

01 Introduction: Gaining Insight into the Nature of Reality

In this and following talks I will be exploring how to gain insight into the nature of reality.

Before I delve more deeply into what this might entail, I would like to outline four considerations that effect my approach.

(i)

First consideration: ‘gaining insight into the nature of reality’ involves taking a stance on our relationship to the world and cosmos around us.

One stance is that there is a reality ‘out there’, which exists completely independent of any consciousness of it. This view is called ‘naïve realism’.

An opposing stance is that there is no such thing as reality because it is all made up by our minds, our consciousness. There is nothing really out there. This view is called ‘naïve idealism’.

There is however a middle way of understanding our relationship to the cosmos and the world around us. For me, writer and thinker Iain McGilchrist expresses it well:

“I take it that there is something that is not just the contents of my mind – that, for example, you exist. There is an infinitely vast, complex, multifaceted, whatever-it-is-that-exists-apart-from-ourselves. The only world that any of us can know, then, is what comes into being in the never-ending encounter *between* us and this whatever-it-is. What is more, both parties evolve and are changed through the encounter: it is how we and it become more fully what we are. The process is both reciprocal and creative. Think of it as like a true and close relationship between two conscious beings: neither is of course ‘made up’ by the other, but both are to some extent, perhaps to a great extent, ‘made’ what they are through their relationship”.

My stance then is that we are in an interdependent relationship with the world and the cosmos around us. There is something ‘out there’ but we interact and change that something, just as that something changes us.

(ii)

Now onto the second consideration.

Ed Yong in his book “An Immense World” tells us that every animal, including the human species, exists in its own unique perceptual world ... “a smorgasbord of sights, smells, sounds and textures that it can sense but that other species might not.” These stimuli defined what biologist Jakob von Uexküll, writing in the early twentieth century, called the Umwelt — the unique small slice of reality that an animal can perceive.

Yong writes:

“A tick’s Umwelt is limited to the touch of hair, the odor that emanates from skin and the heat of warm blood. A human’s Umwelt is far wider but doesn’t include the electric fields that sharks and platypuses are privy to, the infrared radiation that rattlesnakes and vampire bats track or the ultraviolet light that most sighted animals can see.”

Yong concludes:

“The Umwelt concept is one of the most profound and beautiful in biology. It tells us that the all-encompassing nature of our subjective experience is an illusion, and that we sense just a small fraction of what there is to sense.”

Donald Hoffman, a cognitive psychologist and professor in the Department of Cognitive Sciences at the University of California, expresses a similar view from the perspective of evolution.

His view develops from what he calls *the evolutionary case against reality*, and it leads to an intriguing hypothesis.

Hoffman’s theory starts with evolution and natural selection.

Strictly speaking, natural selection doesn't build a human body, with its senses and brain, that necessarily sees reality. Natural selection will simply preserve traits that are conducive to the proliferation of genes, to the survival of the species.

And so natural selection will build brains and bodies that have the kinds of perceptions and thoughts that are conducive to the proliferation of genes. And if those perceptions and thoughts are false but still are conducive to the proliferation of genes, then there will be false perceptions.

More fundamentally Hoffman argues our perceptions don't contain the slightest approximation of reality; rather, they evolved to feed us a collective delusion to improve our ability to survive..

Since humans aren't extinct, he argues, we see an approximation of reality that shows us what we need to see in order to survive, not how things really are.

So, we are in an interdependent relationship with the world and the cosmos around us. There is something 'out there' but we interact and change that something, just as that something changes us. But what we can be aware of in that interaction is limited by our senses, by our 'umwelt'. We are aware of just a very small part of that 'something out there.'

(iii)

Third consideration.

There's a big temptation when talking about gaining insight into the nature of reality to get involved in scientific and other speculations about the nature of the universe.

What happened before the big bang birth of the universe?

What will happen to the universe in the future? Will it continue to expand and die a slow, silent death, or is the current expansion to be followed by a contraction, followed by another expansion?

Is this universe alone or are there multiverses?

In the Buddha's time there were equivalent questions and speculations which preoccupied the minds of many spiritual thinkers.

On one famous occasion the Buddha was approached by the wanderer Vacchagotta who asked the Buddha a series of questions.

The exchange goes like this:

Vacchagotta asks: "How is it, Master Gotama (the Buddha), does Master Gotama hold the view: 'The cosmos is eternal: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..." replies the Buddha.

