

Metaphysics, or The Nature of Reality

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Everything has an inside and an outside	1
All is One.....	4
The One expresses itself in activity and repose	5
The One is infinitely wise	5
It is useful to pay attention to the One.....	6
Reality is good	7
We are all connected	7
Ethical Implications.....	7
References.....	8
Revision History	8

Introduction

This chapter I explain the fundamental nature of all reality, the essential principles of all that exists. This is the domain of Metaphysics, which provides a conceptual framework within which to explain or understand everything.

Everything has an inside and an outside

Known as Process Metaphysics and as Panpsychism, the view I espouse here says that everything has a mental aspect and a physical aspect, a subjective aspect and an objective aspect, and inside and an outside. By “mental,” “subjective” and “inside” I mean that everything has experience, is in some way conscious or aware, and, like all experience, that experience is private.

The difference between what is private and what is public is easily seen or grasped in ordinary human experience. Take a look around you. You see things that others can see, such as tables and chairs, trees, other people, etc. You hear sounds that others can hear, smell odors that others can smell. These are public things. You can describe what you see, hear or smell, and listen to others’ descriptions of what they see, hear or smell, and conclude that you both perceive the same thing. In this sense, much of what you experience is public. However, some of what you experience is private. For instance, think of something – a color or a word or a card, etc. As you think of it, there is no way another person can know what you are thinking of. Your thought is entirely private, subjective. Your thoughts are private, and so are other aspects of your experience, such as your emotions and your physical feelings, the proprioceptive perception of your own body. In addition, the particular appearance of each public

thing, the particular way it is presented to you, is private. We each see a slightly different aspect of every public thing.

In fact, all experience is private. We learn to interpret much of what is contained in our experience as public. But the public world is presented to us in our experience; and only each of us, individually, has direct acquaintance with our experience.

In addition to our private experience, each of us has a public aspect, which is viewable, palpable, audible, etc., by other people and animals and perhaps by plants. In addition to the inside, that to which each of us individually has exclusive direct access, each of us has an outside, which is perceptible by others.

It is easy to understand the idea that everything has an outside. Less obvious is the idea that everything, down to the smallest quark or muon, is in some way aware of its surroundings. This is not so much a claim, as it is unverifiable, as a way of thinking about things (events, actually).

It is unverifiable because there is no way to experience the inside, the subjectivity, of anyone or anything else, so there is no way to know for sure that it exists. Certainly some things exhibit external, public, behaviour that suggests they have an inside. There is a range of such behavior, from purposive, like humans, to inert, like a rock. Animals and plants are in between. We infer that other people have intentions, desires, aversions and feelings as we do because we observe them acting in ways similar to the way we act, and we know how it feels to be us. So we conclude that others feel in ways similar to the ways we feel, even though we cannot directly experience their feeling. We extend this inference to animals. Dogs and cats appear to have desires and aversions; they respond to verbal communication from humans (cats less so than dogs, but we interpret that behaviour as being aloof rather than as exhibiting less consciousness); they seem to be happy at times, bored or unhappy at others, and so forth. Some people extend the inference to plants. My wife, a gardener, says plants are happy when they get watered.

Most people in advanced civilizations conclude that non-living things, which exhibit no external sign of having any subjectivity, in fact have none. But there is no way to know that for sure. It's just a convenient way conceptually to divide up the world, into living and nonliving things. People commonly assume that nonliving things have no awareness of their surroundings, but one can imagine that they do. We cannot directly experience the internality of their world, as we cannot directly experience the internality of any entity's world but our own, so it might be true that even a rock has some experience of the world. Try imagining being a rock. Your world would be very, very slow, but you can imagine feelings of pressure, of heat and cold, of heaviness.

