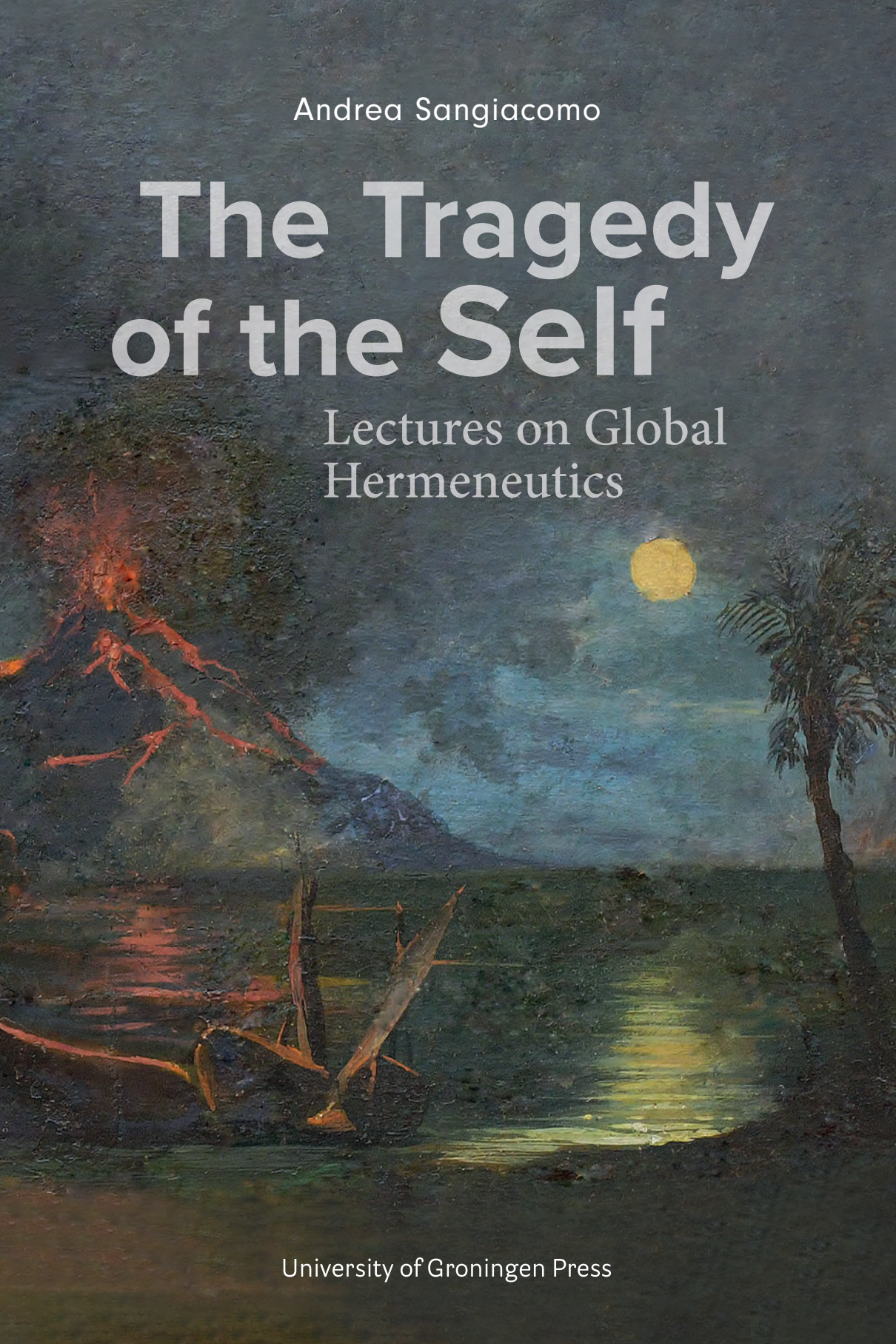


Andrea Sangiacomo

# The Tragedy of the Self

Lectures on Global  
Hermeneutics



University of Groningen Press



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Concerned, but not comfortless, we stand aside for a little, as contemplative spirits who are permitted to witness these enormous struggles and transitions.

Alas! The magic of these struggles is such, that we who sees them must also take part in them!

F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, §15





# Foreword

Groningen, Winter 2022

The fact that human beings can transform their external environment is obvious. It has been suggested that, to stress how much the human impact on the global environment has steered its evolution, the current age ought to be called the ‘Anthropocene.’ These transformations are usually based on some sort of *technique*, namely, a disciplined and methodical use of means for the realization of an intended end. Knowing a certain aspect of reality, and knowing how to manipulate it, are strictly connected forms of knowledge, as the contemporary synergy between science and technology illustrates.

It is also true that human beings transform themselves. Learning to communicate with others, learning a language, and other more sophisticated forms of education are familiar examples of how this can happen. One might even say that humans are technical products. A newborn has the capacity to become a human, but this capacity can be fully actualized only through appropriate technical transformations. As in the case of external implementations, endogenous transformation (the sort of technical manipulation that one does upon oneself) is based on some sort of knowledge, usually shared and advocated by the human community in which one lives. Becoming human means also becoming a certain kind of human, a new member of a certain community. Usually, it is because of the needs and demands of this community as a whole

that individuals attempt to transform the rest of their environment. If there is no human being that exists outside of any community (because in such a condition nobody would become a human being in the first place), then the human potential for technically transforming their external environment is an outward expression of the way in which the whole human community constructs itself and its members, and hence struggles to ensure its own thriving.

There can only be an interest in transforming something when there is some form of recognition that what needs to be transformed is not acceptable in its current state. The knowledge that underpins any technical implementation is essentially concerned with diagnosing what is wrong with the way in which things are, and how they can be changed or altered for the better. Survival challenges are the most obvious example of how this relation between knowledge and transformation can develop, but they are by no means the only example. Even when knowledge presents itself as eternal and immutable (think about Plato's ideas, or the Brahminic *Ātman*) it still has a normative and technical implication for those who might be far from possessing such a knowledge. By pointing to a region of eternity, knowledge reveals the problem with the uncertainty of the rest of reality, and offers a more or less viable bridge to rescue those who are willing to be transformed enough.

We might call the knowledge aimed at endogenous transformation, and thus at building human beings, 'anthropoietic' knowledge,<sup>1</sup> since it aims at imagining and enacting what and how humans should be, or become. This anthropoietic knowledge is essentially soteriological. Anthropoietic knowledge is a way of articulating and exploring an ideal of safety, a dimension of salvation (Greek *soteria*), and thus prescribes the means necessary to bring that condition about, or to forge humans capable of reaching it. The distinctively human ability to transform the outward environment is but a consequence of the essentially technical nature of humanity as such (humans are constructions, not natural kinds), but in turn this is even more fundamentally predicated on a soteriological basis. Humans are constructed for the sake of reaching some sort of salvation, they engage in transformation for the sake of being saved. They become humans by aspiring for safety. The origin of humanity is in the

•• 1 For the use of this term, cf. Francesco Remotti, *I drammi dell'antropo-poiesi* (2013).

acknowledgment of some form of unsafety, danger, and uncertainty, no matter how that is understood or spelled out.

In its broader and more proper sense, soteriology should be first understood in relation to the way in which some sort of fundamental problem or predicament is articulated and exposed. It is only by building on this diagnosis that an ideal of salvation, and a practice leading to it, can be further envisaged and spelled out. In this sense, soteriology articulates the way in which humans (in different times and places) express, conceptualize, and act upon their understanding of some structural issue, threat, concern, evil that is perceived as plaguing their condition and thus urging a reaction. Any actual solution (theistic or atheistic, linear or cyclical, optimistic or pessimistic) is derivative of this broader, more fundamental getting in touch with something worrisome that demands attention, understanding, and transformation. Soteriology, in this broad sense, is the expression of that *from which* humans want to be saved. Soteriology is the cradle of human aspiration for the good. However, especially in today's Western culture, this soteriological dimension that is inherent in human transformative practices is not duly acknowledged, or been too much restricted by interpreting it on the basis of a few particular instances that have been (mis)taken as universal paradigms.

Over the last forty years, a number of Western philosophers have drawn attention to the technical and transformative drive that is constitutive of being human. Authors such as Pierre Hadot, Michael Foucault, and Martha Nussbaum focused in particular on ancient Greek schools, especially in the Hellenistic period, as a crucial moment in which the idea of human transformation was explicitly articulated. Foucault's final research was aimed at using this reconstruction to better understand later Western forms of human transformation, as practiced in particular in early Christianity and in monastic institutions. More recently, Giorgio Agamben, in his *The Highest Poverty* (original Italian ed. 2011) expanded this line of research further by focusing on medieval Western monasticism (and the Franciscan order in particular). Agamben drew attention to the attempt at articulating a *form or rule of life* that is irreducible to both the domain of juridical right but also to the domain of ordinary life.

Peter Sloterdijk has offered the most general and cross-cultural theoretical framework for discussing human transformation so far. In his *You must change*

*your life* (original German ed. 2009), Sloterdijk focuses on the way in which humanity is essentially constituted by an ascetic verticality. Ascetism (Greek *askesis*) must be understood in keeping with its etymology, as a practice, a way of exercising. Building on Nietzsche, Sloterdijk illustrates how any form of exercise (asceticism) is always built on a pull from above. As he puts it: ‘whoever looks for humans will find ascetics, and whoever observes ascetics will discover acrobats’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 62).

Sloterdijk’s investigation entails two provocative claims. First, he dissociates the issue of transformative ascetic practices from the issue of religion or religiosity. Provocatively, Sloterdijk claims that ‘religions do not exist’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 83-105). What is socially constructed as a ‘religion’ is usually based on some form of transformative ascetic practice, that has been reconceived (and, Sloterdijk suggests, also misconceived) for the sake of protecting or selling it among larger groups of people. The religious dimension of transformative practices should thus be studied as a specific socio-cultural phenomenon, but it remains derivative on the practices themselves. As he writes: ‘perhaps the ‘great’ religions, with their clerical apparatuses, their networks of organized escapism and their world-friendly schools, clinics and welfare services, are nothing but businesses for softening the hurtful overloads let loose by their founders’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 220).

The second claim concerns a hierarchy between practicing elites and the habits common to the average population. Sloterdijk articulates this claim (echoing Nietzsche again) in terms of what he calls the ‘base camp problem.’ He writes: ‘the vast majority of people have no interest in becoming more than they are. If one investigates the average direction of their wishes, one finds that they simply want a more comfortable version of what they have’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 176). Average habits and norms are ‘base camps’ in the sense that they provide a ground for preparing the ascent to the heights of ‘Mount Improbable’ (Sloterdijk’s name for the ascetic ideals). But most people might decide that they like living at the base camp more than they like the idea of ascending further. According to Sloterdijk, it is from this preference that the notion of ‘identity’ arises: ‘inertia is elevated from a deficiency requiring correction to a phenomenon of value. My identity consists of the complex of my unrevisable personal and cultural inertias’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 188).

The resulting picture tells us that practicing humanity is genuine humanity, or better that the nature of humanity is to be a cultural construction. This construction is inherently oriented by a vertical pull towards transcending the current state, overcoming any established habitus, and bringing about something new. Hence, humanity is inherently self-changing, self-transforming, self-overcoming, despite how large is the portion of human beings who appear too idle to take this transformation as their own goal.

One of the main problems with Sloterdijk's account is that it tends to treat this concern with transformation as prior to any further knowledge, as if the drive for transforming could be considered prior to some form of knowledge about what the needed transformation is and how to bring that about. In other words, in his effort to rescue practice and ascetism from its religious overtones, Sloterdijk seems to treat soteriology as a byproduct of practice itself. But this move is unwarranted, since without some knowledge or understanding of *why* and *how* one should ascend, there could be no actual striving for ascending. Bringing practice back to the foreground of discussion cannot be done at the expenses of the anthropoietic knowledge that underpins that practice. This dichotomy (or the possibility of isolating practice in its own right and neutralizing any further knowledge attached to it) is untenable, both theoretically (practice conceptually requires some knowledge) and historically (there is no evidence of practice without some underpinning knowledge). In short, even Sloterdijk's attempt at developing a new discipline of 'Anthropotechnic' is flawed by its failing to take soteriology as the ground for any human practice.

But what does it mean to take soteriology as the ground of any human practice? Answering this question entails recovering a whole field of investigation. As a preliminary sketch, two dimensions of this field might be pointed out.

Soteriology has a descriptive dimension, insofar as it helps charting the different ways in which various historical communities in various times and places have articulated anthropoietic knowledge about their predicament, and the tools for facing it. In this descriptive sense, investigating soteriology means uncovering the answer to questions such as: what is the diagnosis of the human condition proposed in this context? What sort of fundamental and systemic problem is recognized and exposed? What further (philosophical, political,

social) implications are associated with this problem? How is the state of salvation conceptualized in this framework? Who is supposed to reach that salvation? What are the means, tools, practices, and exercises envisaged to reach it? How do they contribute to transforming not only the practitioners but also their overall environment? And how does this investigation change our understanding of our own historical situatedness as interlocutors and inquirers of this or that particular soteriological structure?

Among preliminary remarks it should be emphasized that soteriology per se has no necessary connection with theistic worldviews, although all theistic worldviews presuppose their own soteriology. This point can be quickly illustrated by considering a few examples.

First: Nietzsche is a soteriological thinker, who claims that the fundamental problem of existence has to do with its inherent dissonance and suffering, and the genuine salvation from it lies in the ability to create something new, and unlock the poetic potential of the 'will to power' that constitutes the core of any form of life. In outlining this vision, Nietzsche is among the most vocal Western philosophers to propose a sort of methodological atheism. Only by building on the acknowledgment that 'God is dead' and that previous religious strategies (especially Christian ones, in Nietzsche's view) must be abandoned, can a viable salvation be pursued (which for Nietzsche means being saved from the 'heavens' and from the 'other world').

Second example: Spinoza is another soteriological thinker, who sees the fundamental problem in the passionate structure of human beings and in the way in which the overwhelming power of external conditions can perturbate the mind to such an extent to let it forget its genuine nature, namely, its being a mode of the infinite substance (which Spinoza, controversially at the time, calls 'God'). Salvation is adequate knowledge of nature, which depends upon and leads to a certain management of passions and affectivity. Despite Spinoza's own protests to the contrary, no other Western philosopher before Nietzsche has enjoyed more outstanding fame (or rather infamy) as an atheist.

Third example: master Gotama, the historical Buddha (fifth century BCE), regarded the whole of ordinary human condition as doomed, due to the pervasiveness of a constant struggle and concern for appropriating this or that content of experience or form of existence. Living beings (not just humans) are

constantly dragged away by their thirst for being something or something else, they are burning of the fever of greed, aversion, and ignorance. Affectivity is the problem, and a reversal of the affective structure is its solution. Through disciplined practice, ordinary habits based upon and leading to appropriation and thirst can be weakened, stopped, and abandoned, leaving the sage free, unconcerned, at peace. Human life is not only a playground for bringing about this transformation, but also the best stage for it, since any sort of divine existence (as acknowledged in Buddhist cosmology) is equally plagued by the same problems, except for the fact that divine beings might lack the sense of urgency and the sharpness of vision regarding the fundamental soteriological problem that are needed for directly embark in the process of making an end to suffering. The Buddha was no atheist, but only because he did not believe that any of the gods were actually eternal, unchanging, and free from sorrow, as they would themselves proclaim to be.

From a descriptive point of view, these examples not only show that soteriology is relatively independent from endorsing a theistic framework, but they also suggest that one important aspect in the charting of soteriological territory consists precisely in clarifying how specific theistic views or concerns interact and play a role in a soteriological construction. In other words, since everybody who engages in some form of transformative practice has a soteriology, but not any soteriology has to be spelled out in theistic terms, one can investigate why these theistic terms are introduced at some point, what purposes they serve, and what the (philosophical, historical, political, social) conditions are that make them more or less meaningful in a given context.

A similar consideration would extend to other characteristics that are often associated with soteriology due to the assumption that particular instances of it are paradigmatic of soteriology in general. Christian soteriology, for instance, tends to have a linear teleological orientation, but such a linear teleology is not a necessary feature of soteriology as such. One might well imagine that salvation entails a form of cyclicity or even comes through endless repetition (think about the Stoic and later Nietzschean *amor fati*). In certain contexts (early Buddhism, for instance), the emphasis is very much on achieving a definite state of salvation *in this very life*, such that the adept reaches a condition ‘beyond training’ where no further practice and exercise is needed. But again,

this idea of embodying perfection in a definite state does not have to be necessarily linked with soteriology as such or in general. Salvation can equally be conceived as an open-ended process that extends on an indefinite (or unfathomably long) period of time, as seems to have been the case for some ancient sects (like the Ājīvikas in ancient India, or perhaps Empedocles in ancient Greece).

These remarks show that mapping soteriological territory inevitably leads to (and indeed ought to) cross cultural and historical boundaries. By facing how both the diagnosis and the solution for the human predicament is conceived by different groups, and in different times and places, it becomes possible to more deeply investigate the reasons that contributed to specifying each soteriological outlook and shaping it in a certain way rather than another. Soteriology is thus best understood as a spectrum of possible views, which might differ greatly both in matters of general orientation and in details, although they would all share the basic concern with articulating some sort of structural problem recognized with a current state, and a need for addressing it through some form of practice, which will inevitably be transformative of those who engage with it.

Soteriology also has a second, normative dimension. This means that soteriology puts certain initial constraints on how any further investigation in human transformation can be carried out. Two constraints are particularly relevant. First, selfhood is co-constituted in its own soteriological quest. The self is not some preexistent entity that engages in a soteriological quest only contingently, at some point. Second, there is no human life devoid of some (implicit or explicit) soteriology, although multiple soteriological structures can coexist in the same time and place, interact, and even compete with each other.

The first constraint consists in methodologically ruling out the assumption that selfhood is constituted in a sort of morally-neutral space, in which it emerges as a pure, dispassionate, cognitive structure of some sort, and only later (if ever at all) might become interested or concerned with its own salvation. This assumption must be rejected (a normative claim) because it reverses (and thus misrepresents) the logical order of phenomena. A dispassionate self is a soteriological construction, it represents a condition of imperturbability and absence of any concern, hence it is a symbol of achieved salvation. For this



notion to be valued and considered fundamental, one needs preliminary to have an experience of what a *passionate* self feels like, what it means *not* to be dispassionate, how it is to live in the grip of existential concerns. But if one has access to these sorts of experiences, then it becomes clear that one is *not* a dispassionate self in the first place. That view of dispassion is a soteriological projection of an ideal state, which is then taken as a regulative ideal and assumed as something fundamental. The ideal of dispassion is *created* in a soteriological context, namely, in the effort of conceiving (giving birth to) an alternative way of existing as a human. Hence, it offers no proof of the fact that selfhood comes before any soteriological concern, but rather shows the opposite, since being concerned with soteriology is precisely the domain in which selfhood (and its potential for salvation or dispassion) is first discovered.

The second constraint consists in assuming that any human individual is practicing some sort of soteriological game. Wherever selfhood is enacted, that is because some sort of soteriological background has been established. There cannot be any ‘base camp problem’ as described by Sloterdijk. Those who appear lazy and inert from the point of view of certain practitioners, cannot be simply indifferent spectators, but must be engaged in a different soteriological quest. It is a well-known paradox that inaction is still a form of action, and doing nothing is still a way of doing something. If one acts, one brings about a change, any action is transformative in a sense. No matter *how* one understands one’s own humanity (no matter how original or derivative, effective or ineffective this view is), this knowledge is anthropoietic, it entails a soteriology, and hence it guides one’s way of becoming the sort of human that one envisages. It is impossible to split humans between practitioners and non-practitioners. Everybody who is human is also a practitioner of sorts, and all practitioners are such because they (more or less explicitly) base their actions on some soteriological knowledge. Hence, wherever there is transformative action there must be (another normative claim) a soteriology that makes it possible.

As a consequence, selfhood is not discovered by an elite of ascetic athletes (as Sloterdijk suggests), but is a phenomenon common to all humans insofar as they all share the same predicament and the same concern for it. The plurality of different soteriologies interacting with one another raises the question of their relative validity, and the problem of how to assess them. Is it possible that

a certain soteriological understanding could introduce new or even unwarranted concerns? How sustainable is a certain soteriological view for individuals or communities? And how do changes in external condition affect this sustainability? In which ways can a soteriological ideal fail? These are all normative questions, which presuppose a preliminary understanding of soteriology as necessarily embedded in any human culture. The alleged difference between practitioners and non-practitioners must be reconceptualized as the interaction between practitioners of different soteriologies (perhaps opposite, or even indifferent to one another), and their clash can result in different forms of selfhood. No one is just watching the show, everybody is playing their part in it. There is no passive audience, only players. What are you playing then?

This is a new field of study. Let's call it 'the global history of soteriological agency.' This is not an established academic field today. If anything, it can be discerned as the overlap between various more familiar domains of study. Agency is a broad topic of research in philosophy and many other disciplines. Within this large cluster of research programs, *soteriological agency* points to those ways of conceiving of, shaping, practicing, orienting agency (of both individuals and communities) for the sake of dealing with a soteriological problem. Soteriological agency must be indexed to specific historical contexts (hence it must be always historical to some extent). But this history needs to be global, both because soteriology emerges at all times and in all places of human history, and because it concerns the global dimension of human (but perhaps also non-human) life as such.

The global history of soteriological agency might not exist as a field or even topic of study *yet*. But *de facto* it existed in the past of various civilizations, and it still arises today in ours. Present-day humanity has reached a degree of interestedness across the globe that had no precedent in past times. And more importantly, we know that today human actions (*our* actions) are also part of a (perhaps new) soteriological problem. If the world as we know it will end in a few decades from now, this is also because of our economic, social, political, ideological decisions, and not just because of the accidents of nature or the will of otherworldly entities. In ways that were inconceivable for past humanity, today we seem to have little time left to make very important choices, which might have an impact not only on our quality of living, but on our survival as

a species. The future has always been a challenge, but now this challenge is both globalized and pushed on the verge of the irredeemable. Simply invoking more scientific knowledge does not seem sufficient. Scientific knowledge, by itself, neither caused nor prevented the course of events from taking their turn that they did, which suggests that other and arguably more profound factors are involved. And yet, some general transformation in humanity's way of conceiving itself (and especially in those sectors of today's humanity that have appropriated the greatest monopoly of power and resources) seems very much needed.

Soteriological agency, despite all its varieties of forms and practices, does have a central focal point, namely, the self. Soteriological agency in fact plays a crucial role in constructing the self, both at the social and at the individual level. This is why, in order to judge any of these practices, it seems most appropriate to look at them from the point of view of the sort of selfhood they give rise to. What sort of self could emerge from undertaking this practice? In what way is this form of selfhood preferable than others? The first question is descriptive, the second is normative. But both questions require comparisons between different practices, and this comparison in turn requires having a sufficiently wide and global framework against which differences can be seen and contrasted.

\*

These lectures are intended to introduce into higher public education the competences needed to be able to critically reflect on different forms of soteriological agency. Their core ambition is to sketch a roadmap of possible theoretical avenues for conceiving of the self, bringing to the foreground its soteriological implications, while also testing this theoretical outlook against insights offered by various disciplines (including philosophy, cognitive science, anthropology, archaeology, psychology, religious studies, intellectual history, and contemplative practices) and in specific historical cultures (ancient India and Greece, the modern West). The resulting journey is a way of practicing hermeneutics, the art of understanding and interpreting experience in its multifarious manifestations (which include different genres of written texts, oral traditions, social

structures and practices, various sorts and domains of experience, ideas and ideals). This form of hermeneutics is best understood as ‘global hermeneutic’ both because of its temporal and geographical scope, and because of its focus on a phenomenon so broad and deeply rooted as selfhood. The purpose of the journey is not only descriptive, though. Exploring the cross-cultural spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self invites more existential question of whether any of these possibilities might offer resources for dealing with the tragedies of today’s world, or maybe even saving it from some of them.

Each lecture focuses on one particular scene in the broader tragedy of the self that is enacted throughout the whole series. The main purpose of each lecture is to introduce the audience to some relevant sources and interlocutors, which can bring important insights for the development of the overall action. In this respect, the first goal of each lecture is to provide a sufficiently clear and comprehensive account of the sources themselves, more than directly arguing in favor of a particular point. The effort is to keep a balance between a narrowly selected pool of main references, and a sufficiently in-depth discussion of the materials, while also providing a number of hints that could be used to further expands various points by those who might be more interested in following up on them.

The lectures are organized around a unified ‘tragic’ narrative (to borrow from the plot of Greek tragedies) articulated into three steps: (i) introducing the character and their goal; (ii) discussing the challenge that the character faces; and (iii) learning from that challenge how to explore alternative scenarios. (i) The self (character) is enacted in order to face various forms of uncertainty (goal), and exploring the ways of facing them gives rise to a spectrum of possible ways of enacting selfhood. However, (ii) uncertainty can never be fully mastered (challenge), and hence all the possibilities encompassed by this spectrum face paradoxes and generate new challenges. This leads to (iii) exploring the possibility of setting aside the whole project of mastery and finding new ways of facing uncertainty without having to master it.

