

POSTSCRIPT #2

Do We Live in a Mindless World?

Implicit Dualism and the Recovery of Nature's Interior

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This is one of a group of planned “postscripts” to a book entitled, “Organisms and Their Evolution — Agency and Meaning in the Drama of Life”, freely available at <https://bwo.life/bk/>. Currently available postscripts are listed at that link — at the end of the table of contents. Their aim is to pick up certain ideas from the book and try to carry them further than the book itself allowed. This material is part of the Biology Worthy of Life project of The Nature Institute. Copyright 2024 by Stephen L. Talbott. All rights reserved. You may freely download this article for noncommercial, personal use, including classroom use.

Virtually all scientists today reject “Cartesian dualism” — the improbable fracture of reality into dualistically paired incommensurables: matter and mind.¹ This is all to the good. And yet one might wonder whether it is quite so easy to escape the specter of Descartes, which now confronts us in the powerful form of an almost universally accepted *implicit dualism* that may be even more distorting than the original doctrine.

As implicit dualists, we do not look back to the time before Descartes and then seek a different way forward — a way to avoid the “Cartesian dichotomy”. Instead we passively accept the fateful Cartesian split as an accomplished fact. And then, if we are materialists like most scientists, we plant our flag upon the ground of just one of the sundered portions of reality Descartes left to us, while discarding the other. So now, instead of having a strangely dichotomized reality, we have one half of a strangely dichotomized reality, which we happily substitute for the original, undivided world of our actual experience.

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, in short, the idea that the vocabulary of the mental and the physical, of material and immaterial, of mind and body, is perfectly adequate as it stands”. One ironic result is that anyone who takes consciousness seriously is likely to be accused (by the implicit dualist) of the sin of dualism.

That is, the implicit dualist charges us with dualism if we refuse to discard half of what was once (before Descartes) experienced as a unified whole — and continues to complain even if our aim is to restore the world's unity in our understanding by refusing the Cartesian dichotomy.

This *implicit dualism*, Searle claimed (without using that term), is “the source of our deepest philosophical difficulties. “As long as we use words like ‘materialism’, we are almost invariably forced” to deny “the existence of (subjective, internal, intrinsic, often conscious) mental phenomena”. Searle

went so far as to suggest that the deepest motivation for materialism “is simply a terror of consciousness” (Searle 1992, pp. 54-55).

As it happens, Searle himself, one of those standing at the summit of the American philosophical landscape, strives to be a thorough-going materialist. But it is not my intent here to criticize his particular version of materialism. We live at a time when there are (and will be in the future) many attempts to reconcile materialism with the growing recognition that problems of consciousness, purposiveness, and mentality can no longer be wished away. Whether this recognition and the consequent defenses of materialism involve appeals to some vague and woolly notion of “emergence” or to the vacuous clarity of cybernetics and computation does not really interest me. There is, I believe, only one escape from the dilemmas Descartes bequeathed to us, and I don’t see that any of the attempts to “mend” materialism carry us much closer to that escape.

I am convinced that the only real solution to materialism is to abandon it altogether. This will require abandoning the implicit dualism that enables it. It is this solution I would like to articulate as best I can here.

So ... I would first of all ask: might we rise above the confusions of dualism by embracing the founding principles of science? I mean a science rooted in careful *observations* and clear *thinking* — a science informing us about a reality transcending the individual’s subjectivity.

There is an alternative to implicit dualism

Most scientists, having committed themselves to living with a fragmentary, materialistic, Cartesian take on things, had no choice but to lean away from the interior dimensions of the world. The reality of the most immediate and incontestable aspects of human experience — mind, consciousness, will, qualities, subjectivity — came under continual question, despite their being prerequisite to all scientific

observation. And because everything scientists knew about the world was in one way or another “contaminated” by these interior aspects, many came to believe that objective reality must somehow lie beyond the familiar world we have taken more or less at face value for millennia.

Our position, as a consequence, has become rather conflicted: everything we can observe — everything we can experience — is unacceptably infected by the all too obviously immaterial and thoughtful character of our interiority. In short, the familiar world seems too “subjective”. And therefore our confidence in reality has had to be forcibly shifted, against all reason and natural instinct, away from the sensible and therefore observable world toward a second world of which we can have no direct experience.

We have two main options for this second world. It can, in the first place, be a world of sub-microscopic, nineteenth-century particles, imagined as building blocks of the macroscopic world we actually experience.

Another option for a second world is available mainly to philosophers. It’s an inaccessible world of “things-in-themselves”. Of this world — so the idea goes — we “know” only one thing, and so we go on to say, in a supreme act of self-contradiction, “We know it is unknowable”.

But there is a third option. We don't *have* to be twisted in knots by our acceptance of the bisected world corpse resulting from the Cartesian confusion. There is another way to go. We can, as a modest beginning, realize that we humans, with all our interior capacities, are perfectly natural and notably full expressions of the world that has given rise to us. We were born from this world and belong to it intimately. Part of this intimacy has to do with the fact that, if we are expressions of the world, then the world must be compatible with everything that works in us, including our sense organs and thinking.

