

Swami Omkarananda

The Universe and the Dimensions of Knowledge



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Human Knowledge and Self-Knowledge

All activities can, ultimately, be reduced to a kind of knowledge. It is some sort of knowledge that fulfils itself through external action. Knowledge determines the texture of action, the course of action and even the nature of the end aimed at by action. Knowledge, here, becomes a stimulus to action, a means to the achievement of a goal beyond, and so, something not valuable in itself, but valuable in relation to some other thing which it subserves. Such is the character of human knowledge.

Even in human knowledge, there are degrees. Some possess more knowledge, and some less. By knowledge, we evidently mean here knowledge of something other than knowledge itself. When we have more knowledge of the nature of a thing, we have also more control over it; our activity in the form of the effort of conquering it is less encumbered, and so less difficult. Our relation to that thing is more intimate, that is, the psychic distance between us and the thing becomes less; and we enjoy it more fully and really. We possess the thing securely, to some extent, and are free from all anxiety about the thing, when the thing is nearest to us, - not merely physically, but psychically. And this latter aspect is more important than the former - perhaps it is the only important factor - and it is here that our knowledge of the thing is widest and deepest.

Logically, we should have the greatest knowledge or power over a thing when it is non-distinguished from our existence, and we enjoy it the best when we become it. The thing may be any particular entity one thing, two things, a thousand things, or even the whole universe itself. Thingness is only a synecdochical expression for the whole of objective existence. Here, knowledge of the thing is really not of it, but is the knowledge of our widened and expanded Self. Our knowledge and our existence are here one. Hence, the highest knowledge of anything consists in Self-knowledge, in knowledge of the Self which is higher than the natural and narrow individual self. Here, knowledge is not a means to some other end, but is the end itself. Knowing is being.

If the highest power and happiness lie in the highest knowledge, and the highest knowledge is of one's own highest Self, it means that, through the different degrees of knowledge which appear to serve some other remote end - i.e. the not-Self, - we really seem to be moving towards the state where knowledge transcends all degrees and includes all ends in its own infinite being of Selfhood. This movement towards the highest Self which is another name for the highest Knowledge, may be conscious or unconscious, but it is there; and it is the only meaning of the life of all beings in the universe.

This also proves that knowledge is within, power is within, happiness is within; it is not in any not-Self, in anything external which, to the blinded eyes, appears to be an end commanding the services of the inner knowledge or consciousness. In trying to acquire things, we are really trying to acquire our higher Self. In attempting to enjoy things, we are really attempting to rest in our absolutely independent, infinite Self. The absence of the knowledge of this great secret, this underlying metaphysical and spiritual truth, surrenders one to an irrational attachment to perishing and passing things which, while seeming to be pleasant on the surface, are in themselves the sources of deception, weakness, unhappiness, and nerve-breaking restlessness. The presence of this knowledge liberates one from the limited, and therefore much troubled, individual existence, and installs one in the Absolute. Without

this knowledge, bondage cannot be broken. As long as objects are used as means to the satisfaction of the individual self, the process of finite existence conditioned to stresses and strains cannot cease. Only when the whole universe is identified with the absolute Self, can knowledge become an end in itself, duality be abolished, and absolute freedom be realised.



The Awakening of Knowledge

If all knowledge is within, how is it to be made manifest? Knowledge, as it has been shown, is not really acquired from without, but manifested from within. This manifestation of knowledge, however, follows certain principles, certain laws or methods, and it does not manifest itself in all persons in the same way and in the same degree.

In this world it is seen that certain external agencies become the immediate forms of the cause of the rise of knowledge. Though no one thing can be called the cause of any event in the universe, and infinite elements from all parts of the universe interact in making manifest any single event in it, yet, as these infinite elements are invisible to the naked eye, only the one element among these which is visible and which seems to precede immediately a particular event is called the cause of this event. So, in this sense, we say that the manifestation of knowledge has a cause, though, strictly speaking, nothing can be called a cause or an effect in a universe of mutual interactions among its constituent parts. Though the rise of knowledge in man is caused not by any individual entities, and can be explained only by the universe taken as a whole, the one that is the visible immediate cause is some event within, which takes place under certain conditions, and in a particular environment.

Under certain specific conditions, a person comes in contact with something in the external world which reminds him of the possibilities of the knowledge and wisdom within him, and in this case, this something is the cause of his knowledge. The best agency which can evoke the highest potentiality of knowledge within, is a person who has direct realisation of the Infinite.