This narrative is deployed in fourteen episodes. More specifically, the first five lectures (i) sketch a spectrum of possible ways of constructing the self, covering apparently disparate and yet related topics such as contemporary cognitive science, anthropological studies on shamanism in small-scale socie-

ties, and philosophical and psychological studies on mysticism. Another four lectures present (ii) a comparative case study of conceptions of selfhood in ancient Greek and Indian cultures (between the sixth and the third century BCE), positioning them with respect to the spectrum previously sketched and underscoring the different issues that emerge in this context. The last five lectures (iii) discuss and compare more critical approaches to selfhood aimed at *overcoming* it, which emerged both in the modern West (Nietzsche) and ancient India (Buddhism).

In today's Western academic philosophy, the dominant style of writing and exposition relies heavily on argumentation. However, the notion of argumentation is often subject to a dangerous equivocation. Argumentation can be understood in two basic ways. A first type of argumentation takes it as the set of rhetorical and dialectical moves used to defend and hopefully support a certain claim in the context of a controversy. A second type of argumentation sees it rather as the overall set of means that can be used to interlink ideas and articulate intuitions, in such a way that they will constitute a coherent and intelligible whole. The paradigm for the first type of argumentation is provided by forensic practice, while for the second type might be better captured by certain forms of art, like Western counterpoint music for instance.<sup>2</sup> These two types can coexist and enrich one another. But today, it is more often the case that the two are conflated, with the first ruling out the second. Often, an audience trained in academic philosophy might hold an implicit expectation that a philosophical argument must unfold in the shape of a debate between opposing parties, and that a claim is not really argued for if this dialectical frame is not provided. But such an expectation overlooks the fact that the exposition and development of a philosophical idea (like that of any other idea) does not have to take such a dialectical form.

Presenting and developing an idea, an intuition, or any other germinative motive, might use various other means, including phenomenological observations, the interplay between certain practices and reflection on their results, the

•• 2 As a healthy complement to the study of argumentative strategies, philosophers might benefit from reading about how various artists conceived of their work. A good start might be Arnold Schönberg's *Style and Idea* (1975).

exploration of various perspectives and degrees of closeness or distance at which the same phenomenon is observed, speculation, analysis, and many others. It would be hard to reduce all these various approaches to just arguing pro or contra a given thesis, finding fault in the opponent's arguments and replying to their objections.<sup>3</sup> But what all these approaches do share in common is an interest for finding, uncovering, and sometimes creating connections and pathways through which meaning can flow, expand, evolve, and disseminate. These connections embed the departing idea in a web of meaningfulness, which arouses interest for it. This interest does not merely depend on what others say pro or contra, but rather on the peculiar way in which that idea is encountered, presented, developed, refracted. Given current practices and conventions, the first, forensic type of argumentative style is by large the dominant one in the industry of writing and publishing philosophy papers, books and book-chapters. Lecturing seems to still leave broader margins for hosting and integrating different styles, and hence the following discussion is phrased as a series of lectures for the purpose of a more sustained and deliberate engagement with the second type of argumentation. Besides, soteriology has to do with transformative practices, and nothing is more transformative than education.

- 3 One reason why dialectical (type-one) argumentation is sometimes regarded as paradigmatic of philosophical activity might have to do with the way in which philosophy, as an academic field, seeks to delineate and distinguish itself with respect to other fields. Emphasis on logical-dialectical argumentation (historical evidence suggests that logic arose from the practice of dialectics, as even a cursory look at Aristotle's logical works suggests) can be taken as quintessential for defining philosophy. While this approach might have strategic advantages in certain contexts, it clearly cannot be taken at face value as a normative definition of what philosophy is. On the one hand, this very emphasis on logical-dialectical argumentation tends to exclude a number of authors (cf. for instance Eileen O'Neil, 'Disappearing Ink,' 1997) and even antagonize whole traditions (as the long-standing divide between 'continental' or 'European' philosophy vs. 'analytic' or 'Anglo-American' philosophy has witnessed). On the other hand, it clearly takes more than just logic to forge and develop philosophical ideas, otherwise any logically sound and valid argument should count as a philosophical argument. Searching for the unique *quid* that makes philosophy something distinct, one would inevitably have to add some more substantial element, like the concerns for this or that particular topic, question, or problem. Perhaps, one might also suggest that the distinctive philosophical flavor of a discussion does not depend on specific topics or on their logical structure, but rather by a peculiar self-reflective interest for *how* the discussion is carried over, what its metacognitive constraints and contexts are. Be that as it may, logical-dialectical argumentation might be a powerful tool to contributing to this philosophical endeavor, but it hardly can provide a sustainable and overarching definition of what philosophy is, what it was, or what it ought to be.

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## Note on texts and translations

All references and readings from the discourses of the Buddha are derived from the main collections of the *Suttapīṭaka*, abbreviated as follows:

DN = *Dīgha Nikāya* (Collection of Long Discourses)

MN = *Majjhima Nikāya* (Collection of Middle-Length Discourses)

SN = *Samyutta Nikāya* (Collection of Connected Discourses)

AN = *Anguttara Nikāya* (Collection of Numerical Discourses)

The *Khuddaka Nikāya* (Minor Collection) includes several smaller sets, which are referred to in their own right, among which:

Sn = *Suttanipāta* (Anthology of Discourses)

Ud = *Udāna* (Inspired Utterances)

Iti = *Itivuttaka* (Sayings)

Discourses in DN and MN are identified by their individual number only (counting from the beginning). For instance, DN 2 should be read as ‘*Dīgha Nikāya*, discourse number 2.’ Discourses included in the other collections are identified by providing, first, a reference to the number of the ‘chapter’ in which the discourse appears, and then to the number of the discourse itself in that chapter. For instance, SN 56.11 should be read as ‘*Samyutta Nikāya*, chapter 56, discourse number 11.’

Pāli texts are consulted in the *Mahāsaṅgīti Tīpīṭaka Buddhavasse 2500: World Tīpīṭaka Edition in Roman Script*, edited and published by The M.L. Maniratana Bunnag Dhamma Society Fund, 2005. This edition can be consulted online (together with several alternative translations and parallel versions) at <https://suttacentral.net/>

Lecture Zero:  
Theme

## 0.1 Exposition

*The self is a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering, in one way or another, the uncertainty that is inherent in its conditionality.*

In an everyday, layman setting, talk about the self is pervasive and diffuse: myself, yourself, ourselves, me, I, the Ego, the subject, the person, the individual, and similar. This broad and diverse range of colloquial expressions usually entails an indexical reference to the agent who is also involved in the speech act. But who is this one who is speaking? Taking the term ‘self’ as encompassing all the other expressions that can be used more or less interchangeably with it, we can begin by saying that the self appears as the main character in what is presented, discussed, and experienced, and offers its own inside perspective on what is going on. The self can be approached in a non-reflexive way, by simply presupposing that we know what it is and how it works. We can refer to a *sense of self*, an ambiguous and mostly implicit, inarticulate feeling or perception that ‘I am here’ or ‘this happens to me.’ Imagine, for instance, the experience of hunger or thirst. Or the feeling of love, or perhaps fear or anxiety. These are not just objectively given, impersonal states, there is someone (namely *you*), who experiences them from ‘within’ (I am hungry, I am thirsty, I am in love, I am afraid). In all these and similar situations, we might call ‘self’ the subject of these experiences as they appear from a first-person perspective, ‘my’ perspective, and who is feeling oneself within and amidst what is happening.

However, we can also take this relatively ambiguous and fuzzy sense of self as an object of theoretical reflection. We can investigate how the sense of self emerges, when and how it manifests, what sort of actions it elicits or associates with, what cognitive structures it requires, and so on. Based on these observations, we can launch into various questions about the nature of this self. Is the self a self-standing ontological substance, a sort of entity that exists in its own right? Or isn’t the self rather a constantly changing and flowing process, something that is constantly arising and ceasing, enacted in various circumstances and depending on various conditions? Is the self a unified structure, or is it

rather a manifold assemblage of various types of self? These and similar questions can be considered ontological questions, insofar as they all ask: What *is* the self? What is the nature of the self?

Any theory about the self aims at describing some sort of experience or phenomenon. Perhaps there is no pure experience that is unmediated by some theory or conceptual scheme. And yet, many experiences might remain inarticulate and implicit in their meaning, details, and implications. Explicitly theorizing about a phenomenon helps articulating it in such a way to uncover features that would have been otherwise overlooked, or even correct ways of looking at the phenomenon itself that might turn out to be spurious or ungrounded. In the ideal scenario, there will be some sort of circulation between the experience of the phenomenon and its theoretical articulation, in which both sides complement and sharpen each other. But this circulation entails that any theory of the self presupposes some pre-theoretical experience of what selfhood feels like, and that any such experience is open for theoretical inspection. Hence, it would be unwarranted to provide a purely normative theory about what a self *should* be (by thus giving prominence to the theory over the phenomenon), but it would be also unwarranted trying to simply look at the phenomenon and pretending to face it without the mediation of a conceptual or theoretical lens (by thus giving prominence to the phenomenon over the theory). What we need is neither just a theory of the self nor a pure description of how selfhood appears and is felt. Rather, we need a way of better understanding how certain manifestations of selfhood might provoke different theoretical reactions, and how these reactions in turn can shape the way in which the phenomenon of selfhood is articulated into a theoretical construction. In other words, we need to find a way of observing the circulation between theory and phenomenon as it happens, rather than immobilizing any of those components in themselves.

Today, theoretical discussions about selfhood emerge in multiple and diverse fields: philosophy, cognitive science, psychology, anthropology, archeology, religious studies, literary and cultural studies, and probably more. Expectedly, selfhood is articulated and studied in different ways in each of these fields, based on different research agendas. Nevertheless, one pervading and common feature that seems to surface in all these otherwise different discussions is a

certain *relational* approach to selfhood. What sort of experience can underpin this theoretical convergence?

Today, the sense of self is most commonly seen as something that grows from very early childhood onward, it never appears in isolation from other selves, and usually is enacted in contexts that require interactions with others (humans and not) and the world or environment in which the self is embedded. Individual selfhood is never abstracted from social and socialized selfhood. From a cognitive point of view, the experience of selfhood is likely to be the product of the convergence of multiple related factors, functions, and processes. In other words, the experience of being a self is multilayered and multifaceted, and this diversity reveals how much the self depends on a whole array of conditions (relations).

Almost a century ago, Martin Heidegger, in his *Being and Time* (1927), stated that human beings are entities that are inherently situated in a world, they are a 'being-here' (*Da-sein* in German). Saying that the self is relational means that the self can manifest as a phenomenon only if it appears in relation with something else. Relationality is not something totally extrinsic to the nature of the self. It is not the case that first the self is there, and then this or that relation happens to it. Rather, the self arises out of a net of relations, hence it is *constitutively relational*. The self is a specific sort of (arguably complex) relation. A growing trend in contemporary debates in political philosophy about the notion of autonomy (an agent's ability to determine on their own their goals and actions) has claimed that there are good reasons to interpret autonomy as constitutively relational.<sup>4</sup> This means that the sort of autonomy that an agent enjoys is entirely shaped by an agent's relations with other agents and the environment at large. This point can easily be extended to the very nature of the self, thus contending that the self is constitutively relational.

But what sort of relations are most essential for constituting a self? The self is usually understood from three points of view: as a cognitive structure, as a practical agent, and as an affective subject. As a cognitive structure, the self is

•• 4 For an overview of this debate, see Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, 'Introduction: Autonomy Refigured' in Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 3-31.

connected with activities such as knowing and perceiving. As a practical subject it is associated with agency, including issues surrounding choice, freedom, and autonomy. As an affective subject, the self experiences emotions (what in earlier times were called ‘passions’) and reacts to them both in cognitive and practical ways. What makes all these three functions possible is the self’s ability to *interpret* experience.

In order to cognize, the self needs to interpret certain phenomena as sensory stimuli, and likely these stimuli have to be filtered and constructed to some degree before they can be experienced as objects of perception. Knowing presupposes a more fundamental ability to make sense of phenomena, namely, attributing to them meanings, and first of all understanding what ‘meaning’ could be (or mean). Language provides one (but surely not the only) paradigm of meaning. But in order for the self to deal with language, the self needs to be able to interpret sounds and images as words, and words as something that have meaning. Even earlier in its life, a self needs to interpret acts and gestures addressed to it as belonging to the domain of communication and language, just in order to learn how to play with language in the first place. These actions are all based on a fundamental hermeneutic ability. The same ability is also crucial for acting and expressing agency, since this requires understanding what a situation is, what the options are, and how a certain course of events can be initiated or stirred. Emotions also demand hermeneutics: one needs to integrate bodily sensations, sensory data, memories, judgments, and other ingredients in order to recognize a certain state as this or that emotion, and then react to it accordingly. One paradigmatic way of understanding hermeneutics is by defining it as the art (or perhaps philosophical knowledge) of how to interpret texts. But this paradigm risks being overly restrictive. We can interpret texts only because, more fundamentally and more generally, we interpret experience (of any sort). Hermeneutics is thus best understood as the art (or perhaps knowledge) about how to interpret experience, and the self is indissolubly dependent on a hermeneutic effort of this sort.

If the self is constitutively relational, the sort of relations in which the self is primarily involved are hermeneutic relations, namely, ways of understanding experience. And since the self is constitutively relational, there is no self prior to these hermeneutic relations. The self is constituted by its hermeneutic rela-

tions; hence, the self is also a construction, something that cannot stand apart from the sort of relations that constitute it. More precisely, the self is a *hermeneutic construction*.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that the self is not real. Houses and furniture, social norms and music, for instance, are all constructions, and yet they are very real. However, constructions are real in such a way that they cannot stand on their own, they need to be put together, and then they rely on certain conditions in order to be sustained. The self is real precisely in this constructed way, as something that constantly depends on that in relation to which it arises and sustains itself.

These considerations indicate some of the reasons why, in today's discourse, the self tends to be regarded in a relational way. Dismissing or countering these reasons would yield a different picture, in which the self is an autonomous substance, agent, knower, perceiver, the underpinning ground of all that happens to it. Although less popular nowadays, this view has in fact been dominant in other periods and contexts, and it articulates equally relevant aspects of the phenomenon of selfhood. The sense of self arises for someone, and it entails a form of reflexivity (self-awareness, self-consciousness); this fact can easily lead one to think that nothing is more intimate and private than my own self. In order for any experience to happen to me, 'I' must be there first. It would seem more intuitive, then, to conceive of the self as some sort of special entity with which 'I' have the most privileged access and acquaintance. Call this latter view of selfhood a 'non-relational' view, to contrast it with the former presented so far.

Confronted with radically different theoretical articulations (one relational, the other non-relational) of the same phenomenon of selfhood, we might be tempted to immediately try to adjudicate which one is preferable. However, it might be more fruitful at this stage to ask instead whether they have anything in common. If we construct the theoretical divide with sufficient sharpness, we

•• 5 Taking the self as a hermeneutic construction does not exclude that non-human living beings cannot have a self, nor does this entail that this hermeneutically constructed self is based on some sort of biologically pregiven selfhood or individuality. Rather, all forms of selfhood are constructed in a hermeneutic way, including in non-human living beings, who share the vital need of interpreting and making sense of their own environment in order to interact with it (as we shall discuss in greater details in Lecture One and Two).



might see opposite theories as describing substantially different phenomena. But in that case, the term ‘self’ becomes equivocal and no longer captures the same phenomenon when described in a relational or non-relational way. The tension between the two opposite theories breaks apart and they become unrelated. In order to avoid this rupture, while preserving the sense of theoretical tension, we need to look at the self not as a pregiven object ready at hand for observation and description, but rather as an enduring problem, which can receive very different, and at times conflicting solutions. What is the problem nestled in the phenomenon of selfhood? Uncertainty.

Let us see first how this conclusion can be fleshed out starting from the relational side of the discussion. Anything constructed is something that could also *not* have been constructed at all. The fact that a house or another artifact is constructed means that it was constructed for a purpose. Interpreting experience has also a certain purpose, which most often (if not always) entails a practical dimension. We interpret the world in order to live in it in a certain way. Asserting the constructed nature of the self introduces the crucial issue of understanding what the purpose of the self is. Notice that a purely cognitive account would not do, since it would beg the question. Claiming that the purpose of the self is nothing more than experiencing things from a first-person perspective is like claiming that the purpose of a knife is to cut. Surely, the knife cuts, and the self allows one to know experience from a first-person perspective. But the reason for the sake of which something is constructed cannot amount to the defining feature of that same thing, otherwise one could keep asking: what is the purpose of cutting? And what is the purpose of having a first-person perspective?

Today, a very common account of the purpose of the self is provided by some evolutionary appeal to its alleged adaptive function. Having a self and interpreting experience in terms of self, so the story goes, allows individuals to survive better, to preserve their bodily integrity, to defend their life, to reproduce and pass on this skill to their offspring. Assume we take this evolutionary standpoint. The background of the idea of evolution is provided by a constant and widespread sense of struggle between the life-form and its environment. The goal is adaptation, but adaptation means being able to cope with the otherwise dangerous and unpredictable circumstances that the environment offers.

This involves an extremely complex interplay of various processes, most of which are seemingly hard to predict or perhaps even random. Uncertainty and precarity are intrinsic in the evolutionary account. Success (whatever this might mean) can never be taken for granted, nor kept for long. This point can be further generalized in such a way to transcend the terms of evolutionary theory.<sup>6</sup>

The self is a hermeneutic solution to the problem of the inherent uncertainty of conditionality. Anything that is relational is conditional. Being conditional means depending on conditions in order to appear and manifest in experience. We are all children of our parents. Nobody was born from spontaneous generation. We all depended on others in order to be. We constantly depend on the whole environment in order to survive from one moment to the next. As human beings, we constantly depend on others in order to develop our cognitive, emotional, intellectual, and social life. In fact, our life is always social to some extent. Our condition is that of being *conditional beings*, we are what we are in virtue of the fact that we depend on conditions, which include (but are not limited to) other human beings. To generalize, whatever is relational is conditional, and whatever is conditional is relational.

Conditionality is inherently uncertain, for at least two connected reasons. First, if the conditions change in a certain way, what allowed us to be there is removed, and we can no longer sustain our being there. The constant possibility of physical death is just the most obvious instance of the uncertainty of conditionality. Second, whatever is conditional is something that has arisen at some point due to certain conditions, something that was born. This entails that whatever is conditional is also something that has not always been there, something for which there is a real possibility of not being there anymore. The

•• 6 Claiming that the self is constructed for a purpose does not entail that this purpose is intentionally and rationally set or even known to the individual self. On the one hand, nobody is a self for the first time, in the sense that everybody's selfhood arises in the context of other selves (parents, siblings, society) in which the construction of the self is already established, and from which any new instance of selfhood will derive (at least to some extent or for some period of time) its schemes, paradigms, and goals. On the other hand, purposiveness in general does not have to be restricted to the sub-class of voluntary and self-aware intentional acts that a subject experiences as decided by themselves. In a broad sense, something is purposeful if it aims at reaching a determinate state ( $x$  and not  $y$ ), regardless of whether this aim, or the reaching of it, includes a full self-awareness of it and of the process leading to it.

real possibility of ceasing to be part of experience is thus intrinsic to the fact of currently being part of experience. I am here, but because I am only conditionally here, my being here is not necessary, but only contingent, hence, uncertain. To generalize, whatever is conditional is uncertain, whatever is uncertain is conditional.

Conditionality entails a whole array of needs. We need air, water, food, space, shelter, other beings, goods, and the list can go on indefinitely including very complex and sophisticated sorts of needs, which can be connected with currently present circumstances, but also with ruminations on past experiences, or anticipations of future scenarios. These needs are most often associated with emotions of some sort, like fear, anxiety, desire, love, craving, hope, despair, and so on. These needs can be (and often are) in contradiction with one another. Satisfying them all is a desperate challenge, either some exclude the other, or they cannot be satisfied all at the same time. The variety of possible permutations and scenarios in the domain of needfulness is endless.

Conditionality creates a situation of profound uncertainty, and this uncertainty is spelled out in a number of emotions, drives, and concerns, aimed at satisfying the various and contradicting needs that our condition creates. Biological survival and reproduction might be two among these needs, but they hardly exhaust the list of human needs, nor they can claim to be necessarily the most important (they can be valued as the most important, but this does not entail that they are inherently the most important). Human beings can decide to sacrifice survival in certain situations (think about bravery in war, or suicide), and they can also decide to give up on reproduction (think about the choice for a celibate life, or simply that of not procreating). However, this does *not* entail that the human condition will then be faced with less or simpler needs. No matter how one constructs one's priorities, to live a human life is to be faced with diverse, multiple, conflicting needs, which are experienced with urgency and profound emotional charges.

The self is constructed as a solution to this problem of being in need. In this condition, the self provides a hermeneutic structure to interpret one's reality and thus introduces a form of *mastery* over needs. Mastery entails putting some order among needs, creating a hierarchy, subordinating this to that, perhaps suppressing one and fostering another. Mastery leads to order, and when order

is applied to something uncertain, the uncertainty itself is apparently reduced, since now there seems to be a degree of control over this uncertainty. What is under control is no longer uncertain. Constructing a self is meant to provide this degree of mastery and, through it, to make it possible to navigate the uncertain and needful condition of human life. From this point of view, the self arises out of the activity of mastery, in the same way in which a musician masters an instrument by playing music.<sup>7</sup>

Let us now turn to the non-relational view that conceives of the self as something substantial, fully autonomous, perhaps even as an eternal entity. If one endorses this view, the problem of uncertainty seemingly disappears, since a non-relational eternal Self cannot be bothered by the uncertainty of conditionality; such a Self is simply not a conditional entity. But *this* is precisely how a non-relational view addresses the problem of uncertainty. A non-relational view of selfhood does not deny that there is a domain of uncertainty in experience, nor that the self is exposed to it, but it denies that the true Self genuinely belongs to that domain and argues for the possibility of ultimately transcending it.

Historically speaking, one common way in which this sort of discourse is phrased is in terms of a certain *soteriological* path. Soteriology identifies an encompassing and structural feature of the whole field of experience as inherently problematic, urges one to find an escape, and indicates a path or practice that can lead one to actually escaping from it. Death is one of the most ancient and pervasive symbols used for characterizing and expressing this problem.

•• 7 One might resist this view by arguing that the experience of being faced with uncertainty and having somehow to master it is not constant, and there are moments in which there is a sense of self, and yet no sense of being struggling with uncertainty. In reply, it can be pointed out that it is true that the sense of self (in general) is not constant. As a process, it can unfold more or less intensely, and at some point, it might stop and then resume afterwards. However, if a self is present, it has to be present within a complex manifold of experience. In this manifold, sorting out what should be appropriated as self from what is something else is already a very basic level of uncertainty. The fact that in ordinary and familiar scenarios the self is enacted in a seemingly smooth and automatic way is due only to habituation and repetition. Just observe how even relatively minor disruptions of the ordinary situation provoke a need for at least reconfiguring one's sense of self and one's attitude towards the new circumstances. The concern for uncertainty might be overlooked, and at times even ignored, but this happens only because at that time the self is relatively successful in mastering the uncertainty of its condition and can thus even forget about it. But the concern remains the root of the self, no matter how buried and silenced it might occasionally appear.

Death does not necessarily have to be constructed as sheer annihilation (conceiving of annihilation is possible only in a certain theoretical space), but it is always a powerful symbol of vulnerability, fragility, of the inevitability of humans to depart and be separated from whatever they are attached to. Death is the symbol of uncertainty, and of the specific form of suffering that comes with it.