We can, in other words, refuse the de-naturalization of the human being, the idea that we with our interiors somehow reside here as aliens. We can also refuse the gratuitous Cartesian notion that our "mind stuff" is incommensurate with the "world stuff" of our bodies and the surrounding environment. This incommensurability certainly does not describe our own experience — for example, our experience as willful and purposive movers of our own bodies. So what are we talking about when we speak dichotomously of mind and matter?

Our abandonment of implicit dualism requires only a simple pivot in our thinking. Instead of beginning with a stubborn and insupportable metaphysical prejudice about a non-experienced realm of particulate "building blocks" or an unknown realm of things-in-themselves, we can begin with what we all believe in practice throughout the routine of our lives. We all show ourselves convinced, whatever our intellectual commitments, that we have straightforward and unproblematic dealings with the real world. In this actual life context, the question becomes, not the impossibly paradoxical "How can we know the unknowable?" but rather the eminently approachable "How do we in fact come to our confident knowledge and understanding of the world around us?"

It might be that an exploration of this latter question will bring so much clarity, and resolve so many previous imponderables, that the truth of the matter will become obvious beyond dispute and our starting assumptions will be validated. Or not. Shouldn't we at least put it to the test?

Let's give it a try.

The role of our senses.

One thing we immediately notice when we do put our confident knowledge of the world to the test is that our sensing and thinking play very different but deeply compatible roles in helping us form our picture of the world. What comes to us through our senses is what we experience as *out there*, as if independent of our cognizing selves. This is especially true of our vision, all the more when vision and touch coincide. We open our eyes, and a touchable world is just there, without our being conscious of any responsibility for its existence. Our relative passivity in the working of our senses contributes to the conviction that what we sense is *out there*, separate from our selves.

Before we lean too heavily on the phrase "separate from our selves", however, we might want to call to mind the fact that whatever presents itself to our senses comes to manifestation only *in here*, on the stage of consciousness. This includes *felt solidity* as much as it does *visible color*. We know everything sensible only insofar as it has an interior character — only, in fact, insofar as we find it a content of our own interiors. We might also want to notice that our senses deliver a thoroughly *qualitative* world to us.

And if there is a reason why scientists have tried to ignore qualities, it is precisely because qualities are thought to be irreducibly subjective — products of our psychic interiors. This effort to purify science of qualities is rather odd, given both that we with our qualitative interiors are natural offspring of the world, and given that scientists have no material world to talk about except by reference to its qualities.

Try to remove all qualities from your sensible experience of the world and you will find that, if you were to succeed, you would have no world left. The effort to abandon qualities is an effort to make the only world we can experience disappear. This is where the “terror of consciousness” that Searle referred to appears to lead us. It is at the same time a terror of the sensible world as actually *experienced*.

Even our mathematical formulae are abstractions from the qualities of sense experience. And the formulae have legitimate meaning only as applied to the sense experience from which they have been abstracted. If they are to contribute to science, they need to be *about* something, and the only material things available for them to be about are qualitative things. Numbers alone, in perfect detachment from our qualitative experience, could never give us an understanding of the material world in which we live.

The role of thinking.

But we can also say: nothing is *there* at all — nothing is cognized to which we could give a name, nothing coherently *means* any real thing — until our thinking is mingled with whatever meets us qualitatively through our senses. This must be *present thinking* in the case of new experiences, or must have occurred in the past if the things we are dealing with have become familiar and routine. Quickly enough our senses become “educated” by our thinking, so that our recognition of many things is automatic. But, through after-the-fact reflection upon our experience, we do not find it hard to identify the distinct role of thinking in giving our perceived world whatever content it has.

Try, in your imagination (as we did with qualities), to subtract all thinking, all conceptualization, from your world picture. To the degree you can succeed in this, you will find that there is no picture left. Or try to assemble any sort of picture from scratch, a picture consisting solely of things for which you not only have no word, but not even a concept — not even the most general concept such as “object”, “thing”, “process”, or “substance”. What this exercise tells us is that we have no world image except with a contribution from thinking.

One of these contributions is the judgment, *out there*, as applied to perceived contents. This judgment emerges from our own (conscious or unconscious) activity of thought, and is not an immediately given metaphysical fact of the world such as “things exist out there in a mind-independent realm”. As with any judgment of thought, this one can be mistaken, is correctable, and needs to be understood in its proper context. The *out there* we are talking about properly means “collectively experienced and independent of my individual subjectivity”, but does not mean “independent of consciousness or interiority in general”, if only because we could *know* nothing of that sort without being *conscious* of it.

Any understanding implies mental apprehension and therefore already rebuts the claim of “mind-independence” for whatever is understood. It is strange, this insistence by contemporary students of

perception that the contents of perception must ultimately refer to a mind-independent reality — strange because it amounts to a wholly superfluous and inherently unsupportable metaphysical presupposition. An impressive amount of philosophical cleverness has been aimed at getting around the problem. It would be far better to opt for a readily available view in which there is no such problem to get around.

We have seen that our senses alone, uninformed by thinking, are not adequate to the full reality of the world. By themselves our senses (which never really operate in isolation from thought) could give us only an unformed, inchoate, not yet meaningful, still content-free access to the world's presence. It is through *thinking* brought to bear upon our senses that the world comes to its meaningful form.