The Spiritual Teacher

This person is the spiritual preceptor. He becomes an instrument drawing out the knowledge of the disciple from within, by appeal to suitable methods. And even the nature of this act of drawing out knowledge is dependent on the ripeness or maturity of the mind of the disciple and the ability of the preceptor.

The maturity and the receptivity of the mind of the disciple, and the

knowledge and capacity of the spiritual Guide with whom the disciple has come in contact, are both in the same degree of reality. A higher disciple obtains a higher Teacher, and a lower one a lower, though it is quite obvious that the knowledge of the spiritual Teacher is always more than that of the disciple. As interaction generally takes place between forces of equal intensity and frequency, a higher Teacher has either to come down to the level of the mind of the disciple, if he is to cause conscious change in the mind of the disciple, or raise the mind of the disciple to his own state - though this rule is not without exceptions in certain cases. Changes within the mind of the disciple, of which he is really unconscious, may be caused by a Teacher even when he is in a higher plane than the one in which the disciple is. The Teacher may, in special cases, cause even conscious changes in the mind of the disciple, whatever may be the difference between the states of their minds. Ultimately, the nature of events in the spiritual realm is very mysterious, and transcends human comprehension, and one cannot say anything about how they happen, and what they mean or imply, unless one has risen to the lofty spiritual heights, and grasped the truths directly in one's own consciousness.

Sri Guru Purnima is the special full-moon day dedicated to the adoration of the spiritual teacher. On this day, Sri Vyasa Maharishi, the Teacher of all Teachers, is worshipped. It is also the occasion when each one worships his own spiritual Teacher, by identifying him with God.

As it has been noticed, it is, ultimately, the universal Being that appears as spiritual Teacher. This is the rationale of worship of the spiritual Teacher, and of the identification of the Teacher with God. The Teacher is the channel through which flows the Grace of God. God becomes visible, and works tangibly, in the Teacher. The surrender of the disciple to the Teacher is really the attempt of the individual soul to gain ingress into the universal Self. This surrender is accomplished in the act of total resignation of the self to the care of the Teacher. The disciple's duty is, therefore, to fully abide by the instructions of the Teacher, and not vitiate this sacred relation between him and the Teacher by the exercise of his untrained and inexperienced intellect. The word of the Teacher is the law of God in relation to the disciple, and the possibility and the quickness of the action of the Grace of the Teacher on the disciple, is proportional to the extent to which the disciple has surrendered his personal self to him. Though God is everywhere, His presence cannot be felt by him who has not been endowed with the required strength with which alone one can have the divine Experience. To fully benefit by the Grace of the Teacher, one needs an emptied heart, cleared of all the cravings.



The Self: Personality and Individuality

Varying are the notions of "personality". Few seem to understand and emphasize the subtle distinction that exists between the terms personality and individuality. More often than not, these two terms are confused even by eminent thinkers. Personality is not the representative of the individual

in man; it is more a mask of the individual than the individual. Personality is formed of the outward mental, moral, and material expressions of the individual, and individuality is the state of being an individual.

The totality of mental traits and the moral, artistic or physical characteristics masking the individual, make up personality. It refers to the conduct, character, or appearance of some person. Personality may be dual or double; individuality is always single, an individual is one who subsists as one indivisible entity. Personality may be split up, not individuality. In the statement, "You, John, you are not the man you were!" the term "you" refers to the individual that is the ever-the-same principle in man, and "being what one was not" refers to personality. And in the sentence, "Fred, you have become Thomas", the term "you" refers to the never-changing individual, and becoming something else or being at the same time two persons, indicates personality.

In all men there is a double element: one is the inward and spiritual entity, called the individual, and the other an outward changing phenomenon, called personality. Personality is a formation on individuality; it is a surface building on the individual. When we say that the other one is a personality, and this one no personality, we do not mean that this one is non-existent. This one is as much alive as the other individual, but this one has no personality about him. A wealthy man is a personality, a professor is a personality, an actress is a personality, the president of a state is a personality; but a beggar is no personality, even though he is an individual.

Some people think that personality is individuality, and individuality is personality. That which distinguishes a person from a thing, or one person from another, is personality. Personality, in common parlance, refers to the body. When a man is tall, has good complexion and beautiful features, when his face has a fine cut, we say that Mr. so and so has a charming personality. When one is able to influence others, people say that such and such a man has a strong personality. When one is timid, shy, we say that such and such a man has a weak personality, and also add that he must develop his personality. Individuality is not a thing for development; it is the fact of existence. Personality counts much in society, for success in life. In all fields of human relations, personality is of great importance.

