

The World Is Not What We See but the Way We See

From the Evidence of the Senses to the Knowledge of Being

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Your awareness of your own being gives you direct, unmediated knowledge of reality. It is the one experience in which reality is known as it is. When you look outwards, reality appears as ten thousand things. When you rest in the knowledge of your own being, you find one indivisible, infinite being, and the ten thousand things shine with it. Peace and joy are the names given to reality when it is known within yourself; love and beauty are its names when it is known in the world.

The View Through Sense Perception

There are two possible approaches to reality: one, looking outwards, and the other inwards. When we look outwards at reality, we look through sense perception. Our sense perceptions – the faculties of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling – are like five windows through which we look at reality.

When we look at reality through sense perception, it appears to us as a multiplicity of objects, animals and people, a world of ten thousand things, each seeming separate from and other than the mind that perceives it. The name we give to the stuff of which these ten thousand things are made, stuff that seems to lie outside consciousness, is ‘matter’.

If our primary view of reality is based on the evidence of our sense perceptions, we will inevitably believe that matter is the fundamental nature of reality, and that this matter assumes the form of the ten thousand things. This belief informs our interior experience, our thoughts and feelings, and deeper still, our very sense of our self.

We start with the evidence of sense perception, and derive our ideas and beliefs from that evidence. Perception first, ideas second. Our understanding of the nature of reality is derived from our primary experience, sense perception itself. That is one way of looking at reality, the standard way in our era. It has not always been like that, but it is now.

Going Inwards to Being

The second way of looking at reality is to look inwards rather than outwards. Whatever the world essentially is must be real, and whatever we essentially are must be real, so we can go in both directions, outwards or inwards. If we look inwards, we go deeply into our self. First we encounter sensations, feelings, images, thoughts and so on, but if we keep on going, we eventually arrive at being, at aware being.

However far we explore reality through sense perception, even if our telescopes and microscopes become more and more powerful, whatever we find by looking through them is still filtered through the limitations of perception. We do not get unmediated knowledge of reality when we look at it

through sense perception. Our knowledge of reality is always tinted by the limitations of the medium through which we look, not just the medium of telescopes and microscopes, but the very medium of sense perception itself.

However far we go in that direction, the results of our exploration will always be tinted with the limitations of perception. Going in the other direction, we go deeply into our self, and eventually arrive at the experience of being, the awareness of being.

This awareness of our own being is the only experience that is not mediated through sense perception, and therefore not subject to its limitations. It is the only experience in which we know reality directly. This pure awareness of being is not mediated through thinking or perceiving, is not subject to the limitations of the finite mind, and therefore gives us direct, unmediated access to reality.

It is the only experience, the awareness of being, in which reality is known as it essentially is, rather than filtered through thinking or perceiving.

For this reason, a scientist who truly wants to know the nature of reality must sooner or later become a mystic, must sooner or later explore the nature of their own being, for that is the only experience in which they have direct, unmediated access to reality. This exploration of the nature of being could be said to be the ultimate science.

Starting with Being

Instead of exploring reality through our sense perceptions, deriving our thoughts and feelings from the evidence of sense perception, and deriving our sense of our self from our thoughts and feelings, we can start the other way. If we go inwards first, tracing our way back through the layers of thought and feeling, we come to the awareness of simply being.

In its own experience of itself, our being finds no limits. It is unlimited, infinite. The awareness of being is the only accurate experience of reality there is, because any other experience of reality is filtered through, and subject to, the limitations of the mind.

If we explore the reality of our self, sooner or later we come to this unlimited, infinite, aware being. We start there, rather than with the apparent evidence of sense perception, taking our being – unlimited, aware, infinite – as the ground from which we derive our sense of our self.

Our thoughts and feelings then arise on behalf of this knowledge of our self as infinite being, and when we look out at reality through our sense perceptions, we recognise that they confer their own limitations on what they show us, limitations placed upon infinite being itself. Reality appears as ten thousand things when viewed through the medium of sense perception, but underlying that appearance is the one infinite being we have already discovered reality to be within our self.

When we look outwards, we start with sense perception, deriving our thoughts and feelings from it, and our sense of our self from our thoughts and feelings. When we go the other way, we start with being, infinite being, and derive our sense of our self from this. Our thoughts and feelings arise as an expression of this understanding, and when we then look out at the world, our understanding overrides the apparent evidence of sense perception. This is an experiential understanding of the nature of reality, derived from our own interior experience. Reality still appears to us as ten thousand things, but we no longer believe the evidence of that appearance.

We still perceive ten thousand things, or rather the appearance of ten thousand things, but we know,

feel and understand that they are all the appearance of one thing, which is not a thing, and we are that. The reality we discover inside ourself is understood and felt to be the reality of the world.

It is not the appearance of reality that changes as this understanding deepens, but our understanding of it: our attitude towards the world, our feeling for people, animals, objects, nature, the environment. We no longer believe that reality consists of ten thousand things made of dead, inert matter, nor feel ourself to be one of those objects, one amongst many, with all the sorrow and conflict implicit in that view. Instead we feel the nature of reality within our self, this unlimited being which, from its own point of view, is without division or otherness, and is thus experienced as what we call 'love'.

Having discovered within our self the absence of otherness, the absence of division, we discover its inherently loving nature, and this felt understanding is transposed to the world: to people, animals, objects, nature, the environment. We infuse our sense perceptions with the felt understanding that, at the deepest level, love is the nature of reality.

Although appearances stay the same, they are infused with understanding. Reality still appears as ten thousand things. But when that appearance is accompanied by the belief that these things are all made of matter, all separate from one another and from our self, this belief conditions the very way we perceive the world, the very way it appears. Whereas for the one who has discovered the nature of reality as love, this felt understanding confers a kind of radiance on everything we see.

The appearance of ten thousand things, which once seemed to veil its reality, now shines with it. Every object, every person, every animal, every thing, nature, the world, the environment, shines with being, shines with love.

The Vision of the Poets

This is the vision of the world that the poets, artists and writers try to give us. It is the world that Rembrandt, Chardin and Van Gogh, and countless others, painted. It is the world that Wordsworth, Rilke and Mary Oliver, and numerous others, speak of.

Remember William Wordsworth:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,

Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar:

Not in entire forgetfulness,

And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God, who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Shades of the prison-house begin to close

Upon the growing Boy,¹

The evidence of sense perception closes this divine vision, our birthright, that lies all around us in our infancy, and takes over from it as we grow. But even then, something of the nature of reality remains – the ‘light’, as Wordsworth called it:

But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,

He sees it in his joy;²

Even then, the infinite shines through the finite. The evidence of sense perception has not yet fully obscured the reality of the world. But as we get older, the evidence of sense perception grows increasingly persuasive, until this divine vision fades into the light of common day, and becomes our new reality. As Einstein said, ‘Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen.’

The world is not what we see, it is the way we see.

As we sink more and more deeply into this understanding, it shines in us on the inside as peace and joy, and on the outside as the experiences of love and beauty. Peace and joy are the names we give to reality when we experience it inside ourself. Love and beauty are the names we give to reality when we experience it outside ourself.

Do not let your sense perceptions dictate your understanding. Allow your understanding to inform and infuse your sense perceptions.

1

William Wordsworth, ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’ (completed 1804; first published in *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 1807), stanza V.

2

Ibid.

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