In several cases, this soteriological discourse can be articulated in theistic terms: there is some inherent problem with ordinary life in this world (say, for instance, the original sin, or the pervasive illusory nature of experience, which make death seem very real and incumbent), and there is the possibility of reaching out to some domain of reality that is outside of this world (God, Being, an ultimate reality) and thus exempt from that problem. In moving from the former to the latter, the self finds itself be a Self, or it uncovers a way of being that makes it independent from the world of death that it leaves behind. The experience of this liberated or saved Self (the most important experiential underpinning of any non-relational theory of selfhood) is thus reached as the *result* of a soteriological transformation, which is entirely predicated on the urgency of solving the problem of uncertainty (symbolized by death).<sup>8</sup> Non-relational approaches to selfhood do not dispense with conceiving of the self in

•• 8 In terms of *post hoc* theorization, one might surely argue that the (eternal, non-relational) Self is a pre-given entity. However, this order of explanation subverts the actual order in which any experience of the alleged Self is accessed and conceived. It is hardly the case that a self-standing eternal Self is assumed as the immediate experiential point of departure of a soteriological quest, and for a good reason: the ordinary experience of selfhood seems to suggest that the self is changing, fragile, conditional. If this was not the case, the soteriological problem would not arise in the first place. Part of the soteriological path aimed at transcending this condition of uncertainty consists in revealing why, despite first glance appearances, the self has a much more robust, even everlasting nature, core, reality (it is actually a Self). Hence, soteriology usually begins by acknowledging *some* experience of selfhood, and by regarding it as inherently plagued by uncertainty, which makes this condition in need for 'salvation.' Following up on this initial observation, the (non-relational) soteriological path aims at uncovering a truer and more secure Self, which can be actually 'saved' from the uncertainty of its departing condition. But this Self has to be reached or uncovered through some sort of activity, process, transformation, event, since its nature and experience are far from obvious. Soteriology always comes with a sense of struggle and challenge. Hence, that Self is actually constructed through the soteriological process of articulating the uncertainty of selfhood and finding a particular solution to it. From this point of view, non-relational approaches aiming at reaching towards a self-standing Self might be seen as dialectically related to more or less articulated relational views, which are used as a departing trigger for the soteriological quest.

terms of mastery over uncertainty, but they provide a radically different solution to that problem compared to relational ones.

However, soteriology as such does not need to be framed in a theistic context, nor in fact has to support a non-relational account of selfhood. Any acknowledgement of a global predicament that concerns the fundamental uncertainty, instability, precarity of one's condition will pose an overall existential challenge that will provoke an urge to be addressed. This urge is the root of soteriology, regardless of how it is further declined and articulated. Appealing to some relation between the self and a transcendent order of being (in which the notion of a God might play a prominent role) is just *one* of the possible ways in which the soteriological challenge can be addressed, but it is neither the only nor an inevitable option. Historically speaking, non-relational accounts tended to phrase their soteriological path more explicitly and typically in a theistic context. This might also explain why relational accounts that steer away from theism tend to omit direct references to soteriology, assuming that the latter somehow forms a package deal with non-relational approaches. But this association is neither universal nor necessary. Once this is recognized, it becomes clear that even the relational conception of selfhood must have a more or less explicit soteriological dimension, even if this is not acknowledged, and no possibility of escaping the world of uncertainty and conditionality is offered. Like the self, soteriology is also a question, and it can receive a negative answer.

We can thus generalize by saying that any theory of the self (what the self is, how it works, what sorts of elements constitute it) is incomplete at best, and misguided at worst, if it does not take into account a soteriological dimension. The self is not like some sort of natural phenomenon, with respect to which various accounts can be articulated, in an attempt at finding the most satisfying. This approach presupposes that the self can be accurately described regardless of the way in which one understands and engages with it. But the self cannot be encountered 'out there' independently of the way in which one interprets and understands reality, including understanding oneself as a self. If the constructed nature of the self is taken seriously, then the very attempt at studying the self is also a way of constructing it and this in turn shapes how the self is understood and functions. The self can never be treated as if it was an entity

that could be observed without being changed and transformed in the process of being observed. The phenomenon of selfhood can become fully intelligible only if it is contextualized in a soteriological quest for making sense of the uncertainty of reality. In this scenario, even a theory of the self is part of the enactment of selfhood (the self is such that it can also elaborate a theory about itself), and it is in this respect that the theory (any theory) can become a (more or less explicit) soteriological tool.

### **0.2 A spectrum of possibilities**

Addressing the problem of relating tones with one another is essential to any form of music, no matter how that problem is actually solved. In the same way, addressing the soteriological problem of mastery is essential to the very possibility of carving up the phenomenon of selfhood. It is possible to outline different and even conflicting ways of theoretically articulating and conceptualizing selfhood, but it is *not* possible to experience selfhood (much less theorize about it) without facing the issue of mastery over uncertainty. Why? Because this issue is what defines the essential reason why the self is identified as a phenomenon in the first place, and then taken up as something in need of theoretical articulation in order to better face its inherent problematicity. Wherever there is self, there is a soteriology at play and an attempt at mastering a perceived form of uncertainty. The self is what is constructed by playing the soteriological game of mastering uncertainty.

Any further theoretical debate about the relational or non-relational nature of the self is best understood as a way of articulating possible solutions to how ensuring mastery or solving the soteriological problem. But if we seriously take this soteriological problem as the pivot around which all theorizing about the self turns, then the relational and non-relation approaches mentioned so far define just two poles of a much denser and richer spectrum that includes a whole continuous series of possibilities, which specify various ways of developing self-mastery. Think about this theoretical spectrum as a piano keyboard. In listening to the actual performance of a pianist (say, of Ligeti's *Musica Ricercata*), one will hear all and only sounds that can be traced back to one or another of the keys of the keyboard, even if that performance will not neces-

sarily make all of them heard. Some keys might remain silent, and yet they are still part of the keyboard. Other keys might become particularly present at some time, and yet they remain fully embedded in the whole keyboard spectrum, which is broader, more encompassing, and within which no particular key has any privileged right.

For now, we can begin to fix the two extreme poles of this spectrum. On the one hand, we have a fully relational account of selfhood, which can be taken to the point of completely reducing and dissolving the self in its conditioning conditions and grounds. From this point of view, the self is nothing but an epiphenomenon of physical and biological (or perhaps even social) processes. Call this the ‘immanent’ pole of the spectrum. On the other hand, a completely non-relational account can lead one to envisage the self as a disembodied entity, somehow independent from all becoming, perhaps in touch with some sort of eternal reality or being. This independency from relationality entails that the true nature of this Self should be such that it can be conceived apart from any other phenomenon or event. This true metaphysical Self can be so divorced from bodily and empirical components that it would be difficult to characterize it as anything individual and distinct. Call this the ‘transcendent’ pole of the spectrum. Notice how at both extreme poles, the self as we ordinarily conceive of it somehow disappears or is radically reconceptualized.

Between these two extremes, a variety of different intermediate positions is also possible. We can expect that various cultures in different times have actualized some of these positions (there is no need to assume that all theoretical options have been exhausted by historical instantiations), and hence constructed the self differently. Historical differences in the way in which the self is conceptualized and interpreted are thus a consequence of different strategies used to address the problem of self-mastery. The specific way in which self-mastery is understood and instantiated, thus, is indexed to specific historical conditions, even if the problem of self-mastery in general can be spelled out in trans-historical terms, as has been the case so far.

Moreover, since the self tends to dissolve the more one reaches towards both extreme poles, it is possible to expect some looping within this spectrum. The more one moves towards transcendence, the more rarefied and attenuated the self becomes, hence one might wonder whether this increasingly more



metaphysical and ineffable entity could genuinely provide an answer to uncertainty. This might urge us to explore the other side of the spectrum. But the more immanent the self becomes, the more apparent the utter contingency and uncertainty of the ground is, up to the point that the self does nothing but simply reaffirm this departing problem. Perhaps it is time then to move again towards the transcendent pole, and the cycle can go on. This movement is not necessarily dialectical, in the sense that there is no inner law that guarantees an advancement or some form of progress or intellectual gain over time. Continuous looping does not necessarily lead somewhere else from where one began.

Investigating the self as a spectrum of possible ways of constructing it, provides a middle-path between the use of theoretical models and constructions, and the need to do justice to how all phenomena are always indexed to historical and cultural contexts (in the case of human phenomena at least). The result is a theoretical topography that can then be used as a map or a model to order, structure, interpret, and further explore historically determined realities. Without some theoretical effort (which always entails both generalization and conceptualization) language would be reduced to a list of proper names, absolutely particular and idiosyncratic, communication would be impossible, interpretation would shrink to a dull witnessing, and there could be no philosophy at all. Yet, the danger nestled in any theoretical effort is that of forcing its own order upon the materials it explores, by dismissing what does not fit, or reshaping what is deviant. Perhaps this risk cannot be entirely avoided, and yet a risk by itself is not a sufficient reason to dismiss a whole enterprise. We can take it as a challenge and let the unfolding of the whole discussion be judged accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

•• 9 The method developed here is analogous to the one adopted by Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma* (2002). In his methodological postscript, Obeyesekere tries to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the idea of ‘structures’ (Lévi-Strauss) and ‘ideal types’ (Weber), and, on the other hand, that of ‘family resemblances’ (Wittgenstein). He rejects the idea that structures are somehow strongly embedded in phenomena, as a sort of essentialist and immutable core that transcends historicity, but he also points out the difficulties inherent in trying to operationalize the idea of ‘family resemblances’ and study them in a systematic way. His goal is to study structures as artificial devices constructed by the researcher in order to uncover structural patterns that are immanent in the phenomena and empirical data. He explains (2002, 353): ‘resemblances exist because they are the demonstrably expectable consequences of a common form or structure (family); but that common form or structure would not have been known to us but for already available empirical information on family resemblances. Hence the logic is deliberately circular, with the one illuminating the other on the model of

Conceiving of our theoretical effort (the idea of mapping a spectrum of possible ways of constructing the self) as necessarily embedded in historical materials, leads us to reject the possibility of an a priori, and ahistorical theory of what the self is. This theory would be either meaningless, because it would deal with a self that can be found nowhere in human history on earth, or it would be affected by a problematic blind-spot, the fact that the theory itself is developed and indexed to a specific historical context, while ignoring how this context actually affects or shape the theory. But if the need for historicity is acknowledged, then building a spectrum of possible ways of constructing the self permits situating one's own standpoint amidst different historical theories and approaches to the problem of the self. In turn, this allows for comparison and assessment of how they fare with respect to the issue of uncertainty that all these theories aim to address. In principle, it might also be possible to falsify this approach (or isolate exceptions to it) by showing that in a given context, there is some theory or conception of the self at work, and yet this theory or conception has absolutely nothing to do with mastering uncertainty.

In proposing this comparison, though, we need to balance two further considerations. On the one hand, we need to preserve a certain axiological charity with respect to the various historical views that will be discussed. The idea of a spectrum of possibilities reveals how certain ways of constructing the self are indexed to particular contexts, in which uncertainty can manifest and be better handled in one way rather than in another. There is no need to assume that uncertainty will manifest and be addressed in exactly the same way across all time, places, and cultures. What we do assume is that in all cultures in which the self is constructed, something that can be meaningfully understood as 'uncertainty' is recognized and addressed. Again, this assumption can be falsified, or exceptions can be found, but for the moment we shall take it as our departing working hypothesis.

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the hermeneutical circle. The notion of structure formulated above has emancipatory implications for ethnography, if not for the other human sciences, freeing it from the stultifying preoccupation with cultural differences, emphasis on the uniqueness of each culture, placing cultures in glass cases as it were, museologizing their relativity and in effect exoticizing them and treating them as alien, unrelated to what is often unrealistically dubbed "Western" civilization.'

In this perspective, it is likely that in a given context only a certain segment of the whole spectrum would appear viable, or even intelligible. If we take seriously the idea that conditions shape how we experience and understand reality, then we should also conclude that, at any given point, we might not have access to the full spectrum of possible interpretations, because some of these interpretations are blocked, hindered, or hidden by the local conditions at work. Insofar as a certain way of mastering uncertainty in a given context is seemingly successful or receives any other form of normative support, it can become paradigmatic for its context, its presence can be taken for granted, and it can even prevent the emergence of other alternative forms. However, as we are going to see, in many cases it is also possible to uncover how the emergence of a certain model of selfhood progressively led, in its unfolding, to the opening up of new possibilities.

Axiological charity means an awareness of the fact that the success or potential problems that can be imputed or associated with a specific way of constructing the self need to be understood primarily from the point of view of the concrete conditions that give rise to it. Evaluation cannot be made from nowhere. But this also entails that axiological charity (the attitude of openness and willingness to understand the values of another) cannot be equated with axiological neutrality (the judgment that all values are equally valuable or else incommensurable among each other). Precisely because we have to operate from *somewhere*, we cannot be entirely neutral, we cannot completely disavow our own current situatedness. The best that can be done, in this respect, is to make this situatedness explicit from the beginning and thus remain committed to a twofold oath: trying to judge particular views from an insider point of view, for as much as this is possible, *and* remaining aware of how our own situated position steer our way of questioning, investigating and constructing various views.

The standpoint to which the following discussion is indexed is based on two fundamental components. First, a twenty-first century standpoint about the historical trajectory of Western culture up to now, including how it has been shaped by multiple and repeated encounters with other cultures around the globe. Second, a specific way in which certain core elements of the ancient Buddhist tradition (the emphasis on the uncertainty of phenomena, the problems associated with most forms of selfhood and mastery, and the ideal of

universal friendliness as a way out) align with some Western sensitivities, as if they were able to unlock long-avoided attitudes. These two components resonate in the enharmonic texture of the theme we started from.

For those who might be surprised by this combination, it might be helpful to remember that it would be a gross historical fallacy to regard Western culture as something that developed alone in its own niche. The history of the West is the history of its symbiotic relations (often based on war, conquest, domination, exploitation, but not necessarily nor always so) with the rest of the world, including the Asian continent and its cultures (to which the same idea of non-isolation should apply). In this global perspective, Buddhist ideas were spread widely for two and half millennia throughout the whole of Asia and they have never been too far out of reach for Westerners, although they might not have been acknowledged.<sup>10</sup> But it is obvious that since the nineteenth century at least, European and North-American audiences had access and were openly exposed to Buddhist ideas and materials.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, since the early twentieth century, and increasingly so for the last sixty years, Westerners even moved to Buddhist countries and took ordination there as Buddhist monks or nuns, devoting part of their time to popularizing not only ideas, but also Buddhist practices and ways of life in the West.<sup>12</sup> These few remarks should be

•• 10 For instance, Jonardon Ganeri, in his *The Concealed Art of the Soul* (2007), appendix C (pp. 228-231), shows how Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) included discussions of well-recognizable Buddhist doctrines (among which emptiness and *karma*) in his widely read and influential *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (first ed. 1697). Bayle could have been familiar with these views through the reports of Jesuits missionaries in China.

11 Besides the specific cases of William James (Lecture Four) and Friedrich Nietzsche (Lectures Eleven) to be discussed later, Andrew Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (1990), provides an enjoyable case study of the evolution of Western attitudes in the interpretation of one of the most famous Buddhist philosophers.

12 To mention but a very few examples among countless cases: Nyanaponika Mahathera (1901-1994), originally German, ordained as a Theravāda monk in Sri-Lanka, contributed immensely to the popularization and understanding of ancient meditation practices through a number of publications and the foundation of the Buddhist Publication Society. Remaining in the same tradition, Ñāṇavīra Thera (1920-1965), originally British, offered a highly provocative and controversial interpretation of core concepts of ancient Buddhist philosophy in his writings (the most important is *Notes on Dhamma*, 1963), in which he creates an original interplay between Pāli sources and Western philosophical views (mostly drawing from phenomenology and existentialism). Operating on another front, Ajahn Sumedo (born 1934), originally American, ordained in Thailand and studied with Thai forest master Ajahn Chah (1918-1992), who entrusted him with the task of establishing a Western branch of the Thai forest tradition, which is currently one of the most conspicuous brands of Theravāda Buddhist monasticism outside of Asia.

sufficient to prevent any naïve sense of some exotic juxtaposition when Buddhism and Western culture are associated. In all historical likelihood, they are old acquaintances.

Making the standpoint of this exploration explicit is a way of formulating a number of questions that we shall address in the following series of lectures. Can the interaction between these two components lead to a distinctive way of understanding selfhood? Where can this understanding be located in the broader spectrum of possible ways of constructing the self? Is this understanding feasible in our current situation? What potential does it have for improving our future?

Addressing these questions will take up the rest of this series. In order to preliminarily set the stage for the ensuing discussion, though, we shall now take a closer look at three Western philosophers who explored how the problem of the self emerged at different points in Western culture: Pierre Hadot (1922-2010), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), and Charles Taylor (born 1931). Their discussions will help us to further framing our departing theme, fleshing out some details of what we presented as a relational account, better understanding why this account emerged as the currently most widespread, and perhaps appreciate why the Buddhist overtones of our departing theme are in fact not that foreign to Western views.

### **0.3 Philosophy as self-transformation**

Pierre Hadot has forcefully advocated for a change in the way in which we look at philosophy. Discussing Hellenistic philosophy in particular, he contended that philosophy was constructed primarily as a way of life, built through daily practice of ‘spiritual exercises.’ This philosophical life was crucially concerned with operating a reshaping (a conversion) of the self. In his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (first French edition 1981), Hadot writes:

Our claim has been, then, that philosophy in antiquity was a spiritual exercise. As for philosophical theories: they were either placed explicitly in the service of spiritual practice, as was the case in Stoicism and Epicureanism, or else they were taken as the objects of intellectual exercises, that is, of a

practice of the contemplative life which, in the last analysis, was itself nothing other than a spiritual exercise. It is impossible to understand the philosophical theories of antiquity without taking into account this concrete perspective, since this is what gives them their true meaning. When we read the works of ancient philosophers, the perspective we have described should cause us to give increased attention to the existential attitudes underlying the dogmatic edifices we encounter. [...] A philosopher's works cannot be interpreted without taking into consideration the concrete situation which gave birth to them. They are the products of a philosophical school, in the most concrete sense of the term, in which a master forms his disciples, trying to guide them to self-transformation and realization. (Hadot 1995, 104)

This passage captures the core business of ancient philosophy in Hadot's reconstruction.<sup>13</sup> According to him, we can distinguish between philosophical discourse and philosophical life (i.e., philosophy proper). Philosophical discourse is akin to musical theory, is a form of theoretical knowledge aimed at informing a certain practice, which is the actual core business one should aim at.<sup>14</sup> In the ancient Hellenistic period, we encounter six main schools:<sup>15</sup> the

•• 13 A similar account was developed at more or less at the same time by Martha Nussbaum, in her *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994 [second ed. 2009]). Nussbaum stresses how Hellenistic philosophy is *therapeutic* in the sense that it aims at achieving an existential transformation in the way in which individuals perceive and interpret their own lives. In her interpretation, this therapeutic model is properly *philosophical* (and thus different from other forms of self-transformation) because of a distinctive use of rational argumentation fostered by philosophical schools. Nussbaum also draws attention to a potential shortcoming of the therapeutic model, in which a more or less marked asymmetry between the master and pupil (physician and patient) can undermine the latter's autonomy. For an overview of these themes, see in particular *The Therapy of Desire*, chapter 13.

14 Why, how, and when did philosophy become a purely theoretical activity? Hadot (1995, 127-144) suggests that, in the beginning of the common era, Christian philosophy incorporated and adapted Greek spiritual exercises. But when, with the institution of universities in the Middle Ages, philosophy became a discipline propaedeutic for theology, it was somehow reduced to a purely theoretical field, divorced from those spiritual exercises that had, in the meantime, been assimilated by Christian contemplative practices. If today one (at least) powerful view of philosophy seeks to present it as a theoretical body of knowledge, relatively disconnected from actual practice, this fact can find some of its roots in the way that Hellenistic philosophy was first Christianized, and then torn apart.

15 In Hadot's chronology, this period spans roughly a thousand years: 'Our history begins with the highly symbolic event represented by Alexander's fantastic expedition and with the emergence of the world called Hellenistic, that is, with the emergence of this new form of Greek civilization beginning

Platonic (including Neoplatonism), the Aristotelian, the Epicurean, the Stoic, the Sceptic, and the Cynic. Each of them offers its distinctive method and path to achieve a certain intellectual, existential, and practical transformation. This approach presupposes that ordinary, non-philosophical existence is problematic. As Hadot explains:

In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly living, it was taught, because they are dominated by worries. Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions [...]. Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation. (Hadot 1995, 83)

Notice that passions are not neutral phenomena. All passions arise with a clear main character, the self; in fact, *myself*. One cannot be passionate by proxy. One cannot love or hate, fear or hope *via* someone or something else. When there is love, hatred, fear, hope, anxiety, craving, and all the rest, *there I am*, actor and hero in this whole drama. Ordinary life is profoundly shaped by personal concerns that centers around myself and my passions, my desires, and my drives. Ancient Hellenistic philosophy aims at transforming this ordinary way of life. Passionate life is stressful, even dreadful. Philosophy provides a therapy, a way of escaping this turmoil. Here, we encounter some of the main ingredients of the general claim introduced at the beginning: the problem of uncertainty (expressed by conflicting needs and passions), the self as a charac-

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from the moment when Alexander's conquests and, in their wake, the rise of kingdoms extended this civilization into the barbarian world from Egypt to the borders of India, and then brought it into contact with the most diverse nations and civilizations. The result is a kind of distance, a historical distance, between Hellenistic thought and the Greek tradition preceding it. Our history then covers the rise of Rome, which will lead to the destruction of the Hellenistic kingdoms, brought to completion in 30 BC with Cleopatra's death. After that will come the expansion of the Roman empire, the rise and triumph of Christianity, the barbarian invasions, and the end of the Western empire.' (Hadot 1995, 53).

ter faced with this problem, and the overall relational hermeneutic context of this drama, in which I have to understand and interpret where these various drives lead, and decide accordingly what to do with them, whether be carried by them, or oppose some resistance.

Despite the differences among the various schools, Hadot clarifies that the ultimate goal of Hellenistic philosophical practice is that of reaching some sort of universal viewpoint on existence. In commenting on the exercise of contemplating death, he remarks:

We can perhaps get a better idea of this spiritual exercise if we understand it as an attempt to liberate ourselves from a partial, passionate point of view—linked to the senses and the body—so as to rise to the universal, normative viewpoint of thought, submitting ourselves to the demands of the Logos and the norm of the Good. Training for death is training to die to one's individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity. (Hadot 1995, 94-95)

A philosophical life is a life that strives (at least) to free the individual from their own passionate subjectivity, transforming 'myself' into a universal spectator of the whole universe, detached from the smallness and trifling nature of daily human affairs. Spiritual exercises are aimed at overcoming individuality, transcending the passionate self (myself), and reaching some kind of more universal, dispassionate, viewpoint. Here we have another ingredient of the theme introduced above: *one way* of achieving self-mastery (or of imposing an order on the passions and needs that agitate ordinary life) is by developing a superior point of view on the whole of reality.

To achieve this goal, Hadot emphasizes a number of practical exercises that need to be continuously repeated in order to train the individual's understanding to progressively acquire this new philosophical perspective on existence and life. These exercises include the memorization of short and snappy dogmatic rules, maxims that can be used and applied in any circumstance in order to subsume the event at hand under the worldview that one is supposed to endorse. These rules are hermeneutic schemes for applying the right meaning to what happens, in order to disempower or prevent passionate ordinary reac-



tions. Another core aspect of philosophical practice is the continuous attention to oneself and one's action; what in today's jargon (inspired by Buddhist meditation) would be called 'mindfulness'.<sup>16</sup> The idea is to live each and every moment while remaining as present as possible to what is currently happening, without being dragged away by rumination about the past or concerns for the future. Through this sort of constant mindfulness, one is then also invited to develop an ability for self-analysis, a watchfulness about one's own behaviors and drives, and the skillfulness in subjecting them to scrutiny on the basis on the principles one has learned and memorized. Instead of letting instinct guide one's life, the philosopher is supremely in control of oneself and one's action; a truly autonomous individual who is able to decide how to think and act based on what they believe to be true and conducive to what is truly good.

Philosophical exercises also include sustained contemplation on specific themes. Two of the most common are death and nature. Death contemplation is recommended as a way of detaching oneself from one's current condition, seeing through the uncertainty and fragility of human life, for the sake of becoming more dispassionate towards it (especially for the Stoics), or appreciating the immense and simple pleasure of having the opportunity to be alive, to exist here and now, even if only for a short time (especially for the Epicureans). The contemplation of nature is also crucial, since it can have direct implications for how one understands events and circumstances of life. Contemplating the universe as the result of chance (like the Epicureans) can be a means of weakening fear of the gods and the afterlife. Alternatively, contemplation of the inevitable necessity of all events (propounded by the Stoics) can lead one to embrace all that happens as inevitable, as a result of a whole nexus of causes and conditions, ultimately ruled by its own logic and rational providence. *Amor fati*, the ability to positively will one's own fate, even if one cannot ultimately decide it, is seen as cutting through the struggle that ordinarily absorbs much of people's energies in the idle effort of managing their external conditions. Energy can be more wisely invested in the domain of events on which one has direct control, namely, making wise judgments and acting accordingly.

•• 16 For further discussion of this point, see Massimo Pigliucci, 'Prosoché as Stoic Mindfulness' (2022).

Although this short summary is far from exhaustive, it gives a taste of the sort of practice that Hellenistic philosophy was supposed to entail. Hadot's investigation is particularly interesting for how it derives these introspective practices (exercises one does on oneself by looking into one's own thoughts and passions) from the dialogic practice cultivated by Socrates. Socratic dialogue is a *social* practice, something one does with others for the sake of thoroughly investigating one's own attitudes, beliefs, and views. However, this dialogic practice can be internalized, and one can then carry it out autonomously. Plato almost takes for granted that thought is the inner dialogue of the soul with itself (*Sophist* 263e). Philosophical exercises and Hellenistic meditations can be seen as an interiorized form of Socratic dialogue. This remark ties in with another aspect touched above, namely, the fact that the construction of the self is always embedded in a relational net. Practices that originate in the interaction among distinct selves can then become interiorized and carried over in relative solitude.