Moreover, it is impossible to cleanly separate the thinking in ourselves from a thinking that is also in the world. Thinking, by nature, can address only what is thoughtful. How we might apprehend anything lacking a thoughtful aspect is a puzzle worth contemplating.

There's another way to approach the matter. Resorting to an older vocabulary, we can say that the world consists of both form and substance. Or, better: formed substance. Try to think of substance without form of any sort. You will find it impossible. Form, organization, lawfulness, coherence — these *thoughtful* aspects of any conceivable world material were strange things for materialists to lose proper sight of.

Are the laws (ideas) of physics in our minds, or in the world? The debate never seems to end — because mind and world are not two altogether different “places”. We know the world by uniting ourselves with it in thought. The idea of the law we know *in here* is one and the same with the idea of the law we recognize *out there*. By what criterion can we distinguish the two, *as ideas*?

Not dualism, but a marriage.

All this is to say that, when we turn to the actual process of cognition while taking our interior activity seriously, we find ourselves facing, not some sort of terror, and not a problematic dualism, but instead a peacable *marriage of sense and thought*. We can detect no paradox of incommensurability in this marriage; the unity of thought and sense, form and substance, idea and being, as distinguishable yet inseparable sides of reality is something we can become aware of as soon as we pay attention to our own cognitional activity.

One conclusion of everything I have been saying is that that we humans, interior and exterior, are far more natural than many observers have been willing to grant. And this truth has as its flip side the fact that the world from which we arose must have been able to express, and therefore must be fully compatible with, everything in our nature.

So we seem led to the perfectly natural conclusion that the cognizable world just *is* the world in its full and true being. We live, in other words, in a world that is *in its own nature* a realm of appearances — presentations to consciousness that are always a marriage of sense and thought. We might also say: presentations *of* consciousness, since it is very hard to imagine presentations *to* consciousness that do not originate *from* consciousness. In any case, if the world is not by nature a world of objective and real appearances to consciousness, it is not clear how we have any material reality we can talk

about.

The sum of the matter, in British philologist Owen Barfield's words, is that "reality, although it is indeed real, is also appearance; and that appearance, although it is indeed appearance is also reality" (Barfield 1971, p. 66).

So the basic idea of this proposal is to discard the dualism of mind and matter — a dualism rooted in the undemonstrable conviction of the mindlessness of nature, with which human interiority then needs somehow to be reconciled — and replace it with the readily demonstrable character of our human knowing of the world, rooted in the very sense organs and thinking functions that this world has given us.

But it's not so easy, after all

I introduced the preceding discussion by referring to a "simple" pivot in our thinking. But while the pivot may indeed be simple in some conceptual sense, as a practical matter we might also say: it is impossible. That's because in our day — in a way directly opposed to earlier (pre-Cartesian) eras — the experience of a world not only "out there", but also radically disconnected from our thinking and other interior capacities, has become, for us, *common sense*. This common sense may be the most serious barrier to critical thinking we ever come up against.

We often find ourselves aghast — or else we may laugh — at the common sense of previous eras. For example, there was the long-running practice of "trial by ordeal", whereby (in one variant) a party accused of a crime was subjected to injurious or fatal conditions, and was judged guilty of the crime if he was not saved from injury by a divine miracle. Or, still today, there is the belief among millions of Christians — a belief they find natural and indisputable — that a kind, just, and loving God created a substantial portion of humankind with the express purpose of subjecting them to everlasting torment in hell — or at least knowing that this would be their destiny.

You might think that this kind of thing would have alerted us to regard critically the power of error to infect our deepest convictions. But such critical regard is not so easy. Our common sense regarding our relation to the material world is, in the first place, built into our immediate experience as inheritors of the Cartesian sword thrust. The world just *is*, we seem to confirm with every perception, "out there", independent of our own interiors. And objects just *are* things in no way bound up with subjects — this in contrast to an older human experience wherein an object became an object only by virtue of some form of attention, or some activity, of a subject.

In general, our common sense is built into the words available to us for describing our relation to, and distinction from, the world — words such as *objective*, *subjective*, *reality*, *force*, *cause*, and *matter*. It's also built into our educational system, religious beliefs, and the entire cultural basis of our lives.

However, none of this means that a little straightforward reflection cannot highlight some of the confusions underlying our experience of a supposedly mind-independent world. The problem lies, not in our inability to identify these confusions, but rather in the fact that our common sense leads us to ignore them. Here, for example, are a few things we *could* choose not to ignore:

◆ There is, first of all, the contradiction between (1) the latter-day conviction, strongly associated with science, that the qualitative aspects of the world's appearances have an irreducible interior ("subjective") aspect and therefore do not belong to reality; and (2) the fact that, as mentioned above, we have no world at all without qualities, and, in a thousand details of our everyday life we give evidence of a certain deep-rooted confidence that the qualitative world as we actually have it is the real world in its true and meaningful terms — this despite our ready intellectual assent to (1).

◆ We routinely switch between two incompatible viewpoints. One gives us the observable world of our immediate, qualitative experience. The other gives us an intellectual conviction that the non-appearing microworld of atoms contains the building blocks, or "real, material stuff", constituting this world of our experience. And yet, we know that this latter conviction is false. By virtually all accounts, physical experiments over the course of the past century and more have destroyed all possibility of taking the microworld as a basis for old-style, particulate, materialist belief. We no longer have any excuse (if we ever did) for imagining a collection of invisible but substantial "building blocks" adding up to, or somehow explaining in an adequate manner, the qualitatively appearing (sense-perceptible) world.²

And so, when we put on our workaday hats, we comfortably situate ourselves in the world of appearances without questioning or doubting those appearances. But when a theoretical or explanatory mood strikes us, we put on our scientific hats, and then we can't help believing that the *real* world is the microworld of "building blocks". And the only way we can do this is by projecting onto these particles the qualities of the actually experienced world — the very qualities that we were trying to explain away by appealing to the microworld. We imagine the particles to be little bits of appearing stuff even though they are not appearances.

One thing we can say is that the relationship between the familiar world and the microworld is asymmetrical. We can reach the microworld — we have in fact reached it — by starting with the familiar world of qualities and then abstracting completely away from those qualities. We end up with highly mathematized constructs reflecting, for example, the structured pattern of forces "read off" by an atomic force microscope.³ But, once having carried out the abstraction, we unsurprisingly find no obvious way to perform a reverse translation from the qualitatively denuded microworld back to the familiar, enfolded world.

◆ Whenever we do try to talk about the non-appearing microworld, we (and, it seems, nearly all physicists as well) form images by drawing upon the qualities of our sensible experience. How else could we have anything material to talk about? At worst, then, particles become solid, hard bits of infinitesimal (invisible) but still spatially localized, material stuff, pictured as bouncing off each other like billiard balls. Apparently the substantive and picturable qualities of things, which are considered merely subjective and unreal *here* in the sense-perceptible world where we can observe them, are thought to be real enough *there*, in the sub-microscopic world where we cannot observe them.

To illustrate: according to a 1985 PBS television special written by science journalist, Timothy Ferris (who was echoing frequently repeated comments by scientists and educators):

The baseball and the bat are mostly empty space. Their solidity is an illusion created by the electromagnetic force field that binds their atoms together ... We credit the home run to the batter, but the fundamental force responsible is electromagnetism (Ferris 1985).

The idea of empty space here gains its meaning only by contrast with the (relatively tiny) amount of

space thought to be occupied by the “solid” particles. So the quality of solidity that is said to be illusory in the familiar but is apparently not illusory when it comes to the unfamiliar and imperceptible (non-appearing) particles.

Given the fact that, without qualities, we have nothing material to talk about, our pathological insistence upon clothing the microworld in qualities is exactly what we should expect. It is too bad that, in this case, the illusory clothing badly misleads us in our attempts to understand that realm. Whatever we may say about measured forces and energies, the physicists’ particles are not *appearing things* — not little chunks of sense-perceptible matter — and pretending that they are distracts us from all sound knowledge we possess about the world of lawful physical appearances.

◆ A common strategy for dismissing the world’s appearances as illusory is to cite the mediating role of our sense organs, nerves, and brain in producing the appearances. But this strategy is almost nothing but a compilation of prior assumptions about the illusory character of the appearances. It is assumed, above all else, that the real world is completely independent of our perceptual organs, which therefore can play only an interfering role. And the strange thing about the entire line of argument is that it freely invokes our sense organs, nerves, and brain just as they are given in perception — all in order to deny that this perception can be taken at face value.⁴

If we want to deal more responsibly with the suggestion that the meaningful appearances just *are* the world’s reality, we would have to consider that we humans are gestated and nurtured *from* a world of meaning *for* a world of meaning, and therefore the same can be said of our sense organs and nerves. In order to think consistently from this starting point, we should view sense organs and nerves as themselves meaningful expressions of the world — expressions whose entire function is to be transparent to the larger world of meaning from which they themselves arose. This would be our natural conclusion once we have recognized that meaning constitutes the native “substance” of the world (Talbot 2024d).

The approach to human cognition I have been presenting will be dismissed by many as idealism and subjectivism, or in any case a rejection of realism. Already a couple of centuries ago Samuel Taylor Coleridge responded to this criticism. Addressing the dualistic, appearance-versus-reality framework of his day (which was much the same as in our day), he wondered how it could be called “realistic”. Is it realism, he asked, when people are told that “there exists a something without them, what, or how, or where they know not, which occasions the objects of their perception?” Not at all, he answers. It is “the table itself” that the true realist believes himself to see, “not the phantom of a table, from which he may argumentatively deduce the reality of a table, which he does not see”:

If to destroy the reality of all, that we actually behold, be idealism, what can be more egregiously so, than the system of modern metaphysics, which banishes us to a land of shadows, surrounds us with apparitions, and distinguishes truth from illusion only by the majority of those who dream the same dream. “I asserted that the world was mad”, exclaimed poor Lee,⁵ “and the world said, that I was mad, and confound them, they outvoted me” (Coleridge 1962, vol. 1, pp. 178-79).

The question, I suppose, is how much incoherence we can live with in order to sustain our faith in an isolated, Cartesian half-fragment of the world.⁶

Beyond implicit dualism

Let's recap the ground we've covered so far:

◆ The world we perceive is qualitative. Without qualities we have no knowledge of an observable, material world. But, oddly enough, qualities are dismissed as “subjective” by hard science. In addition to being a refusal of the only world

available to our understanding, this reflects a rather unnatural conviction that the human subject is not part of nature.

◆ We also have no world without the thinking that permeates all things and tells us what these things are or mean in their own, observable terms. Without thinking nothing coherent enough to be nameable would be *there* for us.

◆ So the world actually available to us for scientific purposes becomes manifest through a marriage of sense and thought, both of which are functions of consciousness. We can say: the only world we know or could possibly know is a manifestation within consciousness, and therefore shares in the character of consciousness.

◆ That last statement runs up against what seems an indubitable conviction underlying our present experience. It's a conviction that places the world “out there”, independent of our interior activity. This conclusion, however, like all attempts at understanding in our day, is necessarily informed by our thinking, and therefore needs to be subjected to clear-headed judgment. The rather obvious and crippling contradictions we have been willing to endure (see preceding section) suggest how difficult it can be for us today to form such a judgment.

The foregoing treatment of our relation as knowers to the known world leaves us with many questions. It is important to address a few of them here, which I will attempt in the space remaining. I will deal first with the relation between our interiors and the world “out there”. Then there is the question how we are to think of consciousness outside our own interiors — consciousness in other organisms and in the material world generally. And, finally, if material reality is at least in part a manifestation of thinking, whose thinking are we talking about? I will conclude with a brief note about the “problem” of subjectivity.

Two principles

Once we have realized that the world we experience, understand, and successfully navigate daily is a marriage of sense and thought — of qualitative sense perception and informing idea — we arrive at two apparently conflicting yet seemingly inescapable realizations. Each of us can say:

(Principle #1:) I apprehend the world as an expression of my own consciousness.

(Principle #2:) This world that presences itself within my consciousness is not *merely* my private, subjective possession, however much I may add subjective color to it. Rather, it gives every evidence

of being the real,⁷ material world we all find ourselves challenged to navigate and understand together — a goal of understanding toward which we can always make further progress without any fixed limit.

For all their inescapability, we nevertheless find these two principles almost impossible to hold together. How do we reconcile what we usually think of as the subjectivity of consciousness with what we usually think of as the mind-independent objectivity of the real world? It hardly becomes easier for us when we recognize that, taken together, the two principles suggest that the world has the nature of a content of consciousness, by which I mean: its presence as a content of consciousness is its reality, or principle of being.

If, however, we find it in ourselves to take this seriously, we may glimpse the possibility of an unfamiliar approach to the problems surrounding our knowledge of the world. We no longer face the seemingly insoluble puzzle philosophers and scientists have wrestled with for the past few centuries. The question ceases to be “How do we know a world that has no connection with our knowing interiors, a world upon which we, as conscious beings, are thought to be unnatural excrescences?” Instead, we begin to suspect that all our knowledge of the world is at the same time a knowledge of ourselves. Or, as Coleridge phrased it:

The spirit in all the objects which it views, views only itself ⁸ (Coleridge 1962, chapter XII, thesis VII).

This statement, of course, mystifies modern sensibilities. It may strike the reader as radical subjectivism or even solipsism. But maybe that judgment merely reflects the dual presupposition of the mindlessness of the world’s solidity and the disconnected subjectivity of the individual. Maybe Coleridge was not so much “subjectivizing” and weakening all the objects of human experience as he was enlarging our understanding of the human spirit. In any case, I will not attempt anything like a full and rigorous justification of his remark. Perhaps it will be enough to approach it gently along whatever paths we find reasonably accessible.

To begin with, let’s remind ourselves of our desire (if indeed it is our desire) to abandon implicit dualism. Presumably, this means we want to avoid anything very like a strict dichotomy between (in Coleridge’s language) the spirit, on one hand, and the objects it beholds on the other — or between the interior self and the world “out there”.

And then we might reflect on the long-running efforts to solve the “problem of explaining consciousness”. The supposed problem here has been, during the past several decades and more, the focus of entire libraries of contentious literature. Yet there has been no hint of a consensus understanding even among those committed to a materialistic point of view. As philosopher Jerry Fodor (himself a materialist), concluded after many years devoted to cognitive science, “Nobody has the slightest idea how anything material could be conscious. Nobody even knows what it would be like to have the slightest idea about how anything material could be conscious” (Fodor 1992). If anything, this remains even more true today than when Fodor wrote it over thirty years ago.

I’m not sure there has ever been a long-running philosophic puzzle rooted in a more obvious source of difficulty. Could we ever have hoped to succeed in the quixotic effort to explain consciousness in terms of a material reality assumed to be absolutely other than consciousness? At the very least we can say: the entire business of knowing the world will certainly begin to look very different once we have gotten rid of the implicit dualism that underlies the problem. And it is hard to see how we might accomplish this without recognizing some sort of commonality between the self

(Coleridge's "spirit") and that which it beholds.

Yes, the "outness" of things is real

To say that the world appears to us as a marriage of sense and thought, and that this appearance is the actual being or reality of the world, is not to deny the "outness" of physical things. It is only to recognize that the judgment,

This rock or tree or stream or moon is *out there*

is a judgment of thought that each of us makes *within* experience. We are recognizing that the objects we collectively experience within a shared world are not your or my private possession. This does not imply the dualist judgment that says: the world is mind-independent. For it might very well be (which it is the whole point of this paper to argue) that the interiority characteristic of mind and consciousness is a feature of the world as well as of our own lives. (For essential clarification of this point, see the discussion under "The trouble with pan-psychism" immediately below.)