Even a glass table top has interiority, although probably without enough cognition to distinguish itself from anything else. Its feelings are not of anything else (it lacks the interpretation, Ofness). It is very simple, not a self. It lacks the coherency of pattern – of sensation, perception, emotional feelings, thoughts, physical feelings, etc. – that

make a self. So there is no self to perceive anything else.¹ There is only feeling. One can imagine the feelings. Fundamentally there would be a sense of attraction downward. Physicists call this gravity. Sufis call it *Ishq*, love. Also feelings of heat and cold, perhaps pressure from above. A kind of orderliness in the glass. From the outside we know that glass is a frozen liquid, so the interiority might have a feeling of very slow movement. It would not have a sense of being lined up like a crystal.

That gravity is love is described well by Daniel Dennett, although he scoffs at the idea:

Imagine that we visited another planet and found that the scientists there had a rather charming theory: Every physical thing has a soul inside it, and every soul loves every other soul. This being so, things tend to move toward each other, impelled by the love of their internal souls for each other. We can suppose, moreover that these scientists had worked out quite accurate systems of soul-placement, so that, having determined the precise location in physical space of an item's soul, they could answer questions about its stability ("It will fall over because its soul is so high"), about vibration ("If you put a counterbalancing object on the side of the drive wheel, with a rather large soul, it will smooth out the wobble"), and about many much more technical topics.

What we could tell them, of course, is that they have hit upon the concept of a center of gravity [and] ... all they have to give up is a bit of unnecessary metaphysical baggage. (Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 367)

Dennett thinks it has no value to say that things are attracted by love, that it is an unnecessary hypothesis. But I say that the theory that things are attracted by love does have value. If you live as if it is true, if you live as if everything has an inside, you'll be happier and function better than if you live as if some things don't.

If everything has an inside as well as an outside, then everything has will, the drive to actualize intention. The fundamental drive in everything, every occasion or event – every actual occasion, to use Whitehead's terminology – is to actualize intentions. One imagines and desires, however dimly, some state of affairs, and one does something to bring about that state of affairs. Plants, for instance, turn toward the sun. They are aware of the current state of affairs, that sunlight is coming from a certain direction to which their leaves are not optimally oriented, and they imagine and desire that their leaves be oriented better, so they act on that desire and turn their leaves. That humans and animals act on intentions is obvious. Even inanimate matter, on this view, actualizes intention, the intention to cohere and persist.

The drive to actualize intention is will and passion. Will can exist without much passion, for instance when one is just gritting through an unpleasant situation because one has to for some reason or one needs to do one's duty. Passion can exist without much will. In that case what one has is unfocused energy and desire, and nothing gets done. Just as every mental event has both a cognitive and an affective aspect, every

¹ I am not referring here to the Transcendental Self, observing and acting on what is presented in experience. That is not there either, but only because phenomenologically, the Transcendental Self is always absent.

intention has both an imagination of a state of affairs, and a desire that that state of affairs come about. (Desire, I am suggesting, is a form of emotion.)

As physical things combine into more organized wholes, their interiority combines as well into more coherency and richness. A plant has more organization than a rock, and its interiority is richer. Animals are more complex and humans more complex yet, viewed from the outside in their physicality. Their experience is more coherent; each has more memory, more ability to anticipate the future and more conceptual understanding than the next order down (humans as compared to animals, animals as compared to plants, plants as compared to non-living things). Each has more self-consciousness as well, in the sense of having an idea of oneself as separate from other things or beings and, through the lens of that idea, paying attention to one's internal states as well as one's knowledge of how one acts and appears to others.

If we assume that everything has an inside and an outside, then what appears to be dead is just living at a very slow pace. A dead animal's interiority has decomposed into its constituent elements, the interiority of the elements; only the larger coherent interiority of the whole organism is gone.

This view, incidentally, solves the mind-body problem. The mind-body problem is the question of how the mind, immaterial and without physical extension, can have any influence on the body or on physical reality generally. The usual answers are to say that reality is fundamentally physical and the mind is an epiphenomenon of the body or that reality is fundamentally mental, or ideal, and the physical is in some way an outgrowth or extension or construct of the mental. A more balanced approach is to say that the mental is an emergent property of the physical, that mentality arises when physical reality reaches a certain complexity.