Hadot's discussion illustrates how Hellenistic schools construct selfhood in relation to a soteriological problem connected with the uncertainty of human condition and the bondage imposed by the passions. These schools differ with respect to how they would further specify their solution and how that would relate to the spectrum we introduced above. Platonists and Stoics are more comfortable moving towards the transcendent pole, while Epicurean and Cynics move rather towards the immanent pole. However, looking more closely at the specific challenges posed by passionate life, can reveal further important features of Greek conceptualizations of selfhood.

#### 0.4 Subjectivization

In the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, entitled *The Use of Pleasure* (first French edition 1984), Michel Foucault focuses on how sexuality became an object of moral reflection in classical Greek culture during the fourth century BCE. From a methodological point of view, his notion of 'problematization' is worth emphasizing. Problematization is the interest for observing how a certain phenomenon emerges as a topic for moral reflection and raises the problem of identifying the right way of engaging with that topic. Foucault's research focuses on

the *problematizations* through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought—and the practices on the basis of which these problematizations are formed. The archaeological dimension of the analysis made it possible to examine the forms themselves; its genealogical dimension enabled me to analyze their formation out of the practices and the modifications undergone by the latter. [...] I would like to show how, in classical antiquity, sexual activity and sexual pleasures were problematized through practices of the self, bringing into play the criteria of an ‘aesthetics of existence.’ (Foucault 1985, 11-12)

Notice the two dimensions, archeological and genealogical. The first consists in recovering the most salient aspects concerned with the topic that is problematized, while the second uncovers the way in which the problematization itself evolved over time. The underpinning assumption is that problematizations are always historically situated and change over time. At some point, a specific way of being, living, interacting becomes a problem. It constitutes a situation with respect to which established habits seem no longer entirely sufficient to interpret it or guide individuals in their dealing with it. More reflection is needed. The situation must be scrutinized, its assumptions and implications unpacked. It is in this process that the self emerges as a subject of renewed scrutiny, its agency is investigated more carefully, and its meaningful engagement with a domain of reality is explicitly put under discussion. This brings us to a second general aspect of Foucault’s investigation that is relevant for our purposes, namely, his idea of *subjectivization*. To be a subject is not an ontological pregiven a priori condition, but rather a process that arises and evolves. Rather than ‘subjects’ we should talk about how certain forms of interaction give rise to the emergence of specific forms of subjectivity. This ties in with the constructed and relational nature of the self already evoked in our departing theme.

Foucault explains:

for an action to be ‘moral,’ it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts conforming to a rule, a law, or a value. Of course all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with

the self. The latter is not simply ‘self-awareness’ but self-formation as an ‘ethical subject,’ a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without ‘modes of subjectivation’ and an ‘ascetics’ or ‘practices of the self’ that support them. Moral action is indissociable from these forms of self-activity, and they do not differ any less from one morality to another than do the systems of values, rules, and interdictions. (Foucault 1985, 28)

This provides an illustration of the claim that the self is not just an unfolding cognitive process, but also an ethical process in which selfhood is established in the effort and struggle for self-mastery. Foucault’s discussion illustrates this general point by investigating various ways that classical Greek authors reflected on the use of pleasures associated with sexual activity. One core aspect that emerges from this ‘archeological’ reconstruction is an emphasis on *temperance* (Greek *sophrosyne*) and *self-mastery* (Greek *enkrateia*).

Self-mastery is the virtue being able to discern various passionate drives (in this case, sexual impulses), and their potential threats (in this case, the tendency for sexual drives to become obsessive and excessive and enslave the person subject to them). One endowed with self-mastery is able to withstand the power of these drives and overrule them. The opposite of self-mastery is weakness of will (Greek *akrasia*), where one sees the need of resisting impulses, but nonetheless does not manage to do so. Self-mastery eventually leads to temperance, which is the condition in which excessive drives no longer arise and one has fully mastered passions to such an extent that they are completely under control. In this sense, temperance is the achievement and fulfilment of self-mastery. Intemperance, meanwhile, is a condition of complete lack of restraint and deliberate indulgence.

Greek moralists extol temperance and self-mastery, and they consider weakness of will and intemperance as vices. Behind this judgment, Foucault identi-

fies a powerful dichotomy that shapes Greek thought, namely, the divide between activity and passivity. Activity is associated with a moral sublimation of warrior ethics. The active one is the one able to subjugate enemies, shows his strength against them, and win battles. Activity is thus valued as a key attitude of the Greek 'free man' and temperance transposes this ideal of activity in the domain of emotional life and sexual conduct. One's sexual drives become yet another domain in which one is called to show one's own strength, by imposing one's will upon them, and by thus showing one's control and mastery over them. The main concern that leads to the problematization of sexual pleasures is their potential for threatening the activity of the free man. How can one be genuinely free and active in the public space, if one is not able to command one's own impulses?

This whole reflection comes with powerful gender overtones and stereotypes, as Foucault stresses:

What was affirmed through this conception of mastery as active freedom was the 'virile' character of moderation. Just as in the household it was the man who ruled, and in the city it was right that only men should exercise power, and not slaves, children, or women, so each man was supposed to make his manly qualities prevail within himself. Self-mastery was a way of being a man with respect to oneself; that is, a way of commanding what needed commanding, of coercing what was not capable of self-direction, of imposing principles of reason on what was wanting in reason; in short, it was a way of being active in relation to what was by nature passive and ought to remain so. In this ethics of men made for men, the development of the self as an ethical subject consisted in setting up a structure of virility that related oneself to oneself. It was by being a man with respect to oneself that one would be able to control and master the manly activity that one directed toward others in sexual practice. What one must aim for in the agonistic contest with oneself and in the struggle to control the desires was the point where the relationship with oneself would become isomorphic with the relationship of domination, hierarchy, and authority that one expected, as a man, a free man, to establish over his inferiors; and it was this prior condition of 'ethical virility' that provided one with the right sense of

proportion for the exercise of ‘sexual virility,’ according to a model of ‘social virility.’ In the use of male pleasures, one had to be virile with regard to oneself, just as one was masculine in one’s social role. In the full meaning of the word, moderation was a man’s virtue. (Foucault 1985, 82-83)

In this passage we can find a number of elements we have already touched upon. The self is relationally constructed. Given a certain historical situation (in this case, Greek culture in the fourth century BCE), the self emerges as the hermeneutic device to face a certain problem. On the background of Foucault’s analysis, we see the problem of domination and control, which characterizes the warrior ethics of the Greek ‘free man.’ This ideal is further spelled out and applied in various domains, including one’s relation with one’s own emotions, drives and pleasures. In each case, there is a potential source of uncertainty, the ever-present possibility of conflict or war. In each case, the model of activity is applied in order to impose a certain form of order upon experience. This form of order is rather simple, it is based on the asymmetrical relation between a dominant principle (which becomes associated with the self) and its object of domination.

Notice the paradox of this view. By introducing a sharp difference between dominator and dominated, this form of order creates a space in experience that is directly interpreted as something that could potentially overthrow the dominator. By constructing sexual drives as potential enemies capable of establishing a tyranny in oneself, the interpretation actively empowers these drives and somehow preserves the possibility for their rebellion. If one has to gain dominion over an enemy, the enemy must be real, and the stronger the enemy, the greater the glory that follows from defeating it. But this also entails that the enemy—and in turn, the uncertainty—is real. This particular way of constructing the self also reveals its own fragility; a fragility generated from within the form of order that it enacts. Self-mastery evokes in its own structure the possibility of self-slavery.

Notice also how much this conception of the self is embedded in the specific historical circumstances from which it emerges. Classical Greek culture was heavily unequal. Only a relatively small minority of male population enjoyed rights and freedom, while women and slaves were aligned with the

‘passive’ side of reality; that which has to be dominated. From a point of view internal to this culture, the situation might appear entirely normal, and the view of the self that comes with it just an objective feature of reality. However, from today’s point of view we can perhaps more easily spot the problems inherent in this way of structuring social relationships, and thus also selfhood. More importantly, historical retrospective allows us to debunk the impression of ‘naturalness’ associated with this view of the self. And if this can be done with classical Greek conceptions of the self, there seems to be no reason why this could and should not be equally done for *any* conception thereof. As Foucault remarks in his conclusions:

The sexual austerity that was prematurely recommended by Greek philosophy is not rooted in the timelessness of a law that would take the historically diverse forms of repression, one after the other. It belongs to a history that is more decisive for comprehending the transformations of moral experience than the history of codes: a history of ‘ethics,’ understood as the elaboration of a form of relation to self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct. (Foucault 1985, 251)

The way the self is constructed in classical Greek culture in relation to sexual pleasures is somehow different from the way it was constructed in the Hellenistic period. This is something that Foucault himself acknowledges and explores further in the third volume of his *History of Sexuality, The Care of the Self* (first French edition 1984). For present purposes, we can stress just two general points. First, in conceiving of the self in terms of the dichotomy between activity and passivity, the model discussed so far does not primarily aim at relinquishment or unyoking (contrary to the Hellenistic view). In struggling to be fully active and dominating, one’s aim is not to escape a certain situation, but rather to shape and maintain it in a certain form, within certain parameters. Second, this same model is inherently social, in the sense that it is built on a thorough circulation between social standards and stereotypes and their internalization by the individual in his own inner life (which leads the individual to enact certain social behaviors, which in turn reinforce the current standards, and so on). The self discussed in *The Use of Pleasure* is the self of a male

householder, of a free man, a political citizen, someone whose concerns include establishing, maintaining, and expanding his fortune and possessions, which include one's family, wealth, prestige.

Compare this model with the one Hadot detected in Hellenistic schools. Certainly, the Stoics emphasized the need for personal commitment in political life. Exhibit one: Marcus Aurelius. Exhibit two: Seneca. Nonetheless, their ideal of transcending of the self (and the accompanying more stringent rigorism in the practice of sexual pleasures) does not seem to be prominent in (actually, it is at odds with) the model based on the active-passive dichotomy. In transcending the world of the senses, in merging into the universal nature, that dichotomy is no longer so relevant and one does not have to worry about his role remaining that of the free dominator. Foucault seems to think that the two models progress diachronically, with the Hellenistic one following the classical.<sup>17</sup> This might not be the case, since hints at transcendence are clearly present in Greek culture from very archaic times (as we shall discuss in Lectures Seven and Eight). But the two models are genuinely different, even if they have *some* relation with each other, nor they can be subsumed under a unified and more coherent model. They are two points on the same spectrum: the Hellenistic model verging more towards the extreme poles of transcendence (Stoics, Platonist) or immanence (Epicureans, Cynics), and the classical model remaining more within the middle range of the spectrum. Why and how one might opt for one or the other is something that remains to be investigated further.

What is clear is that in exploring the perpetual struggle to impose an order upon the uncertainty of experience, the self emerges as a tragic character, and history as its stage. In fact, historicity exposes the relational nature of the self. We can then expand the focus of our discussion, by looking at one way of narrating the long-term evolution of Western conceptions of selfhood.

•• 17 Hadot had some qualms with Foucault's idea of the 'care for the self' (cf. Hadot 1995, 206-212) but here we shall pass over this debate between the two philosophers. For an engaging critical discussion with Foucault's theory of the self, especially in the context of today's feminist and poststructuralist debates, see Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism* (1992).



## 0.5 Inwardness and ordinary life

Hadot drew attention to practices of the self in Hellenistic culture aimed at embracing a sort of cosmic view that would transcend the individual standpoint in all its limitations and situatedness. Foucault's discussion of classical Greek self-mastery over pleasures illustrates a different account, located closer to the middle of the spectrum. Here, self-mastery does not lead one to transcend the individual, but rather to assert its power and dominion over the contingency introduced by emotional drives. In both cases, ancient Greek selves are strongly rooted in their surroundings, both at the cosmical level and at the social level. However, today's Western culture is often characterized by a marked uneasiness towards transcendence (*pace* Platonic and Stoic schools) and also towards the sort of moralistic self-mastery described by Foucault. This is usually captured under the (admittedly broad and vague) rubric of 'secularization' that seems to shift the conception of the self more markedly towards the other extreme of our spectrum, one where the difference between the self and its biological ground is dissolved in the name of immanence and embodiment. How did we get here?

Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of the Self* (1989) offers a broad reconstruction of how the process of subjectivization (to use Foucault's term) is constitutively related to a moral space shaped by the acknowledgment of certain goods that make life meaningful for the individuals who recognize them. By regulating their life in relation to these goods, the individual actually constructs their own identity and its place amidst others. These goods provide a general orientation in life and allow for the constitution of an order or hierarchy within which actions can be judged, and overall progress or regress with respect to the good(s) assessed. This picture not only offers a generalization of the cases we discussed above, but also stresses a further aspect: human life can be ruled by *multiple* goods, and they can be in conflict with one another, thus creating moral and existential dilemmas. Taylor's reconstruction focuses on the tortuous way in which the competition between potentially conflicting goods led modern Western conceptions of selfhood to tilt towards the more secularized and immanent pole of our spectrum that is now dominant.

Taylor's book was published at a great watershed in contemporary history, the year of fall of the Berlin Wall (the symbol of the fall of a certain way of shaping the world's geopolitics), and just three years after the Chernobyl disaster, which can now be regarded as an appetizer for the sort of global ecological meltdown that marks our days. The book is complex and multilayered. One strand is polemical and takes issue with a certain narrowness of conceiving of morality, reducing it either to a theory of obligation (what it is right or wrong to do), or to a purely proceduralist structure (what are the right methods to ensure appropriate action). A second strand is historical or 'archeological' in Foucault's sense, namely, it provides a reconstruction of the various and diverse transformations that took place in European thought (mostly French, British and partially German) and North-America (mostly in the United States) from the seventeenth century up to the early twentieth century, out of which the 'modern' way of being a self progressively emerged. Yet a third strand argues more directly for an account of what it means to be a self in the first place, and in light of this account challenges current alternative views as too simplistic, and discerns in the history of modern identity a genealogy of this account. For present purposes, we shall focus on this latter aspect of Taylor's discussion, substantiating it with some of his claims derived from the historical emergence of modern identity, and leaving the more polemical aspects to the interested readers of the whole work.

One way Taylor announces his general view of identity is by framing it in terms of orientation. He writes:

I want to defend the strong thesis that doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; otherwise put, that the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations. Moreover, this is not meant just as a contingently true psychological fact about human beings, which could perhaps turn out one day not to hold for some exceptional individual or new type, some superman of disengaged objectification. Rather the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood. [...] To know who I am is

a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (Taylor 1989, 27)

The last few sentences in the above quote makes it clear that Taylor's discussion cannot be confined to a study of cultural or social norms. Instead, he aims to show such norms are constitutive of the way selfhood is constructed. In his subsequent discussion, Taylor adds two important refinements to this view. First, the question of orientation is essentially framed in terms of ultimate or constitutive *goods* (what he calls 'hypergoods,' §3.2, 63). These goods are not only the highest values that one recognizes, but they are also used as criteria for judging other goods as more or less consistent with them, more or less subordinated, to be accepted to some extent, or to be rejected altogether. Second, as a result, (hyper)goods provide criteria for assessing one's moral progress in terms of advance or regress from the sort of aim or objective that these goods establish. Being a self is not something static. It is not a condition in which one just occupies the same place. Being a self is a process of moving towards or away from those centers of value that bestow meaning on one's existence and life. The self is not independent from the goods that set the trajectory of its becoming; the self *is* this becoming, which is framed in relation to certain goods. From this point of view, the self faces two crucial moral issues: on the one hand, the problem of assessing progress or regress with respect to a given good, and on the other hand, the possibility of subscribing to multiple and potentially conflicting goods, with all the dilemmas that this entails.

Taylor's historical analysis uncovers how Western conceptions of modernity are shaped by their endorsement of multiple and conflicting goods. The polemical side of Taylor's discussion targets what he considers overly simply or quick attempts to dismiss or dissolve this problem. The two strands are related to one another. Most often, dismissing the dilemmas and conflicts entailed by subscribing to multiple goods is based on what Taylor calls 'inarticulacy,' the inability (intended or not) to explicitly spell out the nature of the various goods to

which we subscribe and the weight and meaning we see in them. But in order to avoid inarticulacy, historical research is needed. As Taylor explains:

the path to articulacy has to be a historical one. We have to try to trace the development of our modern outlooks. And since we are dealing not just with philosophers' doctrines but also with the great unsaid that underlies widespread attitudes in our civilization, the history can't just be one of express belief, of philosophical theories, but must also include what has been called 'mentalités.' We have to try to open out by this study a new understanding of ourselves and of our deepest moral allegiances. (Taylor 1989, 104-105)

This historical project takes up almost four fifths of Taylor's book. To simplify it, the main theme concerns the idea of turning towards 'inwardness.' In Taylor's view, ancient Greek mentality is based on a direct access to a pre-given ontological order, which is available for inspection by the sufficiently wise. The order (the good) is 'out there,' it only needs to be looked upon. What we discussed in connection with Hadot and Foucault's accounts helps to illustrate this point. One turning point in this story is constituted by Augustine's merging of a Greek philosophical outlook (mostly based on Platonic and especially Neoplatonic elements) and Christian faith. For Augustine, the order of reality is established by God, but in order to see this order, one cannot simply look 'out there' in the natural world of the sensory objects. One has first of all to look 'inside,' namely, at one's own *ability to know*. This inner knower is the one who actually sees through the eye, and yet it is not the same as the eye itself. I see things, but I am not the sheer act of seeing, much less the objects I see. I am more than this living consciousness that sees through the eyes. In Augustine's view, this sort of contemplation reveals that there is a light in us, a light of reason and life, which reveals something much greater, namely, God itself. God is this inner life and inhabits this inner consciousness that makes us capable of knowledge. What we see, in fact, we see only because of this union with God, because we see 'in' God. In order to express this relation, Augustine exploits the spatial metaphor of inwardness in order to stress that this principle is not something we find out there, in front of us, but something that is found by

moving in the opposite direction, turning inwardly, *in interiore homine* ('within the human being').

As Taylor emphasises, Augustine sees the moving inward as the first step to moving upward, namely, towards God. This latter step will be progressively eroded starting from the early modern period. The story that Taylor traces is complex and multifaceted, but one powerful line takes philosophers like Descartes and Locke as those who fully articulate the idea that we can find in ourself a rational order, which empowers us to live and deal with the world in a new way, based on a degree of disengagement and control. Commenting on Descartes, Taylor writes:

Descartes's ethic, just as much as his epistemology, calls for disengagement from world and body and the assumption of an instrumental stance towards them. It is of the essence of reason, both speculative and practical, that it push us to disengage. Obviously, this involves a very different concept of reason from Plato's. Just as correct knowledge doesn't come anymore from our opening ourselves to the order of (ontic) Ideas but from our constructing an order of (intra-mental) ideas according to the canons of evidence; so when the hegemony of reason becomes rational control, it is no longer understood as our being attuned to the order of things we find in the cosmos, but rather as our life being shaped by the orders which we construct according to the demands of reason's dominance. (Taylor 1989, 155)

The rational control of reason is linked with a new attitude that understands and handles the world as an instrument for achieving certain goals, which are themselves set, scrutinized, and validated by reason. This instrumental attitude is born of a self-reflexivity that is different from the sort of reflexivity that can be found in ancient Greek thought, since it is no longer experienced as an attunement to the pregiven order of the cosmos, but rather as a discovery based on one's own inborn ability to use reason well. This new stance tends to go against the grain of received tradition and authority and instead emphasizes the importance of critical evaluation (an emphasis that can hardly disguise its Protestant overtones).

Parts III and IV of Taylor's book are devoted to exploring how this conception of identity evolves through the eighteenth century up to the twentieth century. In general terms, this evolution entails first a problematization and then a progressive dismissal of a theistic background. This is the phenomenon usually referred to as 'secularization,' often associated with the radical Enlightenment, and which finds a well-known slogan in Nietzsche's dictum 'God is dead.' One advantage of Taylor's analysis is that it avoids (and in fact dispels) a number of oversimplifications that surround this evolution, including the tendency to regard it just as a consequence of the development of a new scientific understanding of the world and growing industrialization. Rather, Taylor stresses how a number of themes that come to be associated with the new secularized picture of identity found a first instance in religious outlooks, and how the dismissal of a theistic view can be seen as the result of growing competition with other moral sources.

The re-evaluation of ordinary life (the life of family and work, production and reproduction) offers an apt illustration of this broad picture. As Taylor argues, a number of radical Christian reformers (mostly Calvinist, and often Puritans) had reasons to insist on the importance of expressing a full commitment to Christian faith in all dimensions of ordinary life. Instead of letting a devoted group of 'specialists' (ordained people, monks and nuns) pursue the holy life to its fullness on everybody else's behalf, every Christian should attempt to embody the values of Christian faith, and this should take place in any aspect of one's daily life. Through some alterations, this idea is taken up again by a number of thinkers who progressively detach it from its religious inspiration. Deists across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Enlightenment thinkers in the later eighteenth century, put an increasing emphasis on the fact that the good life consists in fulfilling natural needs, maximizing natural pleasures, and minimizing suffering. Quite quickly, this view further extends from the individual level up to the interest of the whole of humanity, through sentiments of sympathy and benevolence. Life and nature are seen as good in themselves, and living a good human life is basically living in accordance with its natural demands. At the same time, this realization comes from self-reflection, in the sense that it is based on having looked more closely not at nature as a pre-given ontological order, but rather

as how nature manifests within our own human way of experiencing and feeling reality.

Following it through various variations and transformations, Taylor argues that the modern dismissal of (and distrust for) a theistic framework is connected with the fact that some of the goods that have been progressively endorsed as capable of determining modern identity (the autonomy of reason, the goodness of nature and life) can be fully defended only insofar as they are *detached* from the theistic framework. In other words, powerful strands in modernity see that their most cherished values are at odds with the assertion of a ruling God, or else that the commitment to a theistic good is at odds with the commitment to the autonomy of reason and the goodness of nature. As Taylor writes:

The mutation became necessary when and to the extent that it seemed to people that these moral sources could only be properly acknowledged, could only thus fully empower us, in their non-theistic form. The dignity of free, rational control came to seem genuine only free of submission to God; the goodness of nature, and/or our unreserved immersion in it, seemed to require its independence, and a negation of any divine vocation. (Taylor 1989, 315)

This historical development can be seen, from the point of view of Taylor's reconstruction, as a progressive deepening of the implications of having turned inward. Such continuity emerges in his discussion of the subsequent Romantic and post-Romantic culture. In reaction to the instrumentalist and disengaged attitude fostered in the previous period, nineteenth and twentieth centuries thinkers and artists developed yet another way of relating with the natural world. Nature is, for them, seen as a source of awe-inspiring epiphany. Nature becomes a symbol of inner and deep meanings. However, these meanings do not exist as objectivized presences in nature itself (they are not Platonic Ideas), but manifest only through and within the artist's way of expressing them. Nature's revelation is always indexed to a certain subjectivity that experiences it, and hence it remains fundamentally different from pre-modern accounts.

Previous forms of objectification of nature are now perceived as limiting and claustrophobic, ultimately undermining our sense of unity and wholeness

with the world at large. But even this new outlook is not without its dilemmas. If this sort of aesthetic expressionism is followed to its conclusion, then one might claim that nature itself is also always a construction, a work of art, at least to some extent. What is liberating in this view is that it finds in the power of creating and expressing a new moral source, a new good that does full justice to the human condition. Here, 'as in Genesis, seeing good makes good' (Taylor 1989, 454). Reworking the old Biblical model in a radically atheistic direction, late nineteenth-century mentality seems ready to verge towards radical constructivism, in which the good is *in the making of it*, in *willing it*, in *creating it*. The good is no longer discovered 'out there' or rationally deduced via observations of an objective human nature. It is rather brought forth by the self in its own self-making, and this process of self-making *is* nature. But if this is so, then morality (the drive towards benevolence and justice, and the constraints that come with it) might eventually be seen as a relic of a life-denying attitude. This, at least, seems the conclusion drawn by Nietzsche.