The two interiorities — of the world and of ourselves — are not separate and distinct interiorities. When we know something, even if it is "out there", we find ourselves at one with it. As Owen Barfield summarizes:

In the *act* of thinking, or knowing ... we are not conscious of ourselves thinking about something, but simply of something ... Consequently, in thinking about thinking, if we are determined to make no assumptions at the outset, we dare not start with the distinction of self and not-self, for that distinction disappears every time we think (Barfield 1973, p. 208).

Nothing about the world's objectivity counts against the conclusion that this world is, by nature, a presentation within experience. We can, of course (as implicit dualists), simply *assume* that the objective world is quite other than our qualitative and interior experience. But this is the assumption I have been questioning throughout the foregoing.

The trouble with panpsychism

We have, of late, seen a resurgence of an older philosophical view referred to as "panpsychism". Put most broadly, it involves a belief that the material world along with all its contents, including every rock, cloud, and grain of sand, possesses a mind-like or conscious aspect, however primitive. I cannot claim any great familiarity with the various versions of panpsychism, but I can easily imagine ways in which something like panpsychism might contain elements of truth. Everything depends on what is meant by "mind-like aspect". And I do worry a great deal about the apparent absence of a crucial distinction.

It may help to begin with our own experience as "minded" beings in communication with each other. When you speak, I and others may truly gain access to your interior life through your words. We can truly enter into conversation with your mind through the mediation of speech. It is evident, then, that there is some sense in which your speech exhibits mind-like aspects.

But would we want to say of that speech that it is itself conscious or like a mind? We might ask the same question of the patterns of ink on the page of a book. The point of the question is to suggest a distinction that seems essential to any panpsychist view. I mean, in the first place, the distinction between act and product — between the human interior as a power of activity, and the products of that activity, whether material or immaterial. The primary contrast I have in mind here is the immaterial one — between, for example, cognitive acts of thinking or imagination, on one hand, and already achieved thoughts, memories, mental images, and all other cognitive contents of our minds, such as hypotheses and theories, on the other hand.⁹

But we can also think of act and product in terms of the spirit that expresses and the unformed meaning-potential (material or otherwise) that receives — is formed and breathed through by — the expressing. So we have the expressor and the expressed, the producing and the already produced. This is the basis for the distinction I made above between a person speaking and the speech she produces.

Or think of the cells in our bodies: they are clearly engaged in well-directed, meaningful activity, but we would not want to say that the individual cell “has purposes of its own” in anything like the sense that you and I do. In ways we do not understand, our cells *participate* in — are breathed through or possessed by — *our* purposes.

Or, again, we can hardly believe that the monarch butterfly in the upper midwest of the United States reasons within itself: “Well, it’s getting cooler. It’s probably about time to pack up and head to Mexico”. When the butterfly (or salmon or arctic tern) sets out on its migratory path, is it not responding to a greater speech, *voiced through* the larger world or environment — the sun, the stars, the air and water, the magnetic fields, or whatever?

So, then, it seems we must distinguish between an organism *possessing* intelligence (capable of its own *acts* of intelligence) and an organism *being possessed* by it (in the sense of being a work or expression of intelligence). Except that we cannot view an organism, however simple, as an artifact like the ones we humans create by working on them non-organically and from without. The intelligence of an earthworm works from within and belongs to it, without being possessed by the worm as its own act in the sense that we humans, for example, make thinking our own act. We must not picture organisms as puppets or robots, but rather as beings deeply possessed by, while giving organic expression to, the speaking manifested in them. And they gain the potential for an ever more active participation in this speaking as evolution reaches toward the fully human.

The idea of being possessed by, as opposed to possessing, the intelligence or thinking manifest in one’s life could use a good deal of working out in terms of the lives of distinct organisms. Here is where we will presumably want to elaborate the idea of the unconscious, which we might think of paradoxically as “consciousness that is not yet conscious” — consciousness of which the organism is not yet aware in the sense of possessing it as its own act. “Instinct” and “drive” might be brought into the picture also.

But we will want always to be on the watch for reading our human experience into other organisms. For example, some of our own unconscious content was necessarily once fully conscious, as when we learn the skill of riding a bike. But subsequently we no longer pay attention to the skill, and it “drops” into the unconscious. We could not gain the unconsciously operating skill without first having consciously attended to it. By contrast, we have no reason to think of a fly’s skills, however

“miraculous” they may seem, in this same way. We can hardly think that they were ever consciously attended to.

Many of our less-than-fully-conscious human capacities — those we have never had to learn — have been called “superconscious” rather than “subconscious” or “unconscious”. (Kühlewind 1988). This seems appropriate in the case of our willing as well as our thinking — the latter in the sense that, while we must consciously direct our thinking, and we feel ourselves participating in the act, we cannot actually say much about how our thoughts are produced or where they come from. Neither can we say how we move an arm, beyond the intention to do it. It does seem that such capacities derive from a higher, more capable form of consciousness than we are yet able to make our own. Might *all* the insect’s intelligent capacities be better conceived as superconscious rather than as subconscious? And so, too, the intelligence of our own cells?

We should keep in mind such distinctions also when we are tempted to project our adult consciousness upon the young child, or our “logomorphic” thinking upon ancient cultures — let alone upon chimpanzees, crows, or amoebas, or upon plants as some biologists are starting to do today. No theory of panpsychism can stand unless it is founded solidly upon a recognition of the distinction between thinking as our own act and thinking as that which works upon and through us (from “above”?).

Who speaks in world and organism?

If neither a pupating insect nor a migrating salmon possesses the thoughtful wisdom so evidently at work in it, then who *is* doing the thinking we can so readily watch in an unfolding organic phenomenon? And if the world itself is a marriage of sense and thought, then we come up against a similar question in all physical phenomena. How do we account for the thinking that belongs to the warp and woof of the familiar world?

There is nothing illegitimate about such questions. They seem to be forced upon us. And nothing tells us that our lack of immediate answers signals something “wrong” with our inquiry. In fact, if we don’t find yet-unanswered questions pressing against us from all sides, we can be quite sure that our quest for truth is shallow or that we are engaged in a project of self-deception.

In any case, here is where we might want to recall how our distant ancestors experienced a world of beings rather than things. Meadow and woods, river and sea, mountain and sky — these were all alive with spirit and invisible beings. It happens that we have contrived a method of science from which any such beings — and, indeed, our human interiors — are by definition excluded. But what, then, were the ancients — for example, those who lived during the primary age of myth — actually experiencing?

If we properly consider the fact that they were not yet the kind of individuated selves who could stand apart from nature and then elaborate theories about causes, we will find reason to conclude that their myths must, in a manner suited to their own consciousness, have been a way of summarizing their actual experience. Understanding that experience from our present vantage point is not something we are particularly good at. But the fact that our ancestors felt themselves living in a world that was itself a grand, living interior akin to their own interiors is perhaps something we could find suggestive today, after a few centuries dismissing such an experience by the power of

presupposition rather than evidence.

Here, I suppose, is where the question of a divine Creator-God is supposed to be raised. If I do not raise it, the reason is not that I consider it foolish, but only that I know of no way to speak knowledgeably and in a scientific manner on such a topic. But certainly the fact that we do have reason to speak about a world humming with the high tension of creative thinking says nothing against the idea of a world of beings rather than things, or against the idea of a Creator-God.

My own powers of understanding, such as they may be, remain in the presence of much that is not yet known. And the unknown is too precious to relinquish prematurely. But we can know this: our own interiors encounter in nature something like ourselves. Surely the first thing is to face this Other respectfully, and be open to receive and learn.

A concluding note about subjectivity

There is something that doesn't feel right in just about all framings of the question, "How can we know the world?". The starting point seems to be "we've got a problem here", and the problem is that we are always coming up against something we have a hard time accepting — ourselves, and particularly ourselves as subjects partly responsible for the coming into being (the appearance) of objects. But the problem vanishes as soon as we reckon properly with the

fact of our subjectivity.

A key symptom of our self-doubt is our felt need for some sort of *provable* certainty in our quest for knowledge. We fail to realize that, in our effort to make an insight provable — to make everything into an indisputable yes-or-no question — we reduce the insight toward meaninglessness. That is, we try to eliminate all the terms of our insight that involve a depth of meaning, until there is no longer a demand on us for wisdom or interpretive subtlety of any sort. The ultimate examples of strict yes-or-no understanding are found in the demonstrably valid, computer-provable statements of pure mathematics or logic.¹⁰

But we don't *need* the kind of provable certainty we crave. We perfect our knowledge of the world in the only worthwhile way — by perfecting ourselves. That this is the standard cannot seem odd once we remind ourselves (as we have done above) that we, too, belong to the world and are instruments of truth within the world, which is only possible because of our natural intimacy with the truth at its very source.

All this seems perfectly natural if in fact we live, not in a world of mind-independent objects, but rather in our native element — if we find our own cognitive activity to be deeply embedded in the world we want to know. In this light, the "problem" of subjectivity begins to look very different. The problem is in reality our hope. It is always possible to develop ourselves further as instruments of truth. The philosopher, Ronald Brady, observed how

the scientific observer in the laboratory must have the skills to make observations that only long practice can tutor. It would seem that the more carefully we try to "see" the world, the greater the perceptual skill and understanding required to perform the seeing. The usual presumption that the contribution of the observer to observation must be minimized to maximize accuracy to the "thing-in-

itself” is apparently reversed here. Yet the notion that there are perceptual skills requiring long years of effort to perfect, such as the immediate recognition of species in the field or the detection of animal signs in the wild, is found in all cultures (Maier, Brady and Edelglass 2006, Chapter 1, “Direct Experience”).

And this reminds me of Barfield’s response to the common boast about the scientist’s objectivity. It is true, he says, “that science does demand objectivity first and foremost, and that the good ones among them endeavor to eliminate all personal bias from their judgments of fact”:

But I sometimes wonder: Is there any need to make quite such a song and dance about it? After all, it is not so very difficult to eliminate all personal considerations, all subconscious bias, when the matter or process you are investigating is, by definition, one in which you could not possibly have a direct personal concern; when from the beginning to end it is assumed to be absolutely other than yourself. To put it rudely, any reasonably honest fool can be objective about objects. It must be a different matter altogether, should we be called on to attend, not alone to matter, but to spirit; when a man would have to practice distinguishing what *in* himself comes solely from his private personality — memories, for instance, and all the horseplay, of the Freudian subconscious — from what comes from elsewhere. Then indeed objectivity is not something that was handed us on a plate once and for all by Descartes, but something that would really have to be *achieved*, and which must require for its achievement, not only exceptional mental concentration but other efforts and qualities, including moral ones, as well (Barfield 1977, p. 139).

There is no cause for despair here. The liberating truth is that *a mind-dependent world is also a mind-accessible world*. In such a world we no longer find ourselves wrestling with the false problem of mind grasping what has nothing to do with mind, or thinking about a world that has nothing to do with our thinking. Rather, we can turn to the actual processes of cognition in practice. Here we may notice first of all a potential for understanding that is already given with our existence — a potential that can scarcely be questioned, since the questioning already presupposes it. A very young child, uninstructed in epistemology, quite naturally takes remarkable steps in understanding.

We have every reason to think that the light of the world — its inner coherence and meaning — is one with the light of our understanding.

I suggested near the beginning of our inquiry that it might be worth jettisoning the “problem” of knowing a mind-independent world and proceeding on the basis of the assumption we all make during the course of our lives — the assumption that we do indeed know the world. Then we can ask how this knowing is achieved. It’s a matter of looking at the actual processes of cognition in which we place our confidence. And we can hope that the investigation will contribute real substance to our confidence.

I would like to think that the experiment has proven justified.

It is certainly true that we each see things (such as that tree over there) from our own angle. But this does not prevent our recognizing the tree as part of a world happily and objectively shared with others. So, too, we learn the discipline of recognizing and correcting our mistakes of understanding in the interest of objective truth. Above all, we cannot doubt that *we always have a path toward seeing ever more clearly and ever more fully*. This is not the result of our absencing our subjective selves from the cognitive project. Rather, the seeing more clearly happens precisely *because* we can make a

rigorous discipline of an interior, cognizing activity that stands in an intimate relation to the interior of the world we want to understand — a world we can recognize as a marriage of sense and thought.

There is no place in this picture for a dualism that alienates our interior activity from the world “out there”.

Notes

1. Descartes spoke of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, or “extended stuff” and “thinking stuff”, as the terms are often translated.
2. During the twentieth century, “particles” dissolved into statistical constructs; every effort to conceive them as minuscule bits of the thing-like familiar world resulted only in huge trouble for physicists — so much so that it became rather disreputable to suggest that the constructs of particle physics could be given any substantive or material interpretation. (This isn’t to deny that many physicists have continued speaking at times, and contradictorily, as if they really were dealing with discrete, locally situated *particles*).
3. We may even “materialize” these forces by translating them falsely into thing-like pictures. But the pictures — for example, showing contoured surfaces said to be images of atoms — are in fact merely graphs of the forces read off by the atomic force microscope.
4. Rudolf Steiner presses this objection in Chapter 4 (“The World As Percept”) of his epistemological treatise, now translated under the title, *Intuitive Thinking As a Spiritual Path* (Steiner 1995).
5. Nathaniel Lee, seventeenth-century English dramatist, who was said to have replied thus when asked why he was incarcerated in a madhouse for five years.
6. The philosopher and student of religion, David Bentley Hart, characterized our faith in a realm of unknowable, mind-independent things-in-themselves this way: “the intelligible is a veil drawn before the abyss of the unintelligible, and the unintelligible is [thought to be] more real than the intelligible”:

Knowledge, then, consists of no more than a kind of cognitive allegory *of* and logical deduction *about* Being, because Being in itself possesses an occult adversity or resistance to being known. All that we experience in experiencing the world, then, is an obscure, logically inexplicable, but unremitting correspondence between mind and world, one whose ontological basis is not a presumed primordial identity between them, but rather something like a pre-established harmony or purely fortuitous synchrony — or inexplicably coherent illusion. The more rational assumption, however, is that so implausible a liaison between absolutely incommensurable spheres of reality is impossible, and that in fact mind and world must belong to one another from the first ... (Hart 2022, pp. 100-1).
7. As for the difference between the real and unreal, I am not trying to be terribly subtle: we would not hold a novelist to account in a court of law if, in her novel, she burned down a public forest. It would be quite otherwise if you or I burned down the public forest we apprehend in our perceptual consciousness.
8. Compare this from Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling:

Nature should be visible mind [Geist], mind invisible nature.

(This is often translated as “Nature is visible mind and mind invisible nature”.) Schelling goes on to mention, as a problem to be addressed, “the absolute identity of mind in us and nature outside of us” (quoted in Richards 2002, p. 137).
9. On this distinction, see Chapter 1, “Thoughts and Thinking” in (Barfield 1971).
10. The relation between provability and the loss of meaning is beautifully treated in Barfield’s essay,

“The Nature of Meaning” ([Barfield \(1981\)](#)).

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