The mind-body problem is only a problem, however, if we assume that the mind is distinct and separate from the body, that mental events are in some fundamental way different from physical events. If we assume that everything is both mental and physical, that everything has an inside and an outside, then the problem disappears. Of course the mental can influence the physical, because it is the same as the physical viewed from a different vantage point. From the outside, everything is physical. From the inside, each of us is clearly mental as well. If we assume that everything has an inside, then from the inside of each thing, or each event, reality is mental as well as physical.

All is One

As one looks around the world it is apparent that the world is composed of many things. The Chinese refer to this aspect of reality poetically as the "ten thousand things." The mystics, however, tell us that reality is actually one and that the ten thousand things are, depending the variety of mysticism, illusory or an aspect of the One. How can this be?

The unity of all that exists can be understood from the inside. The One – the God, al-Lah – is that which is conscious and active in everything, in every event. What appears to be many from the outside is in fact the manifestation of one underlying reality. Al-

Lah is the inside of everything. This insight is expressed in the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 13, verses 1 and 2, in which Krishna, the God, speaks to Arjuna, a human:

1 - This body, Arjuna, is called the field. He who knows this is called the knower of the field.

2 - Know that I am the knower in all the fields of my creation

The God looks out through our eyes, hears through our ears, feels through our fingers and skin, smells through our nose and tastes through our tongue. (By "our" I mean each of us, individually.) The God thinks through our mind, feels through our emotions, and actualizes intentions through our will.

The One expresses itself in activity and repose

*The ten thousand things are born of being.
Being is born of not being.
(Tao Te Ching, tr. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, #40)*

Inherent in nature are two contrasting principles, activity and stasis. Pattern is the key to understanding both.

The two poles of existence are difference and sameness. They both come out of the Nameless. You can't have one without the other.

Sheer difference would be completely chaotic and random, no pattern at all. Sheer sameness would be dead. In each case there would be no pattern.

Sheer difference and sheer sameness thus would be identical, i.e. completely without pattern. They would both be the same. This implies that sameness is fundamental. Difference comes from breaking up sameness into chunks. Eve came out of Adam's rib. Ultimately the question is meaningless, however, as we never experience pure difference or pure sameness.

The fundamental thing that makes reality is pulsation. Sameness gets broken up. Then pulses happen in variations of rhythm, more and more elaborate. The fundamental thing is pattern. Pattern is made up of sameness and difference. Difference keeps adding new variations to the pattern. Metaphorically, each time it gets a groove going, it adds something else.

The One is infinitely wise

The whole, of which each of us is a part, is infinitely wise; it's not just a collection of stuff. The God, being the inside of everything, sees all and knows all. The God perceives the outside of each thing and event through the experience of every other thing and event. The mentality of such a huge interior inspires awe.

There are different metaphors for God. One is that God is at a distance, that God sees all from afar. This is a notion of God as one object among many, although in some way a much greater object than any of the others, being their creator. Another metaphor is that God is very close to us, so close as to be our friend and our lover and beloved. Another metaphor is that God is so close to us as to be identical with us, that God is our very self.

None of these metaphors are incorrect. They are ways that limited beings such as ourselves can think of and understand the totality, which is too grand for us to fully comprehend. The metaphor of God as our very self is, I believe, more useful than the metaphor of God as being at a distance. For instance, the notion of God as separate from God's creation leads to the notion that God can do miracles that violate the laws of physics. This notion pits religious believers against the findings of modern science, which has no place for miracles. But if we understand God as that which is conscious of everything from the inside, we understand that God does not have to intervene from the outside. Does God intervene in the world? Of course, all the time. But from the inside of all the pieces that are interacting, not from the outside. The God can put attention on places of interest and act through the various pieces of reality that are there.

It is useful to pay attention to the One

By our prayers and our practices, we attract benevolent interest. By tuning into the One, we (each one of us) get guidance, we feel part of something larger, we become the beneficiary of the divine benevolence and in certain states we feel quite blissful.