In fact, the turn inward can move even further. Not only God is dead, but even the idea of a unified center of agency, a substantial self becomes increasingly more unbelievable, yet another relic of the past. In Taylor's words:

And so a turn inward, to experience or subjectivity, didn't mean a turn to a *self* to be articulated, where this is understood as an alignment of nature and reason, or instinct and creative power. On the contrary, the turn inward may take us beyond the self as usually understood, to a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question, as with Musil, for example; or beyond that to a new kind of unity, a new way of inhabiting time, as we see, for instance, with Proust. Indeed, we can see how the notion could arise that an escape from the traditional idea of the unitary self was a condition of a true retrieval of lived experience. The ideals of disengaged reason and of Romantic fulfilment both rely in different ways on a notion of the unitary self. The first requires a tight centre of control which dominates experience and is capable of constructing the orders of reason by which we can direct thought and life. The second sees the originally divided self come to unity in the alignment of sensibility and reason. Now to the extent that both of these come to be seen as facets of a



world and an outlook whose claims to embrace everything we want to escape, to the degree that we adopt a post-Schopenhauerian vision of inner nature, the liberation of experience can seem to require that we step outside the circle of the single, unitary identity, and that we open ourselves to the flux which moves beyond the scope of control or integration. (Taylor 1989, 462)

This story brings us to the edge of an abyss called ‘today.’ Being a self is a relationally and historically determined constructed process. Being an active self in the fourth century BCE in Greece is something different from being a Self in the same period in India, and this is different still from being an embodied self today. Today’s Western conceptions can be seen as struggling with the heritage of inwardness. This is an attempt at locating moral goods and sources not in a pregiven order objectively established ‘out there,’ but rather in the very conditions of possibility for any experience. And those conditions seem to be ‘in here.’ Rational examination, self-reflection, and expression, are all different ways in which this turn inward can take shape. This movement opens up the possibility of alternative, competing, and potentially conflicting goods. If they still include the possibility of looking at a theistic ground, this is no longer the only option, and hence its own meaning is radically transformed by having lost its hegemony. Potential competitors are now the power and dignity of human reason itself, and the creative power of expressing human experience. The overall trend seems to push Western modernity towards some form of immanentism, according to which moral values must make room for some form of acknowledgment of the goodness of life as it is; that is, of the rights of living in the ordinary and refraining from world-denying attitudes and metaphysical escapism. However, what also emerges from this process is that by turning inward, we do not discover something there. There might be an ‘here’ but there is nothing truly there, we are *Da-nichts*. The progressive dismissal of the pregiven ontological order matches with a progressive dismissal of a way of understanding the self as a self-standing, pregiven, ontological entity.

If we consider this broad picture without attempting to escape from its problematicity, then we are left with a question:

Does something have to be denied? Do we have to choose between various kinds of spiritual lobotomy and self-inflicted wounds? Perhaps. Certainly most of the outlooks which promise us that we will be spared these choices are based on selective blindness. (Taylor 1989, 520)

One way of interpreting the results of Taylor's discussion is by focusing on the dilemmas about the pluralism of values (and its potential inconsistencies) that modern identity seems to entail. From another point of view, this discussion illustrates the theme from which we departed: *the self is a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering, in one way or another, the uncertainty that is inherent in its conditionality*. Modern identity is one of the ways of constructing a hermeneutic self that is capable of mastering the uncertainty inherent in its conditionality, which can be phrased in terms of orientations in life towards one or more goods capable of bestowing meaning. Yet from another point of view, modern identity also shows that in the very attempt at self-mastery (in the attempt at creating and bringing forth goods) the self also creates and constitutes its own uncertainty. This is the most profound, troublesome and paradoxical aspect that we have to face. In the arising of modernity, Western identities introduce new sources of morality, which also complexify the positioning of that very identity they contribute to establishing. Disengaged rationality challenges established theistic outlooks, and creative expressivism challenges rationality. These challenges are themselves not pre-given, they are evoked in and by the evolution that the process of self-mastery entails. Ultimately, this also leads from a turning inward towards the self as a unified moral agent, to the discovery that there is no such a unified and pre-given self to begin with. We turn inwards, but turning inward we turn nowhere, towards nobody. This suggests yet another pressing question: could it be that the problem of self-mastery is not limited to the potentially conflicting ways in which this process is constructed, but lies in the very attempt at mastering uncertainty? In other words, could it be that uncertainty itself is also partially constructed, fostered, and made more troublesome by the very attempt at mastering it? And if this is so, what are the consequences for our understanding of the self and of its tragedy? These are some of the questions that await us in the following lectures.

# Lecture One: Enaction

## 1.1 Introduction

The self is a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering, in one way or another, the uncertainty that is inherent in its conditionality. This theme provides a synoptic outline of the upcoming lectures. The theme can be broken into three elements: (i) ‘the self is a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction;’ (ii) ‘aimed at mastering, in a way or another;’ (iii) ‘the uncertainty that is inherent in its conditionality.’ In this first group of lectures, we focus on the first and second element. In this lecture, in particular, we try to better clarify what it means for something to be ‘constitutively relational,’ and in Lecture Two we will investigate more closely the sense in which the self is a ‘hermeneutic construction.’ Lectures Three and Four will then turn to the ways in which the self is associated with mastery of uncertainty.

Claiming that something is constitutively relational has to do with the way in which something is or can be experienced. In order to clarify this point, we should thus begin from experience. ‘Experience’ is a broad and general term that can be used to encompass the whole spectrum of events, encounters, phenomena, objects, subjects, relations, and anything else (this list is open-ended) that somehow appears and is available to us. Whatever one does, perceives, thinks, acts, *that* is part of their experience. To use a more concise formulation, experience is the appearing of (some, whatever) content.

The fact that it is possible to engage with experience cannot be controversial, since debating this point would also be part of experience. However, what is controversial is to understand experience and articulate its basic constituents. A very broad, widespread, and historically affluent family of approaches to this issue is based on an adversarial attitude. Despite the range of variations, adversarial approaches share a common structure, which can be summarized in four basic points: (i) experience is divided into two poles; (ii) each pole is *not* the other, or it is understood to be fundamentally different from it, and irreducible to it; (iii) one pole tends to be more fundamental than the other in some significant way; (iv) experience is the result of the way in which the two poles come together. Notice that this family of adversarial approaches entails both some form of dualism (i-ii), and some form of hierarchy in the structure of experience (iii-iv).

The history of Western thought can offer many examples of how adversarial approaches have been instantiated. Aristotle's account of cognition, for instance, posits that a perceiving subject or soul receives inputs from an objectively given external world. Calling this position 'realism' (because it stresses the givenness of an objective external world different from the cognizing subject), one can identify at its opposite extreme the sort of 'idealism' defended in the early modern period by Berkeley, who denies that there can be any objectively given material world. The whole of experience is made just by ideas and spiritual subjects who think those ideas. In between these two poles, one can posit Descartes's 'representationalism:' the thinking subject and the external world are two genuinely different and mutually independent entities. *Pace* realism, all that a subject can know is their own representations of the world (the subject's ideas). One cannot cognize beyond the veil of ideas, since anything that one cognizes will be in the form of having some idea of it. *Pace* idealism, though, some ideas at least must come from an objectively given external world, and its existence can be proved by reason, even if the world in itself cannot be cognized directly and in an immediate way. Within a few centuries, Kant developed and refined the representationalist approach, German idealists the idealist approach, while positivists took up the realist view. Many more nuances, hybrids, and intermediary views are possible, including the possibility of establishing a contrast between the domain of experience that is immediately accessible to the senses, and an inferred (metaphysical, or meta-experiential) domain of reality that can be accessed only via reason.

Despite contradicting each other, none of these accounts contradicts the basic structure shared by all adversarial approaches. If one steps outside of this whole millenarian debate, the genuine question that arises is whether there is any alternative to this whole family of approaches. Would it be possible to understand experience in a non-adversarial way?

Answering this question requires finding a way of conceiving of experience and its structure that does not split it into opposite poles. Hasting in this direction, one might simply dismiss all differences, by resorting to some form of absolute monism, in which experience is just undifferentiated ineffable oneness (Bradley's view of the Absolute might provide an instance of this approach).

However, this is *still* an adversarial approach, since now experience is understood based on the dichotomy between oneness and manifoldness. The switch that is required by a non-adversarial approach does not concern primarily the sort of poles that are considered to be crucial in understanding experience (subject-object, internal-external, individual-world, one-many, and so on), but rather the question of whether those poles (however defined) are *prior* to their relation (and thus whether they ground that relation), or rather they are the *result* of their relation (which is the groundless basis of them). In other words, the genuine alternative to any adversarial approach has to be gained via addressing the following issue: what does come first, relations or relata? Any adversarial approach takes it for granted that relata come first, while a non-adversarial approach must instead take relations to be prior. A relation can be prior to its relata not in the sense that the relation itself is a ground for the relata, but rather in the sense that the relational interplay of the relata is groundless. Here, the long history of Western thought does not offer as many examples of how this view might be developed.

In 1991, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch published a visionary and groundbreaking book, entitled *The Embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. This book defends an account of human cognition in which both the subject and its world are ‘enacted’ in their mutual interaction. Varela, Thompson and Rosch defend enaction as a way of making sense of the (then) most recent developments in cognitive science, and square them with first person human experience. Enaction provides a example of a non-adversarial approach to experience, while at the same time offering a new approach to addressing a number of key questions, including how to think about experience as groundless.

Enaction is based on two main claims. The first claim is that subject and object, individual and world, co-determine each other in their mutual interaction. In his previous works, Varela called this process ‘autopoiesis,’ which literally means ‘the bringing forth of oneself.’ Autopoiesis is the process, fundamental to all forms of life, through which an organism bring forth its world through the very activity of interacting with it. The polarity individual-world is thus constructed within the (more or less complex) process of defining and negotiating both.

The second claim is that enaction offers a better way to live in the world. Understanding experience through the lenses of enaction provides a viable alternative to the more standard and traditional adversarial approaches, which ultimately lead to some form of conflict between their contrasting poles. From a more contemporary point of view, this problem is made more urgent because the actual groundlessness of natural and cognitive processes is observed, explored and demonstrated by science itself, which represents one of the crucial cultural authorities in today's world. At the same time, though, scientific results pointing to groundlessness are at odds with the deeply rooted affection towards grounded-ness, which informs most of daily and social life. Our daily first-person experience seems (and it is assumed) to be based on a central and unitarian character, the self, *ourself*. How could this possibly not be the case? And yet, when this first-person perspective is explored through the lenses of a scientific investigation into the nature of cognition, no enduring core seems to be identifiable in experience—the self vanishes away. Not being able to reconcile these two poles can lead one to ignore the tension (by preventing it from being fully understood and hopefully resolved) or create a new opposition between scientific views and ordinary life, theory and practice, first-person and third-person perspectives.

To gain a deeper understanding of enactivism and of its implications, we shall now look at each of these claims and how they are defended. Before getting into details, it is important to locate our departing point on the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self outlined in *Lecture Zero*. Approaching enactivism and its rooting in today's cognitive science, we move near the immanent pole of the spectrum. Discussing Taylor, we observed how today's Western culture is profoundly affected by a form of disbelief towards the more transcendent pole. Taking up enaction first, we thus begin to explore the spectrum from the place where our secularized culture had led us up to this point. As we shall see, a scientific attempt at understanding the self also raises problems for how science itself is constructed and interpreted, and encourages us to investigate the extent to which the phenomenon of the self can be explained if we remain strictly confined within the domain of the natural sciences.

## 1.2 The science of groundlessness

Varela, Thompson and Rosch begin their discussion with an account of the origin and development of cognitive science. Cognitive science is a multidisciplinary field of research, which includes among others (but is not necessarily restricted to) computational sciences, linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, engineering, and philosophy. The purpose of cognitive science is to offer a viable and workable account of cognition, and possibly use this account to design effective technology. This field is still relatively young (its origins can be traced back to the 1940s). The authors identify two major trends that led the evolving views in cognitive science to diverge from the standard adversarial approaches. The first trend concerns the problems connected with modelling cognition in terms of representational states. The second trend concerns the problems connected with modelling the external world as a given background, which simply provides objective stimuli to which cognitive systems need to react.

The idea that cognition is some sort of representation of an external world is not new. It was not new when Kant tried to improve on Descartes. It was not new when Descartes himself reworked medieval scholastic models.<sup>18</sup> The novelty introduced in (especially early) cognitive science is a particular model of representationalism based on computation. Discussing the emergence of cognitivism in the mid-twentieth century, the authors write:

The central intuition behind cognitivism is that intelligence—human intelligence included—so resembles computation in its essential characteristics that cognition can actually be defined as computations of symbolic representations. [...] The cognitivist claim [is] that the only way we can account for intelligence and intentionality is to hypothesize that cognition consists of acting on the basis of representations that are physically realized in the form of a symbolic code in the brain or a machine. [...] Here is where the notion of *symbolic computation* comes in. Symbols are both physical

•• 18 For some of the historical background of Descartes's views, see Han Thomas Adriaenssen, *Representation and Scepticism from Aquinas to Descartes* (2017).



and have semantic values. Computations are operations on symbols that respect or are constrained by those semantic values. [...] A digital computer, however, operates only on the physical form of the symbols it computes; it has no access to their semantic value. Its operations are nonetheless semantically constrained because every semantic distinction relevant to its program has been encoded in the *syntax* of its symbolic language by the programmers. (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 2016<sup>2</sup>, 40-41)

The cognitive hypothesis posits three distinct layers: the physical instantiation of symbols, the syntactic rules that regulate how these symbols can be related, and the semantic domain to which symbols refer. Despite distinguishing between these three layers, in practice cognitive systems modelled in computational terms dispense with meaning or take it for granted as something given (by the programmers for instance). A computer does not *see* or deal with this layer, but it can manipulate the physical instantiation of symbols based on their syntactic rules.

A major consequence of cognitivism is the discrepancy it creates between the first-person experience of cognition, and the actual process that is supposed to underpin that same experience. When I look at a table or sit on a chair, I do not have the experience of computing a vast amount of symbolic information according to given syntactic rules in order to form a representation of ‘table’ and ‘chair.’ I simply (this is how it feels to me) look at the table or sit on a chair. However, if the cognitivist hypothesis is correct, then behind my seemingly naïve first-person experience, there is a complex array of computational processes that allows me to have these apparently simple and unproblematic experiences. Even more importantly, these computational processes are by definition *outside* my own first-person domain of experience and cannot ever enter it, because first-person experience and the computational process run at different levels.

It could be added that this is the way in which cognitivism gives a new flavor to the old representationalist tenet according to which a subject cannot know the world in itself, but only a representation of it. Cognitivism adds that the subject cannot directly know even the process through which representations themselves are computed. Since the computing process is the fundamental

engine that makes computation possible, this conclusion has important implications for how I understand my own experience. I might think (naively) that my experience is about looking at the table or sitting on a chair, and that these are the basic and most fundamental experiences I could have. It turns out that these are in fact just the *result* of computational processes that are not accessible in any direct way to my first-person experience. This first-person experience, thus, is not the ground of experience (*pace* Descartes), but its result. I do not make up my representations. At best, I enjoy them as I would do when watching a show.

Varela, Thompson and Rosch stress that cognitivism fundamentally challenges the ordinary sense of self as being the agent and ground of lived experience. It turns out that such a subject does not have any significant role to play in the process that makes its own cognition possible. As they write:

According to cognitivism, cognition can proceed without consciousness, for there is no essential or necessary connection between them. Now whatever else we suppose the self to be, we typically suppose that consciousness is its central feature. It follows, then, that cognitivism challenges our conviction that the most central feature of the self is needed for cognition. In other words, the cognitivist challenge does not consist simply in asserting that we cannot find the self; it consists, rather, in the further implication that the self is not even needed for cognition. (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 2016<sup>2</sup>, 51)

In this remark, the tension between scientific views and first-person perspective that substantiate the second core claim of enactivism begins to emerge. Before focusing on these implications, though, it is important to follow the authors' discussion through some further steps. As they explain, cognitivism itself is not without problems. Cognitivism tends to work in a top-down fashion. The programmer is a *deus ex machina* that encodes meanings in syntactic rules, by thus enabling computers to manipulate symbols. The computer does not even understand what a symbol is and can only understand what a syntactic rule is and how to implement that on a given array of material elements. There are two major difficulties in this cognitivist and computational approach. First an enormous amount of knowledge needs to be encoded in a system in order for

it to work effectively and show sophisticated cognitive faculties (and it is not always clear *how* to encode all this knowledge or how to define what sort of knowledge will be relevant). Second, if one examines biological cognitive systems (like the human brain, but also simpler life-forms like a fly or even a bacterium) it is extremely hard to discover symbols and syntactic rules, or anything that would make their working analogous to computers. Biological systems are seemingly based on distributed and non-hierarchical structures, and cognition does not result as the output of some linear process, but rather as an *emergent* phenomenon.

Emergentism can be broadly defined as the view according to which systems can operate in such a way as to self-organize themselves, and through this self-organization they acquire new properties, or these properties *emerge* in the system.<sup>19</sup> Global cooperation between the different parts of a system leads to self-organization and to the instantiation of higher functions and ways of operating, without a need for centralization or top-down control. Emergentism characterises more of a diverse family of approaches and research programs than a unified field. Nonetheless, it is possible to highlight the crucial advancement introduced by it. As Varela, Thompson and Rosch remark:

One of the most interesting aspects of this alternative approach in cognitive science is that symbols, in their conventional sense, play no role. [...] This nonsymbolic approach involves a radical departure from the basic cognitivist assumption that there must be a distinct symbolic level in the explanation of cognition. [...] How do the symbols acquire their meaning? In situations where the universe of possible items to be represented is constrained and clear-cut (for example, when a computer is programmed or when an experiment is conducted with a set of predefined visual stimuli), the assignment of meaning is clear. Each discrete physical or functional item is made to correspond to an external item (its referential meaning), a mapping opera-

•• 19 For further discussion of emergentism, see in particular Ganeri, *The Self. Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance* (2012), Part II, 69-126. Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007), explores a parallel emergentist account, inspired by American pragmatists like James and Dewey, that emphasises how meaning emerges from bodily and somatic patterns.

tion that the observer easily provides. Remove these constraints, and the form of the symbols is all that is left, and meaning becomes a ghost, as it would if we were to contemplate the bit patterns in a computer whose operating manual had been lost. In the connectionist approach, however, meaning is not located in particular symbols; it is a function of the global state of the system and is linked to the overall performance in some domain, such as recognition or learning. (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 2016<sup>2</sup>, 99).

While this emergentist view moves further away from the computational paradigm, its implications for the ordinary sense of self that usually informs daily life are significant. Discussing some development of this view, for instance, the authors present how the mind can be modelled as a society of agents, each one specialized in performing a certain function. Different agents can be composed or decomposed in more or less articulated structures, whose performance emerges from their interaction and mutual adaptation. From the point of view of first-person experience, once again this is not how I look at the table or sit on a chair. I have no clue about all these agents cooperating together in order for this state ('I see the table') to emerge, I just look at the table. As far as I am concerned, it is a simple experience. But in reality it isn't. Emergentism further challenges the ordinary sense of self already advanced by cognitivism. But it also suggests a way that one might become aware of how the self emerges, namely, by directly looking at the various processes in which the self is actively engaged. This means that when I look at the table, I do not see the various agents that makes this global state emerge because I simply do not pay attention to the various reasons and motives that underpin my intention of looking at the table. Why do I look at the table? When? Where? How? Behind each of these questions there are various ways in which I engage with the environment in which I find myself, and through these ways, I become an actor in my own experience, or rather I enact my world.

In order to see the relevant processes that bring forth cognition, one cannot simply look 'inside' (the brain, the mind, or any other 'inside' point one wishes to take), because cognition is not just the result of inner actions, but more properly of *inter*-actions. I will not see how I bring forth my vision of the table by simply looking inside of me (whatever this means), I need to pay attention

to the complex way in which I relate to the environment in which I happen to encounter the table. This does not mean that the ‘inside’ should be dismissed or treated as a black box, but simply that it cannot be considered a wholly sufficient condition for cognition. Not only there is no inside without an outside, but the very distinction between the two is something that has to be constantly created.

By no longer assuming an intermediary symbolic layer between first-person experience and cognition, emergentism is not forced to postulate that cognitive processes are doomed to remain opaque to their subjects (in the active and passive sense of the term). If cognitive processes are essentially interactions within cognitive systems, then making these processes transparent for the system itself might become matter of attentiveness and disciplined observation aimed in the right direction. The importance of this point will fully appear shortly. For now, it is important to mention how developing an emergentist approach leads not only to a rethinking of the unfolding of cognitive processes (steering away from representationalism) but also of the relation between cognition and environment (undermining the idea of an objectively pre-given external world).

Giving their own twist to the topic of emergentism, Varela, Thompson and Rosch define their particular approach as an attempt at studying cognition as embodied action, or *enaction*:

The enactive approach consists of two points: (1) perception consists in perceptually guided action and (2) cognitive structures emerge from the recurrent sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided. [...] The point of departure for the enactive approach is the study of how the perceiver can guide his actions in his local situation. Since these local situations constantly change as a result of the perceiver’s activity, the reference point for understanding perception is no longer a pre-given, perceiver-independent world but rather the sensorimotor structure of the perceiver (the way in which the nervous system links sensory and motor surfaces). This structure—the manner in which the perceiver is embodied—rather than some pre-given world determines how the perceiver can act and be modulated by environmental events. Thus the overall con-

cern of an enactive approach to perception is not to determine how some perceiver-independent world is to be recovered; it is, rather, to determine the common principles or lawful linkages between sensory and motor systems that explain how action can be perceptually guided in a perceiver-dependent world. (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 2016<sup>2</sup>, 173)

If cognition depends on interaction with the environment, then the environment too must depend on the cognitive process. There is no pre-given environment or world, since that can be encountered only in the interplay between the living organism and its effort to perceive what is around it. The very distinction between living organism and environment has to arise *because* of this process of interaction, and it cannot be posited *before* it. Without organisms, there is no environment; and without environment there are no organisms. The point is not to establish which is first, but rather to assert that neither is first; that they co-occur, or co-determine each other, that they are dependently co-originating, and that neither is more fundamental.

The authors support this view with a detailed analysis of the process of vision, which is taken as a case study to illustrate the advantages of the enactive approach. However, they also acknowledge one possible way for a realist critic of their view to ‘save’ the objectivity of the external world. The realist could claim that the self-organization of cognitive systems is the result of a process of natural selection, through which organisms evolve in order to adapt in the best possible way to the conditions of their (pre-given) environment and adjust to changes occurring there. Although ideals of adaptation and fitness are very widespread in discussing neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, the authors argue that these notions cannot fully account for the actual ways in which living beings are observed to evolve. The key problem is that natural selection understood as a process of adaptation is taken to work in a *prescriptive* way, as indicating what features should be preserved by evolving organisms. The authors suggest that natural selection is better understood instead in a *proscriptive* way, as indicating what evolving organisms should *avoid*. As they write:

Cognition is no longer seen as problem solving on the basis of representations; instead, cognition in its most encompassing sense consists in the enactment or bringing forth of a world by a viable history of structural coupling. It should be noted that such histories of coupling are not optimal; they are, rather, simply viable. This difference implies a corresponding difference in what is required of a cognitive system in its structural coupling. If this coupling were to be optimal, the interactions of the system would have to be (more or less) prescribed. For coupling to be viable, however, the perceptually guided action of the system must simply facilitate the continuing integrity of the system (ontogeny) and/or its lineage (phylogeny). Thus once again we have a logic that is proscriptive rather than prescriptive: any action undertaken by the system is permitted as long as it does not violate the constraint of having to maintain the integrity of the system and/or its lineage. (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 2016<sup>2</sup>, 205)

This account of natural selection includes the co-evolution of individuals and their environment (their ‘coupling’) within the enactive framework. Evolution does not offer a realist argument against enaction. Duly understood, evolution actually strengthens the case for enaction. And once again, this makes the ordinary first-person view even *weirder*. I thought I could look at a table and sit on a chair, now I discover that there is no table and no chair out there as existing independently from my sensorimotor system and how it co-evolved with this environment. In a sense, the chair is there only because my body is such that it can sit on it. However, I still look at the table and sit on the chair without usually being aware of this co-evolution and of how it affects both my cognition and the presence of the world. The world seems to be just there, ready at hand. But this view must be naive at best, or false at worse, if enaction (and the scientific models that underpin it) is to be taken seriously.

Discussion so far illustrated that, in Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s reading, recent trends in cognitive science significantly challenge the ordinary way experience is understood and conceived from an ordinary first-person perspective. This ordinary view is based on a sense of self (‘me’) as being at the center of the scene, knower and agent in a pregiven world. As it turns

out, there is neither this unified and fundamental self, nor a pregiven world. The enactive view instead entails an original and mutual co-dependence of self and world, individual and environment, in which neither is more fundamental and both are co-originated in the process of their mutual interaction. What is the ground for this interaction? In fact, here is no ground; it does not need to be grounded in something else, nor could it (since anything else depends on it).

