

Chapter Thirteen, Transcendental Idealism. Of the Book, God is No-thing. The Apophatic Assertion. Copyright Rodger Ricketts Psy.D.,2020. All rights reserved. Protected by international copyright conventions. No part of this chapter may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever, or stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, without express permission of the Author-publisher, except in case of brief quotations with due acknowledgement. Published through CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

## **Transcendental Idealism**

In transcendental idealism, that which we call the ‘external’ world – the world we inhabit – is only a representation or interpretation we create with our cognitive apparatus, not the actual reality itself. Just as, in a similar way, a creative artist creates an art form, we create a picture or representation of Reality which in no way resembles it in its actuality.

We can never truly know or sense Reality because we are not only limited by and cannot go beyond the input of our sense perceptions, but our cognitive apparatus has evolved to only accommodate and service that input egocentrically. Our entire linguistic framework of conceptual categories is a set of representations or pictures of reality, and the input through our sense organs is only possible because of an integral relationship between aspects of ‘Reality’ and our sense organs. A simple illustration of this is figure 1

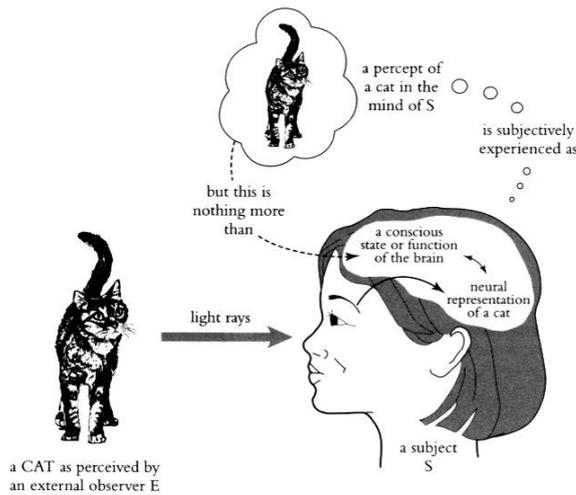


Figure 1 Simplified view of cat representation in mind

In other words, in Buddhist scholar Susan Hamilton's words, "[...] *the reality of experience is experiential. And the reality of Reality is unknowable in (normal) experiential terms. The aim for the Buddhist is to understand the nature and limits of experience by means of understanding the nature and extent of one's subjective cognitive apparatus. In Buddhist terms, this subjectively and objectively correlated insight is knowing and seeing how things really are.*"<sup>5</sup>

However, given our pre-enlightened way of how we see things, we assume and believe that the world is as real as we cognitively construct it. We also think of the 'self' – the abstracted experiencer of experience – as an individual, independent, and continuing being in a world of other such discrete entities. However, as the mystics and cognitive science contend, Reality is not ultimately conceptually graspable or verbally articulable. As Albert Einstein wrote, "*Behind anything that can be experienced there is something that the mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection.*"

When the experiencer finally sees through the illusion of the projected dualisms and understands the non-substantiality of her cognitive world, she experiences Awakening and Emptiness– bliss,

serenity, non-duality, and liberation.

Bhikkhu K. Nānananda gives this analysis: *‘Worldlings have a tendency to tenaciously grasp the concepts in worldly usage, to cling to them dogmatically and lean on them. They believe that the words they use have a reality of their own, that they are categorically true in their own right. Their attitude towards concepts is tinged by craving, conceit and views.’*<sup>3</sup>

A well-known parable of individual truths is found in the story ‘Congenitally Blind.’ The Buddha used the tale of the blind men and the elephant to illustrate the relativity of points of view as well as their root in dogmatism. To summarize the parable: A king assembled a crowd of congenitally blind men and, having made them touch various limbs of an elephant, asked them what an elephant looks like. Those who had touched the elephant’s head compared the elephant to a pot, those who had touched its ears compared it to a winnowing basket, those who had touched its tusks compared it to a plough share, and so forth.

Depending on the sense-contact, on which they based their perceptions, they evolved dogmatic theories. The dogmatic views in the world follow the same trend revealed by the assertion ‘This alone is true; all else is false.’ According to one’s level of perception, one forms a notion of reality. The dogmatists in the world are severely entrenched in their own points of view. The point is to not be fooled by our own cognitive illusions and narcissism.