When we pay attention to the divine, we pay attention to people's humanity and their connection with the divine, and we overlook the differences between our self and the others. This promotes peace and harmony, to the benefit of all concerned.

Think of each lifetime as a pulse. Imagine a sheet of water pulsing up and down, not necessarily in waves, but in discrete pulses like the surge of water back up after something drops in, such as a raindrop or a pebble. If each lifetime is a pulse, some are higher than others. The higher ones can see out farther, see more of the pattern. The highest ones can see the broadest pattern. The higher the pulse, the more conscious it is. Paying attention to the God is a way of being more conscious, that is, of being able to pay attention to more of reality.

Those of us who are conscious in this way are like the responsible adults of the universe. It is up to us to see that things go well. We are leaders in Re-evaluation Counseling terms, bodhisattvas in Buddhist terms.

"Responsible" in this case means "able to respond," to respond with understanding and compassion.

Responsibility does not mean duty, nor compulsion. We are not obliged to see that things go well and we are not punished by anyone if we don't. (By "see that things go well" I mean to create a harmonious pattern.) If we don't see that things go well, we suffer the consequences. It's like being punished for not doing our duty, except nobody

is doing the punishing. Duty is somebody telling you what to do. What I am talking about is just paying attention to consequences and choosing the consequences you want. The higher the pulse, the more consciousness there is – i.e., the broader the range of things we are conscious of – and the more effective we are at choosing harmonious and interesting patterns.

Reality is good

There is no absolute good. Goodness is always in relation to something else. To be good is to be good for something or good at something. Reality is good for giving us something to push against. By this I mean that reality gives one some stability, some predictability, in one's experience. Reality provides a good framework within which to act. Reality helps one learn how to actualize intentions.

We are all connected

From the mystical point of view, we are all connected in that we are all manifestations of the One. One need not assume that metaphysical premise, however, to recognize that we are connected. Consider: we all breathe the same air, drink the same water and get our nutrients from and recycle our wastes into the same environment. Thus, all of us – humans, animals, plants and minerals – on the planet earth are connected. We are connected to the rest of universe as well in that we are subject to the gravitational attraction of the planets and can see the light of distant stars.

Certainly we humans are all connected to other humans; if we were not, we would not be able to survive. As babies we are born helpless except for our powers – and very strong powers they are – to influence other humans, powers such as our ability to cry to summon aid and to smile and respond with love and cuteness to the attention of others. The few stories we have of humans raised by animals rather than other humans reveal beings that are more animal-like than human, without language or the ability to relate in a sociable and mutually respectful way to other humans. We learn to express ourselves in language, and there is no such thing as a private language; language is essentially communal. We have the capability or capacity to imagine another's point of view, to experience things as they do, and it is fulfilling to do so. If we were not connected we would not have this capability.

Ethical Implications

If we assume that all these things are true – that everything has an inside as well as an outside, that all is one, that reality is good and that we are all connected – then there are implications for how to live one's life. The main one is this: we should work for the good in all things.

The goal of life is to survive and thrive, and to do so you need to act for the benefit of both yourself and your environment. (By "you" I mean everyone, each of us individually; and by "environment" I mean everything that surrounds us: people, animals, plants, non-living things, the earth, the atmosphere, the water, etc. Everything.)

To benefit oneself at the expense of others or to the detriment of one's environment is self-defeating. If you act selfishly in the usual sense of that term, for your own good alone as if you were separate from your environment, you will not thrive as much as if you worked for the larger good. On another hand, if you act altruistically, in the sense of working for others' benefit or the benefit of your environment without regard to your own benefit, you might burn out and be unable to contribute. Instead act so as to flourish mutually with your environment. If you do good for what is around you, it will nourish you.

The methodology is simple:

1. Observe and pay attention.
2. Act with a benevolent intent.
3. Be smart about it.

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Revision History

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