Some might already take this plea for groundlessness to be a signal that the whole enactivist project should be wrong or have some serious theoretical flaw. However, contemporary debates in metaphysics show that groundlessness or non-foundational theories (theories of reality in which no ultimate foundation or ground is provided) are a serious and viable option. Jan Westerhoff, in his *The Non-Existence of the Real World* (2020), has offered a complete and encompassing discussion of various debates that point in different ways to the fact that (i) foundationalist approaches are fraught with serious difficulties, which are not entirely clear how to solve; (ii) that the main objections raised against non-foundationalist approaches (enactivism included) can be successfully addressed or are not as serious as foundationalist opponents assume. While we cannot get into the details of this discussion here, Westerhoff's work provides a wealth of *other* arguments (besides enactivism) in support of the general claim that both an objectively pregiven external world and an ontologically substantial and independent self are philosophical constructions that do not necessarily stand up to scrutiny.

From a historical point of view, we can still observe that this non-foundationalist view can find relatively scant support in the historical canon of Western philosophy. And yet, its emergence is not without reason. On the one hand, it is possible to observe a progressive erosion, in Western metaphysics, of ontological notions and views that require a strong foundation. Historically, the paradigmatic case of grounding would have been the appeal to a Supreme Being, or God, as ultimate foundation of reality. But as mentioned in Lecture Zero, and as we are going to discuss further in Lectures Nine and Ten, this paradigm was already under serious threat by the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, some non-Western traditions have sometimes been much more precocious and keener on articulating what a



non-foundationalist view of reality might look like. Westerhoff himself is a remarkable scholar of classical Indian Buddhist philosophy, and especially of Nāgārjuna, the second-century Buddhist authority that also plays a pivotal role in Varela, Thompson and Rosch's discussion. In his 2020 book, Westerhoff (deliberately and strategically) refrains from explicitly drawing on Buddhist texts and arguments, but Varela, Thompson and Rosch widely and emphatically do so. It is time now to understand why.

### **1.3 The Eastern Escape**

One of the great merits of Varela, Thompson and Rosch's work is that it repeatedly emphasizes that the tension, or even conflict between a first-person (subjective) perspective and a third-person (scientific) perspective on experience is neither something that can be simply ignored, nor a problem that will go away by itself if it is not addressed head on.

The conflict cannot be ignored because the first- and third-person perspectives cannot be divorced. The third-person perspective offers an attempt to conceptualize and clarify the experience encountered in first-person perspective, but even when this is done, the scientist remains a human being who will have to experience their life from their own first-person perspective. A sharp divorce or contraposition between these two perspectives leads to either subjectivism or objectivism, often in the form of setting up a more 'humanist' view against a more 'scientific' view. This output is fairly common in the West, even today, although unwelcome. Given the prominence and authority that science has acquired in most of today's societies around the world, devaluing its perspective as incapable of coping with authentic human experience creates a sort of cognitive dissonance within society itself, while simply invoking science for dismissing a 'folk understanding' of experience makes science looking inhumane, despite being one of the greatest human achievements. This problem can be rephrased in terms of overcoming the adversarial approach. The opposition between first-person and third-person perspective is in fact another declension of that approach. The challenge for enactivism is to show that first- and third-person perspectives can be not only reconciled, but that exploring

and deepening the experiential dimensions of groundlessness is also the way to operate this reconciliation.

Looking at the Western philosophical tradition, the authors explicitly acknowledge their debt to the twentieth-century phenomenological tradition, with special reference to Merleau-Ponty.<sup>20</sup> Phenomenologists have also reflected on the need to escape from an overly rigid subject-world distinction and reconceptualizing this distinction from the point of view of an intrinsic interplay between these two poles (Heidegger's existential analytic based on the ideas of *Dasein* and being-in-the-world is another example of such an attempt). However, the authors also point out that the major limit of the classical phenomenological tradition concerns its method, which remains purely speculative. Phenomenologists (not dissimilarly from Descartes) recognized that the 'folk' or ordinary first-person perspective is fraught with potential prejudices and pitfalls. They then aimed at devising a more rigorous method to both obviate these problems and provide a more 'objective' account of first-person experience. According to Varela, Thompson and Rosch, the problem with the classical phenomenological method is that, even when it aims to be pragmatic (as in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's cases), it remains a purely theoretical activity that occurs in reflection, somehow *post factum*, after that experience already occurred, and it is mostly based on reasoning alone.

•• 20 One might call the initial phases of phenomenology (coinciding with Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) 'classical phenomenology' in order to indicate that phenomenological thought evolved beyond the original views of its founders, and later siblings might have departed significantly from the initial positions. But these historical developments cannot be addressed here. Evan Thompson, in particular, stressed in his Introduction to the 2016 revised edition of *The Embodied Mind* (p. xxii) that their relatively negative judgment about classical phenomenology was unwarranted, and in his own *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (2007), Appendix A (pp. 413-416) Thompson offered a reappraisal of Husserl's own position. However, when it comes to the point that will be most crucial in our discussion (searching for a disciplined method that could guide both the understanding of how experience unfolds and its reshaping), even Thompson remains fairly general: 'although I think phenomenology has tended to overemphasize theoretical discussion in the form of textual interpretation (to the neglect of phenomenological pragmatics as well as original phenomenological analyses and philosophical argumentation), I think it is too facile to say simply that phenomenology is a purely abstract, theoretical project lacking a pragmatic dimension' (Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 414). On this front, Husserl himself would perhaps have preferred to be accused of being too theoretical, rather than too involved with an actual practice aimed at a soteriological goal (such as the Buddhist one), given that he himself constructed the core difference between his phenomenological science and Buddhist teachings as pivoted around the purely theoretical interest of phenomenology. On this point, see Karl Schuhmann, 'Husserl and Indian Thought' (2005).

For present purposes, the limits of classical Western phenomenology can be spelled out in a slightly different way. The problem is not just about using reason to reflectively examine first-person experience. The problem is assuming that reason, by itself, can have both the power and the lucidity to see through prejudices *at will*, or to assume that taking a reflective attitude, by itself, allows one to bracket one's prejudices. Descartes seemed aware of this problem. So much so that, in his *Meditations*, he began by setting up a global skepticism that is meant to function as a sanitizer against the potential danger of any hidden or unnoticed bias that could survive the ensuing reflection. Descartes (like many other early modern philosophers, including Bacon and Spinoza) had no naïve faith that one can simply stop prejudices at will. Cartesian universal doubt is meant to provide a particularly inhospitable environment for these prejudices, thus allowing reason to perform its function. But if one doubts that Cartesian methodological scepticism might actually do the trick, equally problematic appears Husserl's confidence in the possibility of performing an *epoché* at will.

A profound and implicit assumption in these strategies is that reason, in order to work reliably, needs to be first isolated from any other emotional forces and preconceived beliefs. Reason works best only when it works on its own, possibly in a completely sterilized environment. Unfortunately, no such environment can be easily created. Even if that could happen, no cognition would take place there, because reason would have nothing to reason about on its own. But even if cognition could happen in such an extremely idealized scenario, its results could not be really significant and have some normative force with respect to a completely different form embodied cognition, since assessing the latter on the basis of the former would be like judging life on the basis of mineralogy.

Although Varela, Thompson and Rosch do not make this point explicit in their work, its significance is worth stressing. The main limitation behind classical phenomenological method is that it assumes that reason can be objective only when it is not disturbed, and hence it strives to directly jump outside the conditions of disturbance by creating an appropriate (sanitized) thinking environment. The result is that this method either cannot escape disturbances (it cannot escape life after all, since that is also its object of study), or that it has to just *pretend* that it can.

Regardless of the reasons why the classical phenomenological method might be seen as insufficient (which surely should not lead to dismissing the whole phenomenological tradition as such), the authors identify in Buddhist meditation practice (what they refer to as ‘mindfulness/awareness’) a disciplined practice that provides at the same time a valid access to first-person experience, and also a way of discerning within that first-person experience the emergence of the same groundlessness pointed out by scientific research on cognition. In Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s work, Buddhism plays multiple roles, including that of providing an instance of a different philosophical tradition that still reaches conclusions similar to those put forward by the enactivist approach. From a theoretical point of view, then, Buddhism is interpreted as a different and yet convergent research path headed towards a similar converging point. However, it is its meditation practice that seems to be the most unique, distinctive, and needed contribution that Buddhism can bring to the table. To put the core point of the authors more bluntly: we do not necessarily need Buddhist philosophy to know that the self is a construction, but we do need Buddhist meditation in order to live with this knowledge.

The sort of practice to which the authors refer (‘mindfulness/awareness’) is admittedly a recent construction in the very long and diverse history of Buddhism(s). We shall return to this point below. However, it is true that a very widely spread feature of Buddhist meditation throughout its various forms is the idea that practice has much to do with directly facing prejudices, emotional structures and beliefs. One does not start by running away from them, but rather by systematically understanding how they work, what sorts of effects they produce, how they shape experience, and gradually also appreciating how it is possible to defuse them and escape from their grip. In other terms, meditation does not begin once disturbances are set aside and one has created a fully sanitized rational environment. On the contrary, one begins by getting fully acquainted with the force, structure, and working of what are commonly called the ‘hindrances’ (what Descartes called the ‘prejudices,’ Bacon ‘the idols,’ and Husserl ‘the natural attitude’), and gradually learning how to step outside of them. In this process, one sees how the very notion of self is fully entangled in the hindrances and moving away from them also has profound consequences for how the self is experienced from within.

This latter point is emphasized by Varela, Thompson and Rosch:

First, contemporary cognitive science does not distinguish between the idea or representation of a Self [the underlying sense of personal identity] and the actual basis of that representation, which is an individual's grasping after an ego-self. Cognitive science has challenged the idea that there is a real thing to which the former applies, but it has not even thought to consider the latter. Second, cognitive science does not yet take seriously its own findings of the lack of a Self. Both of these stem from the lack of a disciplined method for examination and inclusion of human experience in cognitive science. The major result of this lack is the issue that has been with us since the beginning: cognitive science offers us a purely theoretical discovery, which remains remote from actual human experience, of mind without self. [...] We construct the belief or inner discourse that there is an ego-self not because the mind is ultimately empty of such a self but because the everyday conditioned mind is full of grasping. (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 2016<sup>2</sup> 124-125)

The advantage of Buddhist meditation practice is that it starts from the task of understanding the workings of what is referred to as 'a mind full of grasping.' An ordinary untrained person takes this condition for granted, and hence grasping becomes transparent, invisible. Meditation begins from the moment one decides to take grasping as a topic of investigation, looking at why it happens and how it works. In other terms, Buddhist meditation does not seek to create ideal sanitized conditions for a neutral and objective reasoned reflection, but rather seeks to learn how best to operate in a cognitive environment that turns out to be fully shaped by powerful conative and emotional forces. Most importantly, this environment is not limited to the 'inside' of one's experience, but it encompasses the whole range of domains in which grasping expresses itself, which are traditionally classified in the three areas of actions: bodily actions, verbal actions, and thoughts. Meditation is about all the three of them, and hence it actually concerns the whole individual in their complex interplay with the world in which they live.

As we are going to see in greater details in Lecture Thirteen, Buddhist meditation starts from first-person perspective on experience, but without taking its content and interpretation at face value. Buddhist meditation is predicated on the soteriological assumption that the ordinary first-person interpretation of experience is biased by attitudes of grasping, craving, aversion, ignorance, and hence it is ultimately unreliable. By progressively and methodically deconstructing and untying this ordinary interpretation, practice leads to a point in which experience is met without any passionate craving for it to be in a way or another. There is just experience. Experience is no longer appropriated as 'mine' or 'my' concern, but neither is it alienated as something entirely external from 'me.' The self no longer functions as the point of reference for indexing experience, and hence the whole distinction between first-person and third-person perspective is left behind. Moving beyond the distinction makes it possible to recognize the constructed nature of the distinction itself, how it can be instrumentally and strategically used in certain contexts, but also why it has no inherently binding force. The first-person *versus* third-person perspective distinction is also a product of enaction, and hence groundless.

Throughout their discussion, Varela, Thompson and Rosch often mention the issue of nihilism. Following Nietzsche's discussion of nihilism as the acknowledgment that old values are perceived to be no longer tenable, the authors stress how an unresolved conflict between first-person and third-person perspective inevitably exacerbates nihilist tendencies. Grasping for a stable 'ego-self,' or a capitalized 'Self' (a self-standing, independent, perhaps eternal entity, ground and owner of its experience), human beings cannot actually find anything like this in their own experience. They can only *delude* themselves that they do. Cognitive science stresses that this quest for such a 'Self' is in fact a piece of self-delusion. However, this realization on its own might not be sufficient to cut the underpinning grasping attitude. The impossibility of actually finding the Self, and the ensuing abyss disclosed by its absence, can be experienced as a breakdown, as a defeat. The problem is not that the Self is not there, but that underpinning grasping has not been treated, or even understood.

In order to avoid the potentially nihilistic consequences of an unresolved tension between first-person and third-person perspectives, between lived experience and the scientific worldview, more than just theory is required: it is

necessary to have some method that can provide a disciplined and systematic way of alleviating (if not eliminating) grasping, while also revealing why the groundlessness of experience should not be feared, nor understood as the deprivation of something, or the dismissal of some value. The opposite is true, as the authors stress by the end of their discussion:

In Buddhism, we have a case study showing that when groundlessness is embraced and followed through to its ultimate conclusions, the outcome is an unconditional sense of intrinsic goodness that manifests itself in the world as spontaneous compassion. We feel, therefore, that the solution for the sense of nihilistic alienation in our culture is not to try to find a new ground; it is to find a disciplined and genuine means to pursue groundlessness, to go further into groundlessness. Because of the preeminent place science occupies in our culture, science must be involved in this pursuit. (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 2016<sup>2</sup>, 251)

The idea expressed here is crucial insofar as it highlights the core emotional component involved in cognition. Within the various families of adversarial approaches mentioned in the beginning of this lecture, one could also include the common antithesis between reason and passions, theory and practice, objective thinking and emotional attitudes. This is also another tribe of views, not just one unified whole. Different philosophers have conceived of the relationship between reason and emotions in different ways. These range, for instance, from Descartes's contention that reason can have some power in rewiring emotional association encoded in the body by nature (basically, overriding natural instincts), to Hume's contention that reason can only provide means to satisfy what passions and sentiments demands, with Spinoza's account offering yet another view in which reason can function properly only if it is supported by active affects, possibly stronger than passive emotions. Despite these (and many more) various accounts, reason and emotions tended to be seen as relatively independent of one another. This drifting is at play also in classical phenomenological methods described above, in which reason has to reach first some form of sanitization with respect to the influence of emotions, otherwise it cannot get an objective view of experience.

Emotions are inevitably biased. Buddhist meditation begins by systematically investigating how these biases work and shape experience. It rejects the idea that an objective view is reached by somehow separating reason from emotions, and it even challenges the very idea that reason can be successfully distinguished from emotions in the first place. A purely objective view, not shaped by any conative effort, would be a purely non-constructed view, a view in which conative efforts play no part. Since the earliest historical records of the Buddha's discourses, this condition is equated with the complete cessation of any experience. Experience is either constructed to some degree (and hence not purely 'objective'), or it ceases together with the activity of construction.<sup>21</sup>

Buddhist thought focuses on the different emotional structures and conative attitudes that ordinarily shape experience and finds that they can be classified in a fairly limited number of basic forms (one simple classification is dividing them into attitudes of greed for the pleasant, aversion towards the unpleasant, ignorance towards what feels neutral). Objectivity or dispassionateness is then pursued in meditation by reversing these emotional structures: greed becomes generosity and gratitude, aversion becomes friendliness and compassion, ignorance becomes wisdom and understanding. All these positive emotional conditions share a common feature: they are not rooted in a strong sense of self-interest and concern for oneself and one's own control over experience, but are based on the absence of it.<sup>22</sup>

Philosophers seek objectivity because they assume that being objective means being dispassionate towards a certain object, and being dispassionate

•• 21 Cf. e.g. SN 22.55: 'if lust (*rāgo*) for the phenomenon of form (*rūpadhātuyā*) has been abandoned (*pahīno*) by a mendicant, with the abandonment of lust the object is cut off (*vocchijjatārammaṇaṃ*) and there is no establishment (*patitthā*) of consciousness. [...] When consciousness is not established in this way, it does not grow, and having nothing more to do, it is freed.' Contents of experience are not given independently and in their own right, but only as a result of the activity of consciousness. In turn, consciousness works by discerning certain contents in a certain way because of specific intentional attitudes and concerns (ordinarily based on greed, aversion, and ignorance). When (and insofar as) these attitudes fade away, the activity of consciousness fades as well. When (and insofar as) consciousness stops discerning contents of experience, these contents are no longer experienced. Consciousness does not cease to be present, but it ceases to be active, like a clock that stops marking the time. For further discussion, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *An Introduction to Friendliness* (2022), §7, pp. 313-327.

22 We shall discuss in greater detail how Buddhist practice is conceived in the older Pāli discourses in Lectures Twelve and Thirteen. For now, these remarks are general enough to apply to various forms of 'Buddhist meditation,' in compliance with the use that the authors of *The Embodied Mind* make of this term.



means not being biased, and hence seeing clearly. Buddhist meditation shows that in order to become dispassionate, one cannot start from an alleged already available dispassionate faculty (reason), but one has rather to reverse passions themselves first. Buddhist meditation is different from a sheer intellectual contemplation, but it does attribute a key role to perceptions and views that one has over experience and its structure. Being aware that an ontologically independent Self is not something that can be found in experience is a precondition, or a working hypothesis, that allows one to explore how the sense of self is actually constructed. However, since the exploration of groundlessness is tackled from an *emotional* point of view, this practice never becomes a purely intellectual game of replacing a certain theory with another, but it aims at changing the emotional structures that underpin cognition, by thus modifying the way in which the whole cognitive process works.<sup>23</sup>

Two common objections have been addressed at Varela, Thompson and Rosch's book. First, meditation does not lead to an objective understanding of experience, since it consists in a manipulation of experience.<sup>24</sup> Second, even if there is no ontologically independent eternal Self, we can still conceptualize a processual and changing self, simply replacing a doubtful view of the former with a more scientific view of the latter. These two objections are connected, and miss the point of the authors (and, more importantly, of Buddhist prac-

•• 23 In their discussion of this point about meditation, Varela, Thompson and Rosch use a common academic strategy: to make the case for introducing X, show that X is both needed and currently missing; and to establish this latter point, show that well-known Y, despite being similar to X, is actually something different. In this case, X is Buddhist meditation practice and Y classical phenomenology. Supporters of the latter will thus have to argue that Y is not that different from X, and hence we do not need X because we already have Y. For those who will perceive meditation practice as something extraneous or alien to the domain (and practice!) of philosophy proper, nuancing the difference will be a way of undermining the case for taking Buddhist meditation seriously (if we already have classical phenomenology, and this performs the same function of meditation, perhaps even better, why bothering with Buddhist meditation?). Hence, nuancing differences can be an exclusivist strategy used to keep perceived alien elements or interlocutors at bay, if not outside of the discussion. This is the reason why, despite all the historical nuances that could be introduced (and the interesting mating of phenomenology and 'contemplative practices' in the last few decades, as we shall see in Lecture Two) the rhetorical approach followed in this lecture chooses to stress the difference between Buddhist meditation and classical phenomenology in order to make more apparent what the added value of genuinely including the latter in the discussion is.

24 For a more extensive discussion on this point, see Richard Legum, 'Skeptical Doubts about Meditation as Philosophy' (2022) and Rick Repetti, 'The Philosophy of Meditation. The Spoken *Tāo*' (2022).

tice). To the first, it is true that Buddhist meditation manipulates experience, but this is because it *rejects* the view that ordinary daily experience can be trusted or taken at face value. It does not presuppose that untrained experience is naturally unbiased (in this respect, Husserl and Descartes would agree). The default mode in which human beings cognize and understand their experience in a first-person perspective is profoundly biased by attitudes of greed, aversion, and ignorance. These attitudes need to be weakened and possibly abandoned for a more lucid understanding of experience to emerge. As we shall discuss in Lectures Twelve and Thirteen, meditation actively engages and changes experience, and it does so for the good, since not doing so would allow all sorts of biases and factiousness to take over one's judgment (as is ordinarily the case).

Notice that the issue is not about manipulation itself: philosophy, science, art, and almost all human activities are ways of manipulating experience. Enaction is manipulation. Meditation is no different here. The objection concerns the idea that meditation can reach some form of impartial view or absolutely objective understanding of reality by simply looking 'inside.' But this is the wrong way of understanding how meditation works, as we shall discuss below. As Varela, Thompson and Rosch point out in their conclusion, meditation is inextricably connected with the cultivation of emotional attitudes, like compassion, friendliness, generosity. It is this emotional training that counters cognitive biases and yields a more reliable and lucid understanding of experience, and *not* the turning 'inward' that a meditator would allegedly perform. Buddhist meditation, if anything, encourages one to deconstruct the rigid division between 'inward' and 'outward.'<sup>25</sup> Turning 'inward' sounds something

•• 25 A core meditation instruction in the Pāli discourses concerns precisely this point (MN 10): '[the meditator] dwells observing the body as [just] body in himself (*ajjhattamī*), or observing the body as [just] body outside of himself (*bahiddhā*), or observing the body as [just] body in himself and outside of himself (*ajjhatabhiddhā*).' In another related discourse, a similar point is made in the context of contemplating the element of space (MN 62): 'the phenomenon of space, either in you or outside of you, is still the same phenomenon of space. That should be seen according to nature (*yathābhūtamī*), with right wisdom (*sammappaññāyā*) thus: 'this is not mine (*netam mama*), I am not this (*nesohamasmī*), this is not my self (*na meso attā*).' Having seen that in this way, according to nature and with right wisdom, the understanding (*cittam*) is wearied of it (*nibbindati*), and it is induced to be dispassionate (*virājeti*) about the phenomenon of space.'

much more familiar and rooted in the Western understanding of mind and subjectivity, as Taylor pointed out (Lecture Zero).

Concerning the second criticism, Varela, Thompson and Rosch are quite clear about the importance of distinguishing between a processual, transitory, even momentary self, on the one hand, and an ontologically independent, self-standing, eternal Self, on the other. The latter is not found in experience while the processual self is, and cognitive science would agree. Now, the critic would say: what's the problem? Just get rid of the metaphysical Self and keep the empirical self. It is a matter of revision, not a big revolution. However, the objection misses the link between the sense of self and the emotional structures that shape human experience.

The sense of self is not just a casual addendum to the cognitive makeup, it is deeply engrained in how the whole cognitive system works. In fact, from a Buddhist perspective, insofar as the self is enacted by attitudes of greed, aversion, and ignorance, any living being partaking in these attitudes (and all living beings partake in these attitudes) experiences its own sense of self. As the authors rightly point out, the metaphysical sense of Self does not simply go away because one has read in a research paper that such a Self cannot be found in some cognitive science experiment. In fact, in the beginning at least, that sense of Self does not go away even when one starts meditation practice. Its resilience is due to the fact that a strong sense of Self is not just an imputed agent in one's experience, but also an object of grasping, a key component interwoven in the structure of greed, aversion, and ignorance. If there is no Self, what's the point of craving for getting more of this, or getting rid of that, since there is no continuous entity that will underpin this change? Vice versa, if there is strong craving for getting this or getting rid of that, then it will be assumed that 'I' will experience the results of this craving, no matter what cognitive science or any other source of information tells me. This view about the reality of a metaphysical Self is so profound and resilient, and so deeply connected with ordinary conative and emotional attitudes, that ancient Buddhist texts consider it as one of the first and most important fetters that needs to be overcome through practice. In fact, from their perspective, achieving this result would already entail having made the first breakthrough towards full awakening.

Simply claiming that one can change a wrong view about the metaphysical Self and replace it with another view entirely overlooks the fact that having a view depends on powerful emotional and conative attitudes. To make any progress on this front it thus becomes paramount to better and more clearly understand *why* this metaphysical Self is enacted in the first place, what sorts of demands and urges it is meant to satisfy, and whether it does actually satisfy them well, or whether other strategies would ultimately be more effective. Short of engaging with this sort of contemplation, one can surely *pretend* to think or believe this or that, but such a pretension will do little in terms of actually changing one's first-person experience. The fact that people might fail to realize that they are not inherently the masters of their thoughts and that they cannot change their views at will, no matter how hard they try, is proof that a person untrained in meditation (regardless of how learned and skilled in other intellectual domains they are) has little familiarity with how their own cognition actually works.

To summarize what has emerged so far, we can say that the enactive approach is a way of exploring a non-adversarial account of experience, in which relations are more fundamental than *relata*. The sense of self, in particular, is enacted as part of the autopoietic self-generation of the individual within their environment. In this respect, the self is constitutively relational, because it cannot be encountered or conceptualized as something that stands prior to or at the basis of its own relations with the rest of its world. However, first-person perspective (the perspective through which the self ordinarily looks at and understands experience) seems to reveal just the opposite: I am here, the main character in my own life, my drama. Cognitive science argues that the cognitive processes that underpin the construction of a first-person perspective do not warrant the presence of any ontologically independent Self as their main agent and character. Varela, Thompson and Rosch suggest that Buddhist meditation can offer a disciplined practice for deconstructing the ordinary assumptions that shape first-person perspective and it might ultimately lead to overcoming the opposition between first-person and third-person perspective altogether, by revealing the constructed nature of both.