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'The cosmos is not eternal: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'The cosmos is finite: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'The cosmos is infinite: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'The soul & the body are the same: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'The soul is one thing and the body another: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'After death a Tathagata exists: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'After death a Tathagata does not exist: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'After death a Tathagata both exists & does not exist: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

"Then does Master Gotama hold the view: 'After death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist: only this is true, anything otherwise is worthless'?"

"...no..."

Vacchagotta is confused. How can the Buddha answer 'no' to all the questions?

The Buddha replies:

"Vaccha, the position that 'the cosmos is eternal' is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair, & fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to calm, direct knowledge, full Awakening, Unbinding."

(Vacchagotta Sutta Samyutta Nikaya 33)

The Buddha repeats the same for all of the questions. Such questions can give you a headache!

Moreover, and most importantly, speculating about the answer to such questions does not help on the path to awakening.

(However, in the interests of honesty, I have to say that I do find some big questions fascinating, and I would find it hard to ignore them. They are just too absorbing!)

(iv)

The Buddha answers Vacchagotta in this way because he is solely concerned with the human condition and with human experience. This is where our awareness needs to be focused.

In the Attadanda Sutta the Buddha describes how he was initially overcome with fear and dread over the human condition:

“Just see how many people fight!
I’ll tell you about the dreadful fear
that caused me to shake all over:
Seeing creatures flopping around,
Like fish in water too shallow,
So hostile to one another!
—Seeing this, I became afraid.
Seeing people locked in conflict,
I became completely distraught.”

But then the Buddha discovers a thorn lodged deep in the human heart:

“But then I discerned here a thorn
—Hard to see—lodged deep in the heart.
It’s only when pierced by this thorn
That one runs in all directions.
So if that thorn is taken out—
one does not run, and settles down.”

The thorn is craving, or selfish desire.

Translator: Andrew Olendzki

<https://www.buddhistingquiry.org/article/the-thorn-in-your-heart-selections-from-the-attada%E1%B9%87%E1%B8%8Da-sutta/>

In another teaching the Buddha describes this craving or selfish desire as a thirst, 'tanha'. It is at the root of the human condition.

In the Agganna Sutta, the Buddha teaches that as human beings we are born with a craving, with a thirst.

It is as if we are born with a sense of lack, a sense that there is something vital missing in our experience.

We try to fill this sense of lack which sits at the heart of the human condition, with things that cannot give lasting satisfaction. This what the Buddha calls the ignoble search (the anariyapariyesana)

It was when the Buddha realised that seeking satisfaction and fulfilment in things that cannot give lasting satisfaction was bound to fail, that he left home and started out on the "ariyapariyesana" – the "noble" search.

The Buddha channelled his tanha into a desire to find a deeper and lasting source of fulfilment. This was his search for awakening or enlightenment.

The Buddha realised that this something vital missing in our experience cannot be covered up by the usual sources of temporary satisfaction. This prompts the search for a deeper, more lasting, source of satisfaction.

But why do we put all our efforts into seeking satisfaction in ways that are bound to fail? Because we fail to see the ways things are.

We lack yathābhūtañāḍassana, 'knowledge and vision of things as they are'.

We fail to truly see that the things of this world, *as we experience them*, are impermanent, are incapable of giving lasting satisfaction, and are insubstantial or empty of fixed and separate self-nature.

These are the characteristics of conditioned existence or the three lakshanas; impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and insubstantiality.

But if we are able to deeply reflect upon these three characteristics of existence, they can become gateways to awakening, or the three vimoksha mukhas, of the signless, the wishless and emptiness.

To make the transition from the characteristics of conditioned existence to their associated gateways, we need to develop particular qualities of mind in meditation and in everyday life.

To go from impermanence to the signless we need clarity of mind; from unsatisfactoriness to the wishless we need sensitivity of mind; and from insubstantiality to emptiness we need openness of mind.

This is what we will be exploring this autumn; the three characteristics of conditioned existence, their associated gateways to liberation, and the states of mind needed to make the transition from the characteristics of conditioned existence to their associated gateways.

N.B. For those of you interested in exploring Vachagotta's unanswered questions here's a link to talk I gave in 2010 on "Death and the Self, and the Buddha's Unanswered Questions":

<https://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=LOC571>

(No transcript available)