The term personality comes from the Latin persona, the mask, that which an individual puts on. Personality is that particular consciousness which concerns the physical body or mental make-up. Mr. or Mrs. or Miss so and so, is a personality. Physical beauty, height, stature, all refer to the personality. This one is a business magnate, that one is a writer, here is an athlete, he is a doctor - all these concern the personality.

Death destroys the personality, but it cannot annihilate the individuality. Individuality is separate and distinct existence. It is something beyond our physical self, beyond our intellectual self. It has no relation to one's personality. The ,I" in a person is the individual; and his or her "me" is the personality. Individuality is the sense of ,I". It is a continuous current. It is the continuity of the one thought, the thought of ,I". All other thoughts are centred round this ,I". I was a boy. I am a man. I was a doctor. I ate, I drank. I spoke. I talked. I went to America. I bathed in the river. I saw the picture. -The same ,I" has gone through all these experiences. ,I" is the

dweller in this body. It is the same in childhood, youth and old age.

Personality changes, but individuality, the sense of ,I", can never change; because the sense of ,I" always continues to exist with one, under whatever masks one may be wearing. Even in dreams one never loses hold of one"s sense of ,I". Unless we have this sense of ,I" in deep-sleep, we would not be able to recollect that we slept soundly.

When the human mind is enlightened through protracted spiritual discipline, the individuality merges in universality, and one realizes the real nature of one"s inner divine being, the infinite Self.



The Universe: Various Theories Concerning its Origin

Mathematical physics and astrophysics have been steadily increasing the width of our knowledge concerning the nature of the physical universe.

Various are the theories concerning the origin and the nature of the universe. During the ancient times, temporalism advanced the theory that time is the cause of the universe. Naturalism maintained that nature is the cause of the universe. While fatalism proclaimed that Fate is the cause of the universe, the Chance theory asserted that the world has proceeded from a chance or a blind caprice. Materialism asserted that the world has come from a fortuitous combination of material elements. The syncretic theory held that the origin of the world is due to the combination of all, or some, of the causes mentioned by the various cosmogonic theories.

Concerning the nature of the content of all phenomenal things, different philosophical thinkers held different views. While one thinker held that the earth was the substratum of things, the others individually maintained that it was the heaven, water, space, air, respectively, that was so. One of the philosophers said that the sun, or the celestial fire, was the substratum of all things.



The Universe as an Organic Whole

In our attempt to know Truth, we cannot start with any fixed point in the universe, for every point, when carefully analysed, is found to refer to something beyond itself, until it carries the seeker-consciousness to the Absolute. Every so-called fixed entity in the universe is really a mirror in which the entire universe is reflected. To know any point in the universe perfectly, is equal to knowing the whole universe perfectly, for no point is an independent existence. Every point is a miniature universe, and so it is impossible for us to start with any fixed point or entity in our attempt to know the universe as a whole.

The universe is not a thing, not a substance; it is not made up of several three-dimensional points or objects. Every object in the universe is a vortex of forces whirling in a particular direction and mode. These modes, however, cease to be modes as such when they become the essential content of the universal Consciousness. The universe, therefore, is a state of the vast Consciousness, in which the Consciousness finds the atmosphere, or the environment, which just befits the potentialities of the experiencing stresses in it, called the individuals. There is, thus, an experience of objective form, and also an experience of subjective reactions, - of the universe based on the absolute Consciousness, and of the one based on the individual consciousness which is an offshoot, or a secondary, confined and reflected branch of the former. The stuff of the universe is the Absolute.

The universe is a bundle of conditions, states or expressions of the Absolute. The universe and the Absolute are not two distinct principles. At any given time, or stage, the universe is one relative interconnected condition, a cosmic situation, and any part of it represents the whole Absolute Background.

The universe in which we live is not physical; it is Consciousness in disharmony and disturbance, trying to adjust and adapt itself, through its universally distributed parts, to regain its equilibrium. Physicality and psychicality are the stages of its expression and development, accidental to its essential being, only to be swept away by degrees in the progression of its evolutionary scheme tending to the Self-Awareness of the Absolute.

The universe is made, ultimately, not of particles, molecules, atoms, electrical charges, protoplasm or cells, but of a process of Consciousness which, when it extends itself into objectivity, goes by the name of space, time, movement, substance, energy, wave, particle, and the like.