We can also push the interrogation about the way in which cognitive science and Buddhist meditation should be integrated further. Is the role of Buddhist meditation just that of providing an experiential backup for scientific findings?

Does this mean that Buddhist meditation is somehow naturally akin to a scientific practice itself? And, above all, what are we actually talking about when referring to ‘Buddhist meditation’? Before moving on, we need to bring some clarity to these issues.

### 1.4 Caveats

Evan Thompson, one of the co-authors of *The Embodied Mind*, recently reached a more critical position concerning the way the dialogue between today’s cognitive science (or science more generally) and Buddhist philosophy and practices could or should be articulated. In his provocative *Why I am not a Buddhist* (2020) he presents and takes issue with the phenomenon of ‘Buddhist modernism.’ His discussion might be important in order to single out some caveats that we shall keep in mind in the development of the upcoming lectures. In particular, Buddhist modernism is the more widespread form of Buddhist thought and practice that Western audiences are likely to encounter and equate with ‘Buddhism’ tout court.<sup>26</sup> As Thompson also acknowledges in his introduction to the revised edition of *The Embodied Mind* (pp. xxiii-xxiv), this modernist declension was the lens through which Buddhist philosophy and practice was conceived and presented in that book. But Buddhist modernism *is not* ‘Buddhism’ tout court (and the latter might well not exist, except as a general umbrella term). In summarizing his core thesis, Thompson writes in his conclusions:

My argument has been that Buddhist modernism distorts both the significance of the Buddhist tradition and the relationship between religion and science. Buddhism gained entry to Europe and North America in the nineteenth century by being presented as a religion uniquely compatible with modern science. Now, in the twenty-first century, Buddhist modernist discourse is at its height. But this discourse is untenable, as we’ve seen. Its core tenets—that Buddhism is a “mind science”; that there is no self; that mind-

•• 26 For a more extensive treatment of Buddhist modernism, see David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008).

fulness is an inward awareness of one's own private mental theater; that neuroscience establishes the value of mindfulness practice; that enlightenment is a nonconceptual experience outside language, culture, and tradition; and that enlightenment is or can be correlated with a brain state—are philosophically and scientifically indefensible. In my view, the significance of the Buddhist intellectual tradition for the modern world is that it offers a radical critique of our narcissistic preoccupation with the self and our overconfident belief that science tells us how the world really is in itself apart from how we're able to measure and act upon it. (Thompson 2020, 188-189)

To unpack some of the claims that are summarized here, we can briefly run through the main points of Thompson's discussion. First (chapter 1), he presents and counters 'Buddhist exceptionalism,' the view that Buddhism would be more akin to a 'science of the mind' rather than to a religion, and a certain type of meditation practice would amount to a direct observation of cognitive structures. Buddhist exceptionalism thus understood tends to dispense with explicit soteriological and normative components traditionally entrenched in Buddhist philosophies and practices. This attempt, Thompson argues, is doomed to fail. Deprived of its soteriological basis, Buddhist practice loses its meaning, while it cannot be equated with (scientific) controlled experimentation. More generally, the presentation of certain Buddhist views as akin to science or even scientific in nature is misleading, since it entails a doubtful positivist account of science as concerned with representing things as they are in themselves, and it dismisses the existential and deeper layers of meaning that Buddhist notions traditionally presuppose.

Thompson illustrates this latter point (chapter 3) by considering current discussions of the self, the Buddhist modernist claim that the self is purely an illusion, and the way in which several neuroscientists try to provide support for that claim. We shall come back to this in more depth in Lecture Two. To anticipate, Thompson's view is that the self is a process through which a whole world of meaning is enacted. The self is a construction, it is not something endowed with independent ontological existence, and yet this does not entail that the self is an illusion; in fact, claiming that the self is nothing but an illusion is not warranted even from a scientific point of view.

Also relevant is Thompson's review (chapter 4) of current scientific debates about 'mindfulness' practice (which is perhaps today the most commonly known form of meditation derived from Buddhist traditions). He takes issue with what he sees as an individualist and positivist approach to studying mindfulness practice and its cognitive components:

Mindfulness meditation isn't a kind of private introspection of a private mental theater. Meditative introspection isn't the inner perception of an independent and preexistent, private mental realm. Mindfulness meditation is the metacognition and internalized social cognition of socially constituted experience. (Thompson 2020, 138)

The idea of conceiving of meditation as based on social cognition is particularly interesting, and it follows from the enactive and embodied approach we explored so far. It can be shown that metacognitive skills (which include the ability to monitor mental states, discern their nature, and sustain attention) are derived from, developed and fostered by social interaction skills. In this sense, metacognitive skills are a form of 'internalized social cognition.' This resonates with the analogous claim, made by Hadot (Lecture Zero), about the originally social nature of Hellenistic meditation and philosophical exercises. The way that socialization constitutes and shapes meditative practices drastically affects not only the sort of experience they can yield, but also the meaning that can be constructed on their basis. In Lecture Thirteen we shall encounter an instantiation of this claim by reflecting on how the most refined and seemingly introspective aspects of early Buddhist practice are both conceptualized and trained as a consequence of analogous ethical attitudes that are first enacted and executed in a social context.

Lastly, for our purposes is also worth emphasizing Thompson's critique (chapter 5) of the Buddhist modernist account of 'enlightenment,' the supreme soteriological goal of Buddhist practice. 'Enlightenment' is a mid-nineteenth century rendering of the Sanskrit root *budh-* (the root of the epithet 'the Buddha'), which literally means both 'to know' and 'to awake.' Thompson aptly shows how this translation plays well with European ideas connected with the focus on individuality in Protestantism, and the focus on individual ration-

ality in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment movement, which we also briefly touched upon in Lecture Zero, when discussing Taylor's narrative.

Buddhist traditions do not offer a unanimous account of what the experience of Enlightenment or Awakening actually amounts to. Views encompass a whole spectrum that moves from a purely negative description (the complete extinction of mental defilements) to more positive, albeit apophantic, accounts (some access to a transcendent unconditioned reality). Buddhist modernism tends to align with an understanding of Enlightenment as a 'nonconceptual and intuitive realization of how things are' (Thompson 2020, 156). However, this notion is utterly unintelligible when it is divorced from a soteriological background, which is not reducible to the domain of scientific investigation (*pace* the modernist). Hence, either Enlightenment is something that puts Buddhism beyond science, or one has to reduce it to some sort of mental or psychological state open to scientific investigation, but very difficult to map onto traditional Buddhist sources, practices, and texts. As an alternative to this conundrum, Thompson surmises that Enlightenment eventually remains a concept-dependent experience:

any experience called an 'enlightenment experience' is concept-dependent. I'm not saying that 'enlightenment experiences' or 'experiences of awakening' don't exist. I'm sure they do. I'm saying that calling an experience an 'enlightenment experience' is to conceptualize it and that conceptualizing it shapes it. Again, think of love. The idea isn't that people don't experience love. Of course they do. The idea is that their experiences of love depend on their concepts of love, that their concepts of love shape the experiences they call 'experiences of love.' Many of the other things I said about love hold for enlightenment. The concept of enlightenment is multivalent and doesn't have an unequivocal experiential referent. Some forms of enlightenment, such as the ascetic forms upheld in ancient India, are inaccessible to most of us today. (Thompson 2020, 161)

The idea that Enlightenment is 'concept-dependent' might sound almost heretical from the point of view of several Buddhist traditions, which strongly emphasize that this experience goes beyond any form of conceptualization.



However, as Thompson notices, the fact that non-conceptual elements are prominent, does not mean that the experience as a whole is non-conceptual in nature. Being ‘concept-dependent’ simply means that the nature and identity of the object at stake requires a particular concept in order to be located and engaged with, or else enacted. Even the experience of ‘a complete cessation of any engagement with conceptual constructions’ can be constructed as precisely the concept of *this* particular experience. In other words, without such a concept, it would be impossible to stumble upon this experience, in the same way in which without the concept of a city it would be impossible to really ‘be in’ or ‘visit’ that city (after all, a city is not its landscape or just any collection of buildings and other artifacts). While contentious, this point opens up an interesting possibility: depending on various circumstances in which Buddhist practice happens to be embedded, the goal of practice can receive different forms of conceptualizations and hence actually aim at different targets (which might be more or less reconcilable in the end).

Historically, this is in fact what happened. Consider the major divide between the ‘older schools’ (like the Theravāda) and the ‘new schools’ (the Mahāyāna in its various ramifications). The former put a strong emphasis on achieving awakening in this very life by individual adepts. The latter instead present adepts practicing for the sake of becoming themselves buddhas at the end of a long progress that span on manifold lifetimes during which they engage in activities beneficial for all sentient beings. Not only doctrinal, but also social and geographical factors shaped this sort of divide. However, if the history of the evolution of Buddhist views and practices already witness a correlated evolution of the ways in which the final goal and the adept’s striving for it has been differently constructed, we might well ask what the most appropriate way of constructing that goal given our current contemporary situation would be. As Thompson puts it: ‘which concept of enlightenment is appropriate and worth elaborating here and now? Which concept and social practices of enlightenment or awakening are worth reaching for?’ (Thompson 2020, 164). We shall come back to these questions in Lecture Eleven, after having gained a better vantage point to address them.



Lecture Two:  
Naturalism

## 2.1 Introduction

We began to clarify some of the interlocking components of the leading theme of this series of lectures, according to which the self is a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering, in one way or another, the uncertainty that is inherent in its conditionality. Having seen how enaction can illustrate a constitutively relational account of experience, we shall now further investigate what it means for the self to be *constructed* as a constitutively relational reality.

If we take seriously the enactivist account and the idea of constitutive relationality, then we can no longer conceive of the self as something that stands alone in front of a pregiven world of experience. Rather, self and world must be conceived as arising from one another, as co-constituting processes. As a consequence, experience can no longer be conceptualized as a passive reception of information from an outside reality. The passivity of perception is a recurrent trope in Western thought. For instance, in his sixth *Meditation*, Descartes exploited it explicitly to build his argument for the existence of a material world beyond the thinking subject. But if the self is enacted in its interplay with reality, then the boundary between inner and outer world cannot be sharply traced, and in fact the whole of experience has to be taken as a continuous spectrum that cuts across the inner-outer divide.

Consider the role of imagination in cognition. Imagination is the power of producing mental images, which can draw from any sensory domain (‘images’ here is understood in a very broad sense and not limited to visual images alone). Imagination cannot entirely be accounted for as a completely autogenous power, since its raw materials seem to be derived from a range of experiences that the cognitive subject can only discover as already given. But the fact that imagination is not *entirely* autogenous does not detract from the fact that it also entails a powerful autogenous component in which cognitive processes actively construct, shape and rework all sorts of images in all sorts of ways. To some extent, a degree of imaginative construction is involved in any experience, since whatever we perceive is always recognized (to some extent) as this or that thing, isolated from a more general background, furnished with details and meanings that might not be immediately available to the senses, and so on.

If there cannot be any purely passive experience in which the subject is just a mere receiver of outer information, then any experience is always constructed to some degree and thus relies on the imagination.

In his first *Meditation*, Descartes considers the difficulty of discerning whether his current state is one of waking or dreaming. Descartes's assumption is that it should be possible, in principle, to distinguish between what is actively produced by the subject and what is received by it. What is actively produced is imagination, like dreams, while what is received is waking experience, which arises because of some contact with the real world out there. It makes sense for Descartes to build on this assumption, given his overall concern of establishing a sharp ontological distinction between mind and body, subject and world. However, if we forego this dualist project and endorse a more enactivist approach, then the distinction collapses. This does not mean that waking and dreaming states cannot be distinguished at all, but rather that this distinction has to be traced on a continuum, in which waking and dreaming cannot be opposed as mutually exclusive states, but rather differ more by degree of activation of various cognitive faculties and by their coordination in constructing experience.

Taking seriously the possibility of constitutive relationality and applying this to the notion of the self, we can see that a constitutively relational self is something that is constantly constructed in the interplay with its environment. This entails that experience, for a constitutively relational self, cannot be conceptualized as moving through rigidly distinct states, like Cartesian waking or dreaming states. It has to unfold in a more fluid and perhaps ambiguous manner. In this lecture, we shall look in more detail at how this spectrum can be mapped, and how this investigation can provide a better understanding of the nature of the self. Eventually, this also shows that the view of an ontologically independent self is not even obvious from the point of view of first-person perspective. This view becomes plausible only if the whole spectrum of experience encompassed by first-person perspective has been preliminarily filtered (and hence constructed) in order to be divorced from a wide range of aspects that otherwise challenge the sense of self. First-person perspective, by itself, does *not* attest to the experiential fact of an ontologically self-standing self. This ontological self-standing self is itself *an interpretation* (and a rather selective one) of the whole spectrum of first-person experiences.

A thorough examination of the whole spectrum of experience reveals that various forms of selfhood are constructed throughout. At each point, and in different domains, different selves are enacted, and later on they might be abandoned. We can call these ‘local selves’ to stress that their arising and passing away remains confined in time and often in a particular segment of a spectrum. When I dream, I perhaps become someone different; this is an example of a new self that is enacted. But this is just a ‘local’ self, since upon waking up, that person that ‘I was in the dream’ is discarded. However, on top of these local selves, it is also possible to enact a seemingly more enduring Self, which appears more resilient, more encompassing, and capable of emerging through various domains. Even in dreams I can dream of just being my ordinary and daily self, not much different from how I feel myself to be when I am awake. We can call this more resilient self a ‘global Self.’ Notice that the difference between local selves and global Self is not a qualitative difference, but rather a difference in resilience. The global Self is able to survive and resist more profound disruptions than local selves are. However, despite the differences in its manifestations, close scrutiny reveals that even the global Self is enacted, constructed, imagined, and this becomes more apparent precisely by confronting it with the array of local selves that arise and pass away around it.

In this lecture, we will take stock of our exploration of the whole spectrum of experience in order to further our understanding of why and how both local selves and the global Self come about. More generally, this lecture focuses on both the empirical evidence and the theoretical framework that can provide a ‘naturalist’ account of the self, in which the self is constructed in strict dependence on the human body, although this dependence needs to be carefully spelled out and qualified.

## 2.2 Diachronic discontinuity

A good guide for this investigation is provided by Evan Thompson’s *Waking, Dreaming, Being. Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (2015). We are familiar with Thompson’s work from Lecture One and can now follow his further discussion to explore in a systematic way the spectrum that encompasses waking, dreaming and other borderline forms of experience.

Thompson calls his approach here ‘neurophenomenology,’ an investigation of experience that combines insight from both a first-person phenomenological perspective (often integrated by contemplative practices coming from the ancient Indian tradition, including Tibetan Buddhism), and contemporary research in neuroscience aimed at better understanding the way first-person experience can be correlated with the functioning of the physical cognitive system, and with the brain in particular.

For present purposes, the neuroscientific details of Thompson’s discussion can be left aside. The only general point to remember is that the sorts of states discussed in his work seem to correlate with specific modulations of the way the brain functions. As Thompson repeatedly stresses, this should *not* be interpreted in a reductionist way, according to which first-person experience is nothing but the epiphenomenon or byproduct of brain activity. On the contrary, neuroscientific evidence should be treated as a way of investigating the impact of that mutual conditioning of brain activity on first-person experience, and (vice versa) on the way that changes in first-person attitudes towards the world are reflected and have a physical impact on the functioning of the brain (both momentarily and on the long term).

Appealing to neuroscience is a way of showing that both waking and non-waking experience admits physical instantiations and affects, in measurable ways, the functioning of physical organs like the brain. Neuroscience can be used here as a device to defuse a potential objection about the irrelevancy (or illusoriness) of any sort of experience that is different from ordinary waking experience. Dreaming states and other non-waking conditions reveal a wealth of activity that neuroscience is still tentatively beginning to understand. In no way are these states less ‘real’ or less in touch with ‘reality’ than waking experience. While brain states are best understood as necessary but not sufficient enabling conditions for experience (in the sense that there would be arguably no experience without a functioning brain, even if a functioning brain is not sufficient by itself to create experience), neuroscience can provide a different perspective to look at first-person experience from the point of view of how cognition is embodied in a certain physical living being.

Thompson’s discussion can be summarized as covering two main domains: (i) the diachronic discontinuity of experience (which includes the ‘gappiness’

of waking experience, hypnagogic states, and deep dreamless sleep); and (ii) the synchronic discontinuity of experience (which includes the dissolution or reshaping of the sense of self in non-lucid and lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, and near-death experiences). To these two main headings, should also be added Thompson's discussion of the possibility for consciousness to exist without physical correlates as a purely non-material entity (chapters 1 and 3), and his enactive account of the nature and origin of the sense of self. For present purposes, we shall leave aside the issue of the non-materiality of consciousness. We can simply note that the difficulties Thompson finds with this idea are the manifestation of the resistance against anything world-transcendent that characterizes the naturalist approach of his neurophenomenology. These difficulties are not surprising given that Thompson's view is located near the immanent pole of the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self. We shall turn to this point in the concluding part of this lecture, briefly touching upon his enactive account of the origins of the self.

Consider first the evidence for the diachronic discontinuity of experience. This discontinuity entails that experience does not unfold in a homogeneous and continuous way throughout time, as a continuous and uninterrupted flow or a 'stream of consciousness' (to use William James's term). Discontinuity entails that experience tends to be momentary: there is one moment of experience, which has a certain duration, it ends, and then it is followed by another moment of experience, which repeats a similar pattern. Each moment of experience is different in itself, and each moment might be separated from another moment by a gap in which there is no experience. In each moment there might be a local self that enacts a certain function. But the view that there is a global Self underpinning all these local selves can be based only on *inference* (by assuming that all the local selves at each moment are the same global Self). However, if experience is discontinuous from a diachronic point of view, then it would be impossible to experience the continuity of the global Self, simply because experiencing genuine continuity itself cannot be part of any possible experience.

The discontinuity of experience can be manifest at both micro and macro levels. At the micro level, Thompson presents a discussion already included in *The Embodied Mind*, about the fact that ordinary waking experience is akin to



a sequence of rapidly succeeding frames (like a movie) rather than the continuous flow of a stream. In chapter 2, Thompson fleshes out this view by arguing that the reason why the ordinary person might fail to notice the discontinuity of moments of experience is due to a lack of training. Focused meditation training aimed at paying attention to discontinuity can reverse this condition and allow experienced practitioners to appreciate discontinuity. Waking experience by itself does not afford hard evidence for the fact that experience is a continuous flow. Whether it does or not depends on what one is looking for, or what one is looking away from.

At a more macro level, this point is strengthened by taking dreams into account. Dreams cover a vast and diverse domain of experience and can reveal different facets of discontinuity. From the point of view of diachronic discontinuity, two aspects are relevant: the hypnagogic state that precedes falling asleep, and the state of deep, dreamless sleep. Thompson discusses the hypnagogic state in chapter 4, as a case in which the world of waking experience seems to collapse and blur, including the sense of selfhood that is enacted there. He comments:

The hypnagogic state blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, self and world. The flashing lights and colors seem to occupy a space around me, but this space appears within my eyes and reconfigures with each eye movement. The strange faces and distorted scenes look other to me, yet my drifting gaze creates them. I behold these images, but they absorb me. In these ways, the distance between me and them diminishes or even seems to disappear. [...] Sometimes, in this borderland state, a peculiar kind of double consciousness ensues; we retain awareness of the outside world while watching the inner mental scene usurp its place. [...] The hypnagogic state offers a unique concoction of relaxation, absorption, diffuse and receptive attention, ego dissolution, reactivation of recent memories as well as older ones, synesthesia, and hyperassociative and symbolic thinking. By outstripping the waking “I-Me-Mine,” this mode of consciousness can tap deeper sources of creative thinking and intuitive problem solving. (Thompson 2015, 124-125)

The hypnagogic state might be dismissed as simply ‘confused’ from the point of view of a certain interpretation of what reality should look like. However, considered as an experience in its own right, it provides direct, easily available evidence against the sense of a very stable, well-defined, coherent and continuous flow of experience. Every day this flow gets disrupted when one falls asleep. More importantly, the fact that the hypnagogic state is fully part of experience entails that experience is actually constructed, and constructed differently at different times. The hypnagogic state and the waking state do not differ from the point of view of being a sort of experience. They differ instead in terms of the sort of contents that they make available. In the hypnagogic state there is no manifest sense of a global Self, and there might not even be any locally working self. The hypnagogic state is thus not only a disruption of the sort of experience that is more common during waking time, but also a disruption of the experience of self usually associated with being awake. This means that waking experience is just *one* domain of experience on a vaster and more diverse spectrum.

Deep dreamless sleep reinforces this point. While the hypnagogic state still manifests a wealth of perceptual components (images, sounds, feelings), dreamless sleep does not. Thompson takes up this topic in chapter 8. Building on Indian contemplative traditions, he contends that deep dreamless sleep is not an experiential blackout. Some minimal form of awareness remains active and allows one to remember the experience of having slept. This is not an inference based on one’s recalling the time of falling to sleep and then observing one’s having woken up again, but an actual memory of the experience of having slept. In order to have this sort of memory, some awareness and retention must have been present during dreamless sleep. As he explains:

In deep and dreamless sleep, we experience a kind of blankness or nothingness. In other words, deep sleep isn’t a *nothingness of experience* but rather an *experience of nothingness*. Here our ignorance is an experience of pure nonapprehension without misapprehension. Since there’s no object of awareness, there’s nothing for us to mistake for anything else. As total darkness in waking life conceals everything, leaving only not-seeing with no way to misperceive one thing as another, so in deep sleep there is only not-knowing.

We have no knowledge of this ignorance when we sleep, but the nonapprehension is a kind of awareness, and it's this ignorant awareness that is retained in the moment of waking up and that waking memory recalls. If we project some terminology from contemporary Western philosophy of mind onto Yoga and Vedānta, we can say that deep sleep counts as a “phenomenal” state or state of “phenomenal consciousness”—a state for which there's something it's like to be in that state. Yoga and Vedānta describe it as peaceful, one undifferentiated awareness not divided up into a feeling of being a subject aware of a distinct object, and blissfully unknowing. Yet deep sleep doesn't normally count as a state of “access consciousness”—a state we can mentally access and use to guide our attention and thinking. We have no cognitive access to being asleep during sleep; we gain access retrospectively in the waking state. (Thompson 2015, 247-248, original emphasis)

As Thompson points out in the paragraphs immediately after those just quoted, the sort of awareness that is present in deep dreamless sleep cannot be identified with a self. It cannot be taken to be ‘me’ or ‘mine’ because in that experience there is absolutely no mental or bodily sense of subjectivity involved. This remark (which in itself was matter of controversy among Indian schools) has two major implications for understanding the experience of discontinuity.

First, the presence of some degree of awareness by itself does not necessarily constitute an instance of continuity in experience. Awareness does not have to be continuously present in order to be present. As already discussed, even in waking experience awareness is gappy, and it would be surprising (*pace* what has been sometimes argued by ancient Indian schools) to find out that in dreamless sleep awareness becomes continuous. The fact that there is no content of awareness available in this experience makes it even more difficult to experience it as discontinuous, since in this state there is no point of reference (i.e., no content) to judge the discontinuity, nor even (more importantly) any reflective access to the experience itself. However, if the *same* awareness that is present in waking experience is also present (albeit in a state of quiescence emptied of contents) in deep sleep, then this awareness must retain the same gapiness that characterizes it. By contrast, if awareness in deep sleep was of

an entirely different kind, then the experience of remembering the fact of having slept could not occur, since that memory is an indication of the fact that there is some bridge between deep sleep and waking. Something discontinuous in itself can provide this bridge insofar as a series of discontinuous moments can flow in a consistent way through the same system (movies create the sense of continuity precisely in this way).

Second, the sense of self is heavily dependent on the presence of certain contents of experience and the ability to access these contents. Both local selves and the global Self can be experienced only in relation to certain contents. In this respect, the sense of self should be regarded as belonging to the domain of perception and recognition, through which this or that content of experience is identified as 'self' or 'belonging to the self.' This entails that the sense of self is always emergent upon an experiential landscape, which is diverse and manifold in terms of contents displayed and available there. Deep sleep offers the opposite scenario: when no content of experience is available anymore (when one has an 'experience of nothingness,' to use Thompson's phrasing), no sense of self (either local or global) could arise, because no content could be perceived as self or belonging to it. This point has a crucial implication: since it is possible to have a degree of aware experience that does *not* entail the experience of a self (like in deep sleep), it follows that awareness or consciousness *by itself* is different from the sense of self. Ordinarily, and when awake, one might conflate awareness and selfhood and take the two to be the same, but this is just a perspectival misjudgment. While there cannot be selfhood without some basis of awareness, there can be awareness in which no selfhood is enacted. More precisely, a minimal degree of awareness is a necessary but insufficient condition for the experience of selfhood. With no awareness whatsoever, there would be no experience whatsoever, including no experience of selfhood whatsoever. But given *just* awareness in its most empty and minimal form (like in deep sleep), it is still impossible to experience that awareness *as self* in any way. Incidentally, this might be one reason why several Indian schools considered 'pure awareness' so important in their metaphysical and soteriological systems, since it seems to provide a model for having an experience *free* from (ordinary) self (although this soteriological move further requires to interpret 'pure awareness' as the True Self, as we shall discuss in Lecture Six).

For present purposes, this second aspect of deep sleep shows that selfhood (in any form) requires more than just awareness, it requires memory, perception, recognition, and access to these aspects of experience. Since none of this is available in deep sleep, despite a residual minimal degree of awareness, deep sleep represents a macroscopic discontinuity with respect to waking experience. Waking experience is not only significantly altered in the hypnagogic state, but it is also almost entirely suspended during deep sleep.

### **2.3 Synchronic discontinuity**

The sort of continuity that seems to characterize waking experience is also challenged on other fronts. What counts as the core agent in a given experience is not always identified in the same way, nor it is always identified with the same person. In this case, the discontinuity does not necessarily concern the contents that appear to be different at different times, but rather the fact that no fixed and permanent content provides a constant basis for an equally constant process of identification. This challenges even more directly the global Self and reveals an even greater heterogeneity in the spectrum of local selves. To build up the case for this sort of synchronic discontinuity, we can review a number of experiences, moving from the seemingly more ordinary, to the more extraordinary (although whether they are extraordinary depends heavily on what is ordinary for any given person).

Let's begin with dreams. The experience of dreaming should be fairly common to every human being, and it is a common feature that appears across different cultures and different times. In discussing dreams, Thompson observes:

In the hypnagogic state, we look at visual patterns and they absorb us. When we dream, we experience being in the dream; more precisely, we experience being in the dream world. The experience of being a self in the world, which marks the waking state but diminishes in the hypnagogic state, reappears in dreams. (Thompson 2015, 127)

This *prima facie* similarity between dreams and waking is often noticed, to the point that is a widely common trope to wonder whether someone is dreaming

or not (we shall come back to this point later). However, there are two important features that single out dreams from waking states: (i) the fluidity of identity, and (ii) the metacognitive dimension of dreaming.

In general, it is possible to both perceive and remember one's own experience from two points of view: either from an inside (subjective) point of view, or from an outside (objective) point of view. This distinction has been often noticed in Western psychology and can be articulated in different ways. Dreams reveal a particularly strong instability about the way in which subjective and objective perspectives alternate, merge, and interact. As Thompson writes:

When you see yourself from the outside running from your pursuer in a dream, the character you identify with constitutes your dream Me, or self-as-object. Your spatiotemporal point of view as onlooker in the dream constitutes your dream I, or self-as-subject. Your dream Me and I are both aspects of your dream ego or your self-as-dreamed [...]. Thus the Me and the I dissociate in this kind of third person perspective dream, for you see yourself (Me) as located in a different place from your observational point of view (I) within the dream. [...] When you experience your dream body from within, however, your awareness seems located at the place of your dream body, and you see your pursuer through your dream body's eyes. The I (self-as-subject) and the Me (self-as-object) coincide in their felt location. These perspectives can shift or alternate as you dream. You might first see yourself from the outside and then all of a sudden experience yourself from within. You might see another person or being—an animal, perhaps—and then abruptly feel yourself to be that being acting in the dream world. (Thompson 2015, 134)

The seemingly random shifting between subjective and objective perspective reveals that *neither* of these perspectives offers a privileged point of view of who the self actually is, since it can be envisaged from both. More importantly, this same shifting allows for identification with entirely different contents. While dreaming, I can regard myself from an external point of view, but I can also identify with something entirely different; another person, or another animal, for instance. These two aspects seem to be connected: the

instability between objective and subjective perspective allows for a replacement of the actual content that is perceived to constitute the identity of the self. I can see a scene from the outside, in which I am someone who looks different from how I normally look, and I can then see the same scene from the point of view of that seemingly other person and identify with that point of view. All these changes take place in a fluid way, so that there is little evidence in dreams that any of them bear a more definitive or even fundamental role than any other.

Furthermore, a key feature of dreams is that they are convincing, despite the fact that many of their features would be judged incoherent from the point of view of a waking conscious experience. Dreams have a cogency that waking experience sometimes lacks, as if one could not avoid fully believing in what unfolds during the dream. Historically speaking, all cultures have had to face this power of dreams and they all had to come up with ways of dealing with it, often concluding at some point that dreams must have something important to reveal precisely because they are so powerful and persuasive. This cogency of dreams seems to be connected with a relative impairment of the metacognitive functions available during dream experience:

the nonlucid dream state lacks the kind of cognitive control that's present in the waking state. Working memory is weak, so keeping track of what's going on is difficult. Distraction happens constantly and attention can't be volitionally sustained. Metacognition is unsteady, so we have difficulty monitoring thoughts and feelings. At the same time, emotions intensify—sometimes fear, anxiety, or anger; sometimes joy and elation—while basic behaviors such as seeking and fleeing often dominate what we do. [...] The dreaming subject isn't an effective metacognitive subject of experience. In a dream, it's difficult to conceptualize and experience yourself as a self in the act of deciding (a volitional subject), a self in the act of attending (an attentional subject), a self in the act of thinking (a cognitive subject), or a self in the grip of emotion (an affective subject). Lacking insight into the nature of your ongoing conscious state, you can't experience yourself as a dreaming subject. (Thompson 2015, 136-137)

Notice that the impossibility of experiencing oneself as a dreaming subject is connected with the impossibility of knowing during a nonlucid dream that one is dreaming. This means that in whatever way the self is constructed during a nonlucid dream (with all the changeability mentioned above), that self is currently the only self available in experience. Even if this dreaming self is highly shaped by previous memories and habits acquired during waking experience, during the dream there is no trace left of the *same* waking self. The dreaming self is in fact more or less different from the waking self, and for the duration of the dream, that dreaming self is the only self present. In this sense, nonlucid dreams provide another instance of how the seemingly continuous experience of selfhood associated with the waking state can be disrupted.

However, Thompson devotes two interesting chapters (5 and 6) to the experience of lucid dreams, namely, dreams in which an awareness that one is dreaming is available, to some extent, to the dreamer. Lucid dreams are not only anecdotally and randomly recorded by disparate individuals, they have been made an object of sustained practice by Indian schools (especially Tibetan Buddhism), in which methods have been devised in order to cultivate the ability of dreaming in a lucid state.

One way of understanding the key difference between nonlucid and lucid dreams is the following:

What marks a strong lucid dream is the felt presence of witnessing awareness, which can observe or witness the dream precisely as a dream. Its presence can inhibit the automatic identification with the dream ego that characterizes dreaming. The same witnessing awareness can be felt in the waking state in moments of heightened mindfulness; its presence can inhibit the automatic identification with the “I-Me-Mine” that characterizes the waking state. When we look at waking and dreaming consciousness from this vantage point, there’s nothing paradoxical about lucid dreaming, even at an experiential level. (Thompson 2015, 161)

Unlike nonlucid dreams, lucid dreams allow the dreaming subject to realize that what is been currently experienced is nothing but a dream. This realization is often accompanied by a sense of relief, freedom, and excitement. While nonlucid



dreams tend to absorb the subject in their experience without any way of detaching from it, lucid dreams afford the opposite by somehow unbinding the subject from the experience itself. What does this trick is the reappearance of metacognitive functions (the awareness of the sort of experience that is currently unfolding) during the dream itself, and without disrupting the dream state as such.

From this point of view, lucid dreams provide a more subtle instance of how identification is disrupted. A nonlucid dream state is an instance of strong identification, despite the process of identification being tendentially incoherent in the dream state and often different from how it unfolds in the waking state. Even this nonlucid dream identification, though, can be disrupted with the reappearing of metacognitive awareness. In dreams, lucidity does not simply bring one back to the waking state, but rather introduces yet another domain of experience (lucid dreaming), with its own distinctive qualities and modes of identification. A key feature of lucid dreams seems the fact that identification with the dreaming subject is lightened. To use the terminology introduced above, in lucid dreams the self-as-object and the self-as-subject split apart even more evidently and consistently than in ordinary nonlucid dreams. The self-as-object is now seen as a dream product, and this reduces emotional tightness around its experience; I know that this is just a dream, and this is happening only to my dreaming-I. The self-as-subject takes a witness position, becomes a metacognitively aware observer of the dream action, and thus gains a sense of dispassion with regard to it.<sup>27</sup>

Thompson derives two sets of conclusions from the discussion of lucid dreams. On the one hand, he stresses that views that tend to reduce dreams to hallucinations, or that envisage waking life as nothing but a dream, somehow miss the phenomenological specificities and differences that qualify dreaming and waking. According to Thompson, dreams are not a sort of hallucination in which something is perceived to be present when it is not. Dreams are rather

•• 27 One might wander to what extent this account of lucid dreams depends upon the Tibetan Buddhist context in which the practice of lucid dreaming is cultivated. One might imagine that in spontaneous and non-trained forms of lucid dreaming, the split between different sides of the sense of self might not emerge so neatly. And yet, what is most interesting for the present discussion is that the possibility of deliberately inducing lucid dreaming through training reinforces the idea that experience (including the experience of the dreaming self) is constructed, malleable, and open to be shaped in multiple ways. *This* is precisely what it means for the self to be ‘constructed.’

a form of spontaneous imagination occurring during sleep, which is qualitatively different from waking experience insofar as dreams do not entail the same sort of sensorimotor engagement with the world (Thompson 2015, 188). From this point of view, waking ‘isn’t a state opposed to dreaming; it’s a quality of awareness that can be present in any conscious state, including dreaming’ (Thompson 2015, 197). On the other hand, recognizing the genuine difference between these experiences (waking, dreaming, becoming lucid in dreams), he stresses the underpinning lack of a shared identity or self that can be identified as an overarching experiencer of all of them. Drawing here on a Daoist view, Thompson comments:

One phase isn’t reality and the other merely a dream; one isn’t true and the other false. Each phase is authentic and fully accepted as it is. Thus selflessness or the absence of ego leads to radical acceptance of all phases equally. In this Daoist vision, accepting each phase as equally real, along with accepting the natural distinction between waking and dreaming, is what enables one to be fully present in the here and now. [...] The fullness of each experience requires not violating the natural borders between dreaming and waking, not supplanting forgetting with remembering. Transgressing these borders means fighting against change (“the change of things”)—a losing battle that detracts from reality rather than bringing about a higher reality. Detracting from reality inevitably leads to suffering, not happiness. (Thompson 2015, 200)

When the distinctive qualities of dreams (both lucid and nonlucid) are fully appreciated, it becomes apparent that they are different from waking experience, but also irreducible to one privileged baseline of what experience should be like. If this conclusion is accepted, it follows that none of these domains of experience is more real than any other, and their full spectrum reveals just that. Dreams might be as lucid as waking, waking might be as dull as nonlucid dreams, and nonlucid dreams might be more enticing than either waking experience or lucid dreams. The point is not to choose which domains best fits a pre-given criterion of reality, but rather to appreciate how this naturally available diversity of experience makes it apparent that no particular domain comes with an a priori or naturally encoded prominence above others.

There are at least two other sorts of experiences that might also challenge the ordinary waking sense of identification. They are perhaps more infrequent and rare, but when they occur, they seem to yield extremely vivid and compelling insights. These are so-called out-of-body and near-death experiences. In both cases, the subject of experience seems to dissociate from the body with which they usually identify. For this reason, this sort of experience is often adduced as empirical evidence for the possibility of a non-material consciousness or cognitive substratum existing independently from the body. Thompson's neurophenomenological approach is apt to show that this sort of inference is unwarranted, and yet these experiences do provide valuable insights about the multifarious nature of experience and its wide spectrum.

Concerning out-of-body experiences, Thompson connects them with the distinction already mentioned between subjective and objective experiential perspective:

Out-of-body experiences illustrate the importance of distinguishing between the body-as-subject and the body-as-object. Your body-as-object is the body you see from the outside lying in bed, whereas your body-as-subject is you the perceiver. To put the point another way, your body-as-object is the external body image you identify as your body, whereas your body-as-subject is the felt origin of the visual (egocentric) and vestibular (geocentric) perspective from which you make that identification. We can now say in more precise terms what makes an out-of-body experience an experience of altered embodiment rather than of disembodiment: there's a dissociation between your body-as-object and your body-as-subject. Normally you experience them as being in the same place. In an out-of-body experience, however, this unity comes apart, so that your body-as-object and your body-as-subject have different locations. For example, your body-as-object lies below on the bed while your body-as-subject floats above near the ceiling. Out-of-body experiences reveal something crucial about the sense of self: *You locate yourself as an experiential subject wherever your attentional perspective feels located.* [...] In other words, your sense of who you are and where you're located goes with your self-as-subject and not your body-as-object. (Thompson 2015, 210-211, original emphasis)

Out-of-body experiences are usually extremely lively, realistic and convincing. Hence, it is natural for people who have these experience to draw the inference that they can somehow exist apart from their physical body, and this easily leads to the conclusion that whatever exists and experiences the body as an object, but can also depart from that body, must be something that is non-bodily and non-material in itself (Descartes would agree). However, as Thompson discusses in detail, this conclusion does not follow from the experience as such. Out-of-body experiences are akin to lucid dreams in which the dissociation between subjective and objective perspective is coupled with a vivid awareness of the unfolding of the whole experience.

From the point of view of the processes of identification, out-of-body events clearly show an instance in which the ordinary waking perception of a coincidence between the subjective and objective experience, usually rooted in the experience of the same body, comes apart. Out of-body experiences thus reveal that this waking way of constructing experience is the result of a cognitive construction. This does not mean that the out-of-body experience is more reliable than the ordinary embodied experience, but rather that the latter is not something simple and fundamental. Ordinary embodied experience in fact appears as the result of a complex process of coordination and superimposition, which can be disrupted in voluntary ways (since out-of-body experiences can also be induced and trained, like lucid dreams).

Near-death experiences go even one step further. They may occur in people who are very close to death but somehow resuscitated, like in the case of patients who suffer from a heart attack. Those who can provide reports about these experiences seem to refer a wide range of different events taking place. Thompson discusses various classifications that have been provided in order to somehow organize and analyze these reports. For instance,

psychiatrist Bruce Greyson developed a new scale that includes sixteen items grouped into four components—1) cognitive features (time distortion, thought acceleration, life review, revelation); 2) affective features (peace, joy, cosmic unity, encounter with light); 3) paranormal features (vivid sensory events, apparent extrasensory perception, precognitive visions, out-of-body experiences), and 4) transcendental features (sense of an “otherworldly”

environment, sense of a mystical entity, sense of deceased/religious spirits, sense of border/“point of no return”). Greyson’s “Near-Death Experience Scale” has a maximum score of 32, where a score of 7 or higher indicates a near-death experience. (Thompson 2015, 300)

Obviously, strong near-death experiences seem to represent a radical disruption of the ordinary waking experience and point to the existence of a different realm, where the self can travel after having left the physical body. However, from a medical point of view, there are several reasons that might be offered for the arising of these experiences. For instance, ‘reduced oxygen levels (hypoxia) can lead to experiences with many of the elements of near-death experience’ (Thompson 2015, 311). This, of course, does not mean that near-death experiences are illusory. As Thompson emphasizes:

One way to lose touch with the existential meaning of near-death experiences is to argue, on the basis of the kind of cognitive neuroscience perspective just sketched, that these experiences are nothing other than false hallucinations created by a disordered brain. Another way is to argue that these experiences are true presentations of a real, transcendent, spiritual realm to which one’s disembodied consciousness will journey after death. Both these viewpoints fall into the trap of thinking that near-death experiences must be either literally true or literally false. This attitude remains caught in the grip of a purely third-person view of death. In the one case, the experience of drawing near to death is projected onto the plane of a third-person representation of the disordered brain; in the other case, the experience is projected onto the plane of a third-person representation of a transcendent spiritual realm. Both viewpoints turn away from the experience itself and try to translate it into something else or evaluate it according to some outside standard of objective reality. (Thompson 2015, 314)

From the point of view of the current discussion, near-death experiences provide a particularly strong instance of how identification can be radically disrupted, anticipating what appears to be the most radical disruption that a living being could picture, namely, death itself. Part of the appeal of these experiences is

connected with the fact that the content of near-death experiences seems to promise that death will not be such a radical disruption, that there will be some way for the subject of experience to keep existing after the breaking up of the body.

One general observation that can be derived from our discussion so far is that there is a direct correlation between the importance and meaningfulness that is attributed to experience and the use of the concept of 'existence' to express and articulate it. The cogency of nonlucid dreams leads some people to take the content of dreams as really existent. The vividness of out-of-body experiences also leads some to infer that the genuine subject of experience must exist somehow apart from the body. Near-death experiences seem to afford direct evidence for the existence of a whole non-bodily realm towards which one can travel. By contrast, when metacognitive faculties restrain the autogenous power of imagination, the sense of seriousness or urgency is somewhat reduced, the imagined action is taken less at face value, and it can be met with a greater sense of freedom, lightness, irony. In lucid dreams, one knows that what is happening does not really exist. Out-of-body or near-death experiences show unusual ways of disrupting the mechanism of bodily identification, but a sufficient degree of metacognitive awareness (or even post-hoc reflection) can inhibit any claims about the existence of a non-material realm to which these experiences would give access to.

This suggests that 'existence' is itself a basic hermeneutic scheme used to signal a domain of experience that appears phenomenologically and emotionally cogent and worth engaging with. The use of this label can be inhibited when metacognitive awareness leads to a realization that the content of experience is somehow the result of the subject's own imagination, it is something constructed to a degree by the cognitive process itself. Hence, we face a curious paradox. What is waking experience? Does it really exist? And do I really exist when I am awake? If a strong sense of existence is correlated with a weak metacognitive awareness, then the less metacognitively aware I am, the stronger I will feel to be there, like in a dream. But if true awake experience is defined as the moment in which the functioning of metacognitive awareness is at its best, then true awake experience should be precisely the moment in which it is more unlikely to license any claims about existence, including 'I am here.' We shall now explore some implications of this paradox.

## 2.4 Beyond illusions

Thompson's discussion so far helped illustrate that the ordinary waking sense of a global Self is relatively fragile. Diachronic discontinuity shows that there is no entity that can be consistently identified as an enduring Self that remains unchanged across time. Synchronic discontinuity further illustrates that it is often not the case that there is a stable core of contents of experience, at any given time, that is consistently and uniquely identified as being 'self' or 'belonging to (one)self.' The way in which diachronic and synchronic continuities break down shows that they are the result of the coming together of complex and more fundamental processes. This is what it means for the self to be constructed. Many of the experiences discussed so far are subjectively felt with a vividness and cogency that largely outweigh that sense of importance and meaningfulness encountered in ordinary waking experience. These experiences are thus often met with an aura of value, which can encourage us to take them as more revealing about the nature of the subject than ordinary waking experience, and naturally leads to existential claims about what 'truly exists.'

Building on these observations, one might take a step further and blatantly dismiss the reality of selfhood entirely. A reductionist or deflationary approach would contend that the global Self is nothing but an illusion. There is nothing to explain there, except how the illusion arises. Historically, some Buddhist schools seem to have taken this path, and contemporary neuroscience sometimes follows a similar line, which Thompson calls 'neuronihilism.' In his last chapter, he offers a good case for rejecting this option. His general strategy consists in providing an enactivist account for how the sense of self emerges in the interaction that a living being has with its environment. This means that the self should be regarded as a process, which is dependent on conditions, but that is real in its own way. Thompson's account (chapter 10) can be summarized as follows.

The biological basis for the self is constituted by what can be called 'self-specifying systems,' namely, physical structures that both define their own autonomy with respect to their environment, and interact with the environment in order to sustain and preserve that autonomy. A living cell or a bacterium is the paradigm of this autopoietic account (to use Varela's terminology).

Self-specifying systems create meaning, since they have to discern within the environment what is relevant for their survival and what is detrimental, and then act accordingly. These systems are thus inherently teleological and poietic, in the sense that they work by creating and attributing meaning to events and objects. Sense-making is not just an accidental feature but is part and parcel of life.

Moreover, self-specifying systems operate in precarious conditions. Achieving the goal of self-preservation is not something done once and for all, it needs to be constantly enacted. At every moment the conditions that sustain the integrity of the system can break down and fall apart. Sense-making not only happens in precarious conditions, but it also aims at countering this precarity for as long and as much as possible. To use the terminology introduced in Lecture Zero, self-making is an attempt at mastering uncertainty. As Thompson notices, a significant step forward in this attempt occurs when self-specifying systems instantiate sensorimotor systems, which allow them to create a feedback circle between their way of acting in the environment and the results of this action on them. Sensorimotor systems are at the basis of neural structures that appear in animals.

While self-specifying systems endowed with a sensorimotor neural system constitute the biological condition of possibility for the arising of the sense of self, these conditions do not seem sufficient on their own, since they do not necessarily allow the system to designate itself as 'self.' In other words, they do not necessarily allow the system to take that sort of reflexive attitude that accompanies the self.<sup>28</sup> Hence, Thompson adds further social and emotional conditions in order to account for this form of reflexivity. He mentions two in particular: the ability to recognize oneself as a subject of experience, and the ability to self-project towards the past or the future. Self-recognition is what allows a living being not only to interact with the environment, but also to

•• 28 In taking this step, Thompson is clearly trying to navigate between a very broad conception of selfhood as pure autopoiesis (shared by all living beings) and a more restricted conception, specific of the human experience of selfhood, which is usually associated with higher cognitive skills like self-reflectivity. From a broad perspective of selfhood as *just* autopoiesis, any living being (including bacteria) would have their own rudimentary or more sophisticated form of selfhood, while from a stricter perspective, only complex animals, and perhaps only humans can properly have a self.



recognize itself as an agent in that environment, or in other words to fully take a first-person perspective. In human beings, self-recognition begins to arise in newborns around the ninth to the twelfth month, mostly in the dyadic interaction between infant and parents. This means that self-recognition is not merely a cognitive process, it is profoundly shaped by emotions, empathy, and social relations. Self-projection is associated with the capacity to fantasize and speculate about oneself in different times, both projecting back into the past, and forward onto the future. This process often takes place when no more urgent task is at stake and it provides the basis for what is often experienced as mind-wandering or day-dreaming. Self-projection is connected with the ability to formulate stories and narrations about oneself and use them to interpret or reevaluate experiences, making plans, or simply get absorbed in one's own drama.

Building on these elements, Thompson concludes that the self is a self-designating and self-specifying process. This process in itself is real, as are the biological and social interactions that underpin it. In this respect, he argues:

To say that the sense of self is a mental construction—or rather that it's a process under constant mental and bodily construction—doesn't logically imply that there is no self or that the sense of self presents an illusion. [...] Part of the issue here is whether, as some Buddhist and Western philosophers claim, thinking of a stream of consciousness as “mine” is an error, or in other words, whether experiencing the stream of consciousness from within as being “mine” is a delusion. I want to explain now why I think there's a basic and natural sense of the “mineness” of experience that isn't a delusion. [...] What I mean by saying that the fantasizing feels mine is that it shows up as an event in my field of awareness and nowhere else. So too does the witnessing and the mental noting of both the fantasizing and the subsequent self-evaluation. All these mental events happen in *this* field of awareness *here*—the one that feels mine. (Thompson 2015, 359-360, original emphasis)

Thompson's point is that there is no illusion in the way in which cognitive processes take place with respect to a certain living being (fantasizing, for

instance) *and* in the way in which that living being experiences them as happening with respect to itself. When I feel pain in my knee, there is no illusion in the fact that the pain is felt in *my* field of experience (putting aside neuroscientific subtleties about how the brain makes maps of the body and so forth). If this self-recognition was an illusion, then two consequences would follow. First, there could be no way of linking cognitive processes to certain living beings, or in other words reflection would be impossible or at least consistently mistaken. Second, practicing for the sake of overcoming this illusion (as Buddhism urges us to do) would entail moving towards a domain of experience in which it is eventually impossible to associate cognitive states with a particular living being who enacts them. The first consequence seems falsified by experience: we can reliably associate cognitive processes to specific living beings and recognize when a process happens to ‘me’ as opposed to someone else. The second consequence is paradoxical. If one would undermine this ability for self-recognition, then it would be impossible to experience ‘what it feels like’ to have any particular experience, since there would be no subject that could recognize that experience from its own point of view (first-person perspective would be abolished). But if there is no possibility of knowing ‘what it feels like’ to have a certain experience (i.e., no phenomenal consciousness), then being in a certain state or in any other can no longer make any difference. Consequently, having fulfