman, summarized the issue with almost poetic succinctness when he dismissed the idea that the universe as a whole might bear any sort of meaningful relation to the story of human life. “The stage”, he said, “is too big for the drama” (quoted in Gleick 1992, p. 372).

But Feynman, with his intelligence, should have been self-critical enough to realize that he was doing no more than insisting that the human drama be reduced to the familiar terms of materialism. The alienation to which his remark points is the alienation of supposedly mindless matter from human life. The vast dimensions may intensify that alienation, but what is being intensified is the sense of otherness and indifference associated with the materialist stance. If, by contrast, we experienced the material universe as the glory and expression of an interior in which we share, then the vastness would only intensify the glory.

Figure 24.4. Portion of an image from the James Webb Space Telescope.[20]

Instead of reducing the human drama to the mindlessness of his conception of matter, Feynman might have asked himself instead whether the universe’s material spaciousness needed to be re-considered in light of its manifestation as appearance — and ultimately (in earth evolution) as *human appearance*. Why simply assume that the universe’s *being known* (achieving manifestation) within human consciousness is not a significant development in the

history of the cosmos? Wasn't Feynman's dismissal of the human being from the cosmic drama simply a re-assertion of his initial, materialistic assumption about the disconnect between humans and the matter of which their own bodies are composed?

It's worth asking ourselves, to begin with: suppose we were each raised under a ten-foot ceiling, so that we never saw a sky reaching without limit above us. Would we ever have had any vivid notion of the transcendent? (Try imagining this the next time you leave a closed-in room and stand under a broadly visible sky.) Yet, the notion of the transcendent has been of decisive importance throughout human history. In fact, the earliest histories of which we have any record, as well as the stories echoing down to us from the primary age of myth, did not concern earthly events so much as the activities of divine, celestial beings — beings who were the centers of human interest. Perhaps this vast and ever-expanding celestial perspective not only elevated human aspirations, and not only (in some respects, anyway) raised the level of human culture, but also reflected truths we have long since forgotten.

But the main thing Feynman failed to take into account was the evidence of our demonstrable means of knowing — the evidence that material phenomena, wherever in the universe we encounter them, always present themselves as a union of sense and thought within an interior dimension. They *must* present themselves interiorly if we are to believe that our most trusted experience — including the science in which we place so much faith — gives us genuine understanding of the world.

In other words, we directly know (by paying attention to our own means of understanding) that the universe as a whole manifests itself within a cosmic-scale interiority. And Feynman apparently never asked himself whether this interior sort of manifestation could have originated anywhere other than from a commensurate interior power of creative imagination.

If, for this creative power, to imagine something is also to realize it as an objective appearance in which all beings can share through their conjoined interiors, what would "far away" mean? How many milliseconds would it take for that creative imagination to leap from one side of its interior space to the other? How long does it take *us* to encompass in thought the most distant galaxies? If they, too, are phenomena — appearances to consciousness — how much of their glory first achieves anything like full reality in the imaginative perception of humans? Can we really say that this *being known* is not as important to their destiny as *knowing them* is to ours?

Of course, in our present state we can hardly address the questions we have now brought ourselves up against. But, oddly enough, very many have been willing and eager to pre-judge these questions, whether with Feynman's succinctness or physicist Steven Weinberg's blunt but self-contradictory remark that "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless" (Weinberg 1984, pp. 143-4). To find the universe comprehensible is hardly a pointless exercise for human beings whose inner lives are a continual upward striving to understand ourselves and the world that has nurtured us.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

An Interior World Hiding in Plain Sight

We began this chapter by looking at how we would have no experience of a material world if it were not for our perception of sensible qualities together with the thinking through which we order those qualities and thereby grasp something of the nature of what we encounter in the world. The material world as we have it, then, is a "marriage of sense and thought", and it presents itself to us upon the stage of consciousness where our perception and thinking take form — or, we might say, it exists for us in the terms of the *interior dimension* of our existence.

That is how we know the material world, assuming we do know it. If we really don't know it, then we have nothing to talk about and could just as well keep our mouths shut. But if we do know it, as everyone seems to assume in practice, then the most straightforward and indeed necessary assumption seems to be that the world presents its true character when it comes to manifestation as an appearance to consciousness.

This should not be taken as a reduction of the world to some sort of wispy, airy-fairy notion of human subjectivity. After all, this train of thought begins with the reality of human experience in all its full-bodied presence and solidity. *That* is what we should mean by "appearance", since that is in fact the nature of the appearances; it is how they present themselves to consciousness.

The greatest obstacle to our receiving this truth lies in our dualistic Cartesian heritage, which lives on in the almost universal conviction (at least within western culture) that we look out at a mindless world. It also lives in the appearance/reality distinction, and in the idea that our perception gives us, not things themselves, but distorted representations of them. Nothing in our experience supports this view, which in fact is a judgment we make from *within* our experience, showing how much implicit confidence we unwittingly place in this experience.

I pointed out in the middle of the chapter how errant is the camera model of (visual) cognition. If, in fact, our cognition conjures up all around us the very body of the world — the "things themselves" that make up the world — then it seems that this cognition is actually a participation in the creative activity through which the world gains its powers of appearance, which may also be our participation in the creative activity through which things come to be in the deepest sense of their actual (as opposed to potential) presentation of themselves.

Moreover, our development as language users may testify to the depth of our participation in the world's manifestation of itself. For language is a pre-eminent example of the marriage of sense and thought, and many ancient traditions hold that the world was spoken (or sung) into existence.

Lastly, I have pointed out that the world's existing within an interior dimension can also counter the self-doubt by which so many question the significance of human life against the backdrop of the vastness of the universe. In the interior dimension our

own inner being directly participates in that of the world.

Notes

1. This distinction might also prove useful in contemporary discussions of pan-psychism. I have not seriously delved into the literature of pan-psychism, so (as far as I know) the distinction may already have been made.

2. There is a false way of dealing with the quality of solidity. How many times have we heard (most of us, anyway) that the solidity of this or that object is an illusion, because it is "mostly empty space"? The irony is that we are denying the quality of solidity in the object where it actually occurs by transferring it to an invisible realm where it doesn't occur. That is, the solidity of the object is disproved by appealing to "particles" with vast tracts of empty space between them. The vastness of that empty space is demonstrated only by reference to the minuscule volume and great dispersion of the particles. These, despite the testimony of physics and despite their existence as purely theoretical, non-perceived constructs, are taken to be tiny, solid things. This false picture of the particles' contrasting solidity is the only thing that gives rhetorical force to the idea of "empty space". (I discuss this kind of thinking in Chapter 13, "All Science Must Be Rooted in Experience".)

Far better to accept felt solidity as the quality it is where we can actually feel it — which is everywhere in the world around us — instead of transferring it to a notional realm of theoretical constructs where we cannot feel it or coherently speak of it. This willingess to stick with the experiential ideal of science involves no disruption of our scientific understanding.

3. Figure 24.1 credit: Sunrise222se (CC BY-SA 4.0).

4. "But the science we already have works — nearly miraculously!" This is emphatically true. It works because working is just about the sole intent of the methods of those sciences whose working impresses us so much. But technological savvy — making things that work — is a very different matter from a fundamental understanding of the character of the world we live in. Finding ways to manipulate the world successfully is not at all the same as understanding what sort of things we are manipulating and how we might relate to them beyond our capacity for manipulation.

In many situations mere trial and error is sufficient for successful manipulation. Often sufficient, too, are scientific models that are known to falsify reality in one way or another. John Dalton's theory of the indivisible, indestructible atom and Niels Bohr's theory of the "solar-system" atom both served to further the manipulative powers of science, and both found crucial application in the experimental domains from which they were derived. But neither of them would possess any respectability if seriously put forward as the best summation of our understanding today.

Notice also that, with our manipulative powers, we are always addressing in one way or another the qualitatively given world — so we are *not* being true to the professed ideals of a quality-free science. The very idea of such a science is a gross absurdity deserving no respect

at all. We can't have a science of a world that isn't there for us. Nor can we have a science without a world from which we can abstract our preferred quantities. And we can't have a quantitative science without a world we can go back to in order to fit our quantitative formulae to it.

5. See in particular the section, "How do things around us become what they are?" in Chapter 13 ("All Science Must Be Rooted in Experience"). If anyone should remain skeptical of the role of thinking in the constitution of things as whatever they really are, I would strongly suggest reading Chapter 4 ("Intentionality") by philosopher Ronald Brady in the online, freely accessible book, *Being on Earth: Practice In Tending the Appearances* (Maier et al. 2006).

6. The philologist and historian of consciousness, Owen Barfield, in the second lecture of his little book, *Speaker's Meaning*, pointed out that, up until the Scientific Revolution, the conviction that ideas were the private property of individuals would have been fully as unapproachable as is, for us today, the conviction that ideas belong to the objective world. The "common sense" of every age can be remarkably difficult to come to terms with, or even to recognize as such. So we tend to be trapped within our own cultural era. The best escape from the trap is to become literate about how earlier eras differed from our own. And that literacy is not achieved by spinning naïve tales about our triumphs over the childish ignorance of our forebears. See Chapter 23, ("The Evolution of Consciousness").

7. It is certainly true that a person who is blind or deaf or who has had traumatic encounters in nature might have experiences of the world differing from those of someone whose senses are functioning "normally". There is in general a huge range of experiential potentials among different persons. Mozart would have ("normally") experienced the world of sound and music to a depth I cannot imagine, just as Picasso would have experienced the world of visual form in ways incomprehensible to me. I do not have a bat's sonar-like sense, nor an insect's infrared sense. The world lends its potentials of experience to all creatures according to their capacity. But we all find ourselves living side-by-side in *one world* — a consistent and shared world with diverse yet harmonious potentials of experience.

8. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Romantic philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, used this phrase, (which was later picked up by the philologist, Owen Barfield) and attributed it to Leibniz. I am not a student of Leibniz's work (and I don't, by the way, know Latin), nor have I been able to identify the source of the phrase, *coagulum spiritus*. For a constructive use of the phrase, see Barfield's essay, "Matter, Imagination, and Spirit" in Barfield 1977.

Since writing the above, I have learned from Peter Cheyne, author of *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy* (Cheyne 2020), that he has investigated Coleridge's use of the phrase. The results of the investigation are presented in Chapter 15, "Bloody Speck: How S. T. Coleridge Turned the Embryological *Punctum Saliens* into a Metaphysical Principle", in the forthcoming book, *Matter and Life in Coleridge, Schelling, and Other Dynamical Idealists*, of which Cheyne is editor. Cheyne thinks it likely that Coleridge's use of *coagulum spiritus* derives from Friedrich Schelling, who in turn references similar ideas in Frans (François) Hemsterhuis and Henry More. It's not apparent that Leibniz ever used that particular phrase, but Coleridge

might easily have associated it with an aspect of Leibniz' thought. For details see Cheyne's forthcoming book, due to be released in June, 2025.

9. The private aspects of the experience stem in part from the fact that it comes to us via our personal sense organs, located in space and giving us, for example, a particular angle of view upon a tree. Subjective aspects may also stem from, among other things, defects in our sense organs, such as the severe tinnitus I experience. But we do not find these subjective aspects of our experience bringing into question the objective character of the world we share with others. The English philologist and philosopher, Owen Barfield, has put it this way:

> I am hit violently on the head and, in the same moment, perceive a bright light to be there. Later on I reflect that the light was "not really there." Even if I had lived all my life on a desert island where there was no-one to compare notes with, I might do as much. No doubt I should learn by experience to distinguish the first kind of light from the more practicable light of day or the thunderbolt, and should soon give up hitting myself on the head at sunset when I needed light to go on working by (Barfield 1965, pp. 19-20).

10. Figure 24.2 credit: The Free Media Repository (CC BY-SA 2.5).

11. On this richer relation to the world, see Barfield 1973, Barfield 1965, and Chapter 23 of this book ("The Evolution of Consciousness").

12. You might wonder: if we now experience the world as mind-independent — that is, if the world *appears* to us that way — and if appearances are what the world consists of, how can I claim, as I have been doing, that the notion of a mind-independent reality is false?

But do not forget that the world is brought to appearance through a marriage of sense and thought, and the role of human thought here is not infallible. We always have to be alert to the limitations of our thought — especially the thought that belongs to the unquestioned common sense of our era. This is so deeply embedded in our experience that we usually remain unaware of it. And, for us today, it includes the disjunction between self and world that forcefully entered philosophical consciousness with Descartes.

Actually, the issues here are subtle and difficult, because of the close relation between human consciousness and the world's reality. Owen Barfield has remarked that, if enough people continue thinking of the world as mere mechanism long enough, the world will eventually *become* mere mechanism. The phrase "long enough" may be crucial, reflecting in part the difference between the history of ideas and an underlying evolution of consciousness. (On this difference, see Chapter 23, "The Evolution of Consciousness".)

The deeper issues have to do with how human agency embraces, and is embraced by, the creative agency lying behind the world. See, for example, the references to Coleridge's thought below.

13. In this section I have been retracing (and embellishing) an argument Samuel Taylor Coleridge makes about experience and "outness" in Chapter XII of his Biographia Literaria.

14. The philosopher Ronald Brady, in a posthumous treatise titled "How We Make Sense of the World" (Brady 2016), succinctly summarized today's Cartesian epistemological stance and its alternative this way:

- "If the question is: 'how can we know the world?' or 'how does the act of cognition take place?' we cannot begin with the very 'knowledge' that this investigation should justify, or we investigate no more than the logical implications of our presuppositions. Epistemology … cannot begin from any positive knowledge of the world, but must suspend all such 'knowing' in order to examine the act of knowing itself … if we do begin from such 'knowledge' our epistemology will necessarily validate present sciences, and deny the possibility of any other form of science." In other words, if we are undertaking a fundamental epistemological investigation, we cannot begin by presupposing the Cartesian diremption of mind from matter.

- "Most modern approaches, for example, take their starting-point from the apparent distinction between the thinking subject and the world external to that subject, and thus formulate epistemology after a Cartesian or Neo-Kantian framework. In this formulation … the basic question of epistemology becomes: 'what is the relation of thinking to being?' or 'what is the relation of subjective consciousness to external or objective reality?' These questions arise from the assumed separation of the two — that is, thinking attempts to know the world of objective reality, which world is itself totally independent of thinking. In such a formulation, however, we [assume that we] already know something of that world (such as its difference from thinking), and the problem is created by what we know — that is, the distance between the thinking and its object."

- "Since we cannot take the results of previous cognition for granted when we attempt to grasp cognition itself, another formulation of the problem is necessary. If we simply propose that knowledge is immanent in human consciousness (if it is not, then we are not speaking about anything), the basic question of epistemology could be simply: How? What is the act of knowing? Thus we face toward our own act of cognition, and the investigation turns on the *self-observation of thinking*."

15. We are free to theorize in terms of non-experienceable, theoretical constructs. But we typically do so by at least implicitly making models out of them, *as if* they were experienceable things (such as the "particles" of particle physics). And such models — because they are based on theoretical constructs abstracted from appearances and falsely conceived as if they were themselves actual appearances (phenomena) — always turn out in one way or another to be false to reality. (See Chapter 13, "All Science Must Be Rooted in Experience"). They also vex us to no end, as in quantum physics.

There is no reason we should not investigate the appearances in all directions available to us, without limit. We can, for example, use instruments to explore the structure of forces at a level beneath the possibility of actual sight or touch. But the physics of the past century has taught us very well that we run into crippling trouble when we try to clothe unsensed theoretical constructs with sensible qualities, as we typically do when we talk about "particles" and then all too naturally assume that these must be more or less like solid things capable of traveling from point A to point B through space (or through narrow slits) in the manner of sense-perceptible things.

If the world is by nature an interiorly experienced world (as I have been urging in this chapter), then we betray reality when we talk about non-appearing things as if they were

phenomenal.

16. Figure 24.3 credit: public domain

17. Regarding our attention to a lecture: it is also well known that we tend to mimic the lecturer's physical speech subliminally within our own vocal apparatus. As for copies of thoughts, it is well to realize that conceptual elements are not material structures, and we cannot create multiple copies of them. What would be the "thing" we are copying? If we are paying attention to our own thinking and not hypothesizing theoretical brain states or whatever, we can hardly help realizing that, no matter how many times we return to the same concept, we are not multiplying copies of it, and the same is true when different people take up the same concept. We may accompany a concept with varying mental imagery, but the images are no more the concept than our various pictures of "straight lines" are the concept of a straight line. All instances of the concept, as pure concept, are the *same* instance; they are numerically one, not many. Through our thinking we share, as it were, in "one spirit". It is a useful exercise to think of a pure concept (the straight line will do) while asking yourself, "How might this concept, *as a concept*, not as a mental picture, be multiplied?" It is difficult to imagine even what this might mean — or, at least, it is, so long as one stands within the actual experience of thinking, and not in some materialized image of it.

18. (Humboldt 1963, pp. 2-3). The translation from German is by Norman Skillen: https://journals.ucc.ie/index.php/scenario/article/view/scenario-16-1-10

Speaking of consciousness rather than language, but with a meaning complementary to Humboldt's, William James had this to say:

> The demand for continuity has, over large tracts of science, proved itself to possess true prophetic power. We ought therefore ourselves sincerely try every possible mode of conceiving the dawn of consciousness so that it may *not* appear equivalent to the irruption into the universe of a new nature, non-existent until then (James 1890, p. 148).

Why should we call consciousness and thought "unnatural" as first principles for the understanding of the world? Are they more unnatural than atoms and molecules that suddenly appear from nowhere? Why not begin with consciousness, since in any case we cannot *conceive* of anything that is not an expression of articulate consciousness? Maybe this reflects the nature of reality.

19. The religious scholar, Andrew Welburn has observed that

> thinking does not somehow demonstrate to us the world, independent of our own activity: it expresses rather our ability to grow and to overcome our self-centredness … "The essential aspect of love, the giving of oneself to the world and its phenomena is not seen to have any relevance to knowledge. Nevertheless in real life love is the greatest power of knowledge" (Welburn 2004, pp. 113-14).

The inner quotation is taken from the Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Steiner. There is also this from Steiner (who might be considered the original proponent of the epistemological viewpoint taken up in this chapter — although my own primary source has been Owen Barfield; and Steiner claimed to have derived his viewpoint from Goethe):

> Man's highest activity, his spiritual creativeness, is an organic part of the universal world-process. The world-process should not be considered a complete, enclosed totality without this activity. Man is not a passive onlooker in relation to evolution, merely repeating in mental pictures cosmic events taking place without his participation. He is the active co-creator of the world-process, and cognition is the most perfect link in the organism of the universe (Steiner 1981, pp. 11-12).

20. Figure 24.4 credit: ESA/Webb, NASA & CSA, A. Martel (CC BY 4.0).

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