In other words, R. G. H. Siu wrote that (unenlightened) humans deceive themselves because of their unique capacity:

*...Human beings are destined, as humans, to live in a world of make-believe, peopled with virtual presences of each other and all things existing and not existing. Neither the observer nor*

*the observed can remain human entirely on truth and reality.  
Fable is the fare of the human.*<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, understanding that virtual presences are not only a propensity but a pre-condition; to be insightful and awake, we see beyond the cognitively created virtual reality of dualism and are very mindful when making determinations and judgments about others, ourselves and our 'world'. Also, Terrence William Deacon<sup>1</sup> wrote, "*We live our lives in this shared virtual world [...] The doorway into this virtual world was opened to us alone by the evolution of language.*" Enlightened cognition is without attachment to what has passed or is present; it is free of expectation of what might arrive. Instead, it implies an equanimous attitude towards dogmatic views and view-holders. Such an attitude avoids categorical affirmation or negation regarding the question of truth and falsehood. It grants a relative perspective to all viewpoints.

The Buddha understood that words and concepts are not absolute; rather, they are constantly in flux and dependently originated. Even though language does not represent reality, the way we incorrectly use it, we do not recognize that. Easily self becomes the Self and the anthropomorphism of all existence comes to include a soul and God.

## **Support of Modern Science**

Modern science supports the mystical understandings about our obscure relationship with 'Reality'. In his studies aiming to define and explain the nature of a living system, the biologist H.R. Maturana comes to a conclusion similar to the Buddha's regarding the limits of our understanding of the nature of experience: "*The observer as an observer necessarily always remains in a descriptive domain, that is, in a relative cognitive domain. No description of an absolute reality is possible. Such a description would require an interaction with the absolute to be described, but the representation which would arise*

*from such an interaction would necessarily be determined by the autopoietic (the natural process which includes the potential for transformation, the creation of novelty, from within the organization itself) organization of the observer, not by the deforming agent; hence, the cognitive reality that it would generate would unavoidably be relative to the knower.”<sup>6</sup>*

Some consider these paradigms, including the Buddha's, to represent a form of Solipsism; the whole of reality and the external world and other people are merely representations of the individual self, having no independent existence of their own. But this is clearly not conclusion or teaching offered by the Buddha, other apophatic mystics nor the modern authors cited here. Instead, in all their writings these thinkers speak of an existing separate world; they clearly recognize that other humans, creatures and living things exist in our environment and that it is possible to empathize and interact with them.

What all these thinkers are claiming, and I think rightly so, is that the outer environment is only partially accessible through the specialized doors of our sense organs, and then, specifically modeled by our cognitive apparatus. Since the rest of 'Reality' is beyond the abilities of our input sense mechanisms to interact with; all this leaves us with a very limited cognitive understanding and appreciation of Reality. Walter Hess<sup>3</sup> similarly wrote, *“Much exists and evolves in this world, which is not accessible to our comprehension, since our cerebral organization is primarily devised so that it secures survival of the individual in natural surroundings. Over and above this, modest silence is the appropriate attitude.”*

In fact, scientific evidence has easily established the limitedness of the human body in its ability to sense the larger environment. For example, the vibration frequencies to which the human ear is

sensitive are in the range of approximately 20 to 20,000 Hz (hertz, or cycles per second), and this band is just a narrow manifestation in the total spectrum of sound and vibration. Also, there are many types of active environmental forces (like radio waves, magnetic fields, inert gases, sub-atomic particles, etc.) that our bodies cannot detect at all. Hence, there are significant limitations to our senses, resulting in an incredible number of energies we can neither perceive nor even detect.

The theoretical physicist Wolfram Schommers also confirms that only some information of the possible external reality actually enters into the body of the observer through his/her sense organs which the brain then 'forms' a picture of that reality. Schommers writes: *"Events occurring in the cosmos are presented inside a biological system only as symbols in a picture. The picture (mental manifestations) in the mind contains aspects of reality only in symbolic form, i.e. the elements in reality are not identical with the pertinent elements in the picture. ... Rather, it is observable or describable by means of pictures on different levels, i.e., levels of reality."*<sup>8</sup>

This process is a transformation of representation of the objects in the outside world.

On one hand, there is the 'Reality'; on the other hand, we create a picture of that reality, and the structures in the pictures are different from the external Reality they are created to represent. This, of course, is clear when regarding the Divine or All. Echoing the Buddha's resistance to search for and answer metaphysical questions, Schommers writes: *"Furthermore, we can say quite generally that there is no picture-independent point of view conceivable, i.e. there is no external point of view which would enable a direct observation of basic reality. Thus, questions like 'How is basic reality built up and what kind of processes take place in it?' makes no sense."*<sup>7</sup>

The vast difference between the outside environment and the internal creation of usable and comprehensible cognitive models is not disputed by most neurologists. Schommers argues, from a modern physicist's perspective, for a viewpoint that is very similar to Transcendental Idealism.<sup>9</sup>