The whole universe is a single, continuous, connected, logical, systematic, purposive process, with every part of it, at every time and stage, mirroring the Absolute, to which it owes allegiance full and perfect; a process of infinite varieties of qualitative and quantitative stresses, where each stress and aspect and part is cause and effect at the same time, where each determines and is the other; a wonderfully worked-out plan of wholeness in every speck and quarter and cranny, a process in which every part is an expression of the Whole; a unique and unitary finished work of completeness, the supreme example of matchless artistic and scientific performance, a process of the Self-realization of the Absolute.

In this universe, everything is organically interdependent and interrelated. Every thing is everything else also, and everything is because of the Whole which is. The individual and its environment are the same; one is not external to the other. No event is cut off from the others. Every pin-drop, every whisper, every thought and every feeling is a thunder that reverberates in the entire existence, setting it in vibration and affecting its equilibrium with an intensity which is in proportion to that of the cause thereof. There is no place where we can talk in secrecy, there is no possibility of our having our own private thoughts. Everything is made public, a property of the universe, in an instant, and the private act is at once judged and rewarded in the supreme court of the universal Whole.

Every part reflects the position of the Whole, and we can reach the Whole through a part, provided we know the inmost essence of the part. From the present, the past and the future can be known, for the present is the meeting-point of the past and the future. The present has in it the effects of the past and the potentialities of the future. Every step taken forward is the actualization of a fresh possibility, an additional expression of the tendency to move towards the Absolute. The universe consists, truly speaking, not of parts, but of phases. There is no sharp division in the universe, and all experiences form a continuous process.

Existence is an equilibrium which persists and succeeds in maintaining itself. The cause of any event in the universe is not in any other thing or event, but in the Whole which alone can account for any event, even for the movement of a leaf in the air. Such is the grandeur of the universe, and such the majesty of the Absolute.



Philosophy as a Means to Knowledge Diverse Philosophic "Isms"

The external objects are real, - this is Realism. There are no external objects, Ideas only are real, - this is subjective Idealism. There is neither object nor idea, there is only void, - this is Nihilism.

There is no world in the three periods of time, Brahman alone exists, - this is absolute Idealism.

Reality is non-dual, - this is Monism.

The individual is not identical with the Absolute, but is a ray of the Absolute, it is similar to the Absolute, - this is Qualified Monism. The individual is ever separate from the Absolute, - this is Dualism.

The goal is one: Self-Realization. Different paths are necessary to suit different stages of evolution.



Three Approaches in Philosophy

Professor Ueberweg defines philosophy as the science of principles. Philosophy coordinates the conclusions of all the sciences.

Individual sciences investigate only a special aspect of reality. Philosophy seeks to say the scientific truth about the whole of reality. It seeks to give us a view of the world as a whole.

The question naturally arises, "Is this possible?" Various schools of philosophy have arisen depending on the nature of the answer given to this question.



Positivism

It is the philosophic answer of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1789-1837). Description of sensory phenomena is the highest type of knowledge. Facts of experience alone are worth knowing. Knowledge can and ought to be of facts perceived. Philosophy of supra-sensible knowledge is absurd. The attempt to know ultimate reality is bound to fail. Metaphysics is absurd. Positivism decries philosophical advance. It extols scientific achievement.

Knowledge has passed through three stages. At the theological stage, man believed upon faith. He explained everything by taking upon faith the existence of spirit behind phenomena. A greater or a lesser god did the thing. This stage marked the childhood of mankind. At the metaphysical stage, man indulged in fancy and speculation. Everything is explained in terms of principles, abstractions and metaphysical theories. The third stage is the final stage. It has now been reached in the age of science. This is the positive or scientific stage. Facts are explained in terms of causes or necessary relations. Speculation is replaced by observation, experiment, induction and generalization. This is the highest knowledge which ought to satisfy the curiosity of man.

Modern science has in the twentieth century rejected positivism. Max Planck believes in the existence of an external world, independent of our experience. We can even know it indirectly.



Scepticism

It is the philosophy of doubt. It exists in various forms. It is doubtful if such ultimate knowledge of reality as philosophy seeks would ever be obtained. It is doubtful if such ultimate knowledge even if obtained, would be valid. It is doubtful if the methods available to philosophers would ever be able to yield them the certain knowledge of reality. It is doubtful if doubts will ever be resolved in the realm of philosophy. It is doubtful if God, self, values, world, would ever be completely known. It is doubtful if anything can be asserted with certainty without putting it to the test of doubt. It is doubtful if human nature can have unselfish motives.

In its ancient form, it was the counsel of despair to beat a retreat from difficult problems. In its modern form, it is a judgement upon the incompetency of reason to yield sure knowledge of the ultimates. Hume (1711-1776) started an inquiry into human knowledge and indicated its limits. Kant analysed it thoroughly and declared that reason cannot penetrate into the transcendental realm. Transcendental knowledge exists, but is beyond sensibility and understanding.



Agnosticism

It holds that it is impossible for man to know the subject-matter of philosophy or metaphysics. It is impossible to know God. It differs from Positivism in this. Positivism totally denies the existence of Reality: there is no noumenon, philosophy or metaphysics is empty of content. Agnosticism maintains that Reality is there, but knowledge of it is impossible. The scientific method cannot be applied to gain the knowledge of Reality. Science of Nature there is. But a science of God or soul, there cannot be. T. H. Huxley coined the term "agnostic" to show that it is impossible to solve the problem of existence.



Appearance and Reality

The world of experienceable things, Kant calls the world of phenomena, or appearances. The real world is the world of noumena, or things-in-themselves. Phenomenon is appearance, the noumenon is the Reality. The unseen is the Real. The seen is the appearance. All sensuously observable states of affairs, constitute the world of appearance.

Francis Herbert Bradley, the British philosopher who had by virtue of his great originality poured a new life into modern metaphysics, in his book *Appearance and Reality*, advances many brilliant arguments to show that the web of our universe is full of puzzling contradictions and discrepancies, and it is these that reduce the phenomenal world into a mere appearance of Reality.

Bradley finds that all the categories and relations of thought abound in contradictions. Inherence, predication, quality, identity, causality, unity, space and time, are full of contradictions. The question of the self and its reality, too, abounds in contradictions. Nothing real can be self-contradictory. All these contradictions that swarm around any phenomenon make it a mere appearance. Nothing which is not consistent can be regarded as real. The contradictory nature of the world shows that it cannot be real.

Reality must be at least intelligible. But, the world of nature is unintelligible. There is no object in the world which does not involve some relation; and the nature of relation being contradictory, all objects must necessarily be unreal, that is to say, they are mere appearances of Reality.

The ultimate Reality does not involve any relation. It is not self-contradictory. There are no discrepancies in it. The Reality is self-consistent. It is the complete whole, bereft of internal and external conflict and disharmony.

Anything other than the absolute Reality cannot exist. Duality cannot be eternal. Therefore, the universe, being other than the Absolute or the Self in its essential nature, must be a dream-like perception, and cannot be a reality. It must be so unreal as a mirage appearance in the desert: for, it cannot be given any substantial value in the region of truth, due to the inconsistency of its existence with the enduring Truth.



The Good, the Beautiful, and God in Platonic Philosophy

The Good is God alone. He is the cause of being. He is the cause of becoming. He is like the sun in the realm of the Ideas. He is the cause of existence, because existence is for the realization of the Good - for the realization of God. God is the master-Idea. God is supreme in the region of "noumena". He is the highest object of knowledge. All knowledge is nothing if it does not lead up to God. It is not easy to know God. Yet He is the author of all Beauty and all Truth.

"Beauty is Truth and Truth is Beauty", cried Keats in the frenzied moment of his poetic experience. "God is the source of all beauty", declared Plato from the heights of philosophical perception. It was spiritual expediency that made Plato say that the Good is the source of the Beautiful, and that the Beautiful is an Idea. In essence it amounts to the beatific vision of God as the Beautiful. The Beautiful is an aspect of the Good. It is an aspect of God.

Accordingly the Beautiful of Plato is the beautiful per se. It is "pure", unmixed and uncorrupted. It has no origin. It has no termination. It is eternal. It is without change, growth, or decay. It is ever the Selfsame. Being beautiful in itself, it shines in opposition to the objects of beauty, and in contradistinction to the so-called beautiful bodies, beautiful arts, and sciences.

The beautiful individuals may in one respect be beautiful, and in another not. They may at one time appear to be beautiful and at another not. They may appear to be beautiful to some and to others even ugly. But that is not so with respect to the Idea of the Beautiful. It is the absolute Beauty, altogether by itself. All beautiful things "participate" in it in the usual way. The absolutely Beautiful is beyond the conception, knowledge, and imagination of man. It also cannot be represented.

All objects owe their being to God, the Idea of the Good. That objects can be known is again due to God. It is because of God that mind has the power to cognize. Things exist because of God's Grace. He judges that it is better for them to exist than not to exist. Thus it is, that Plato so winningly persuades everyone to meditate upon God, to love and worship Him, and to seek Him in every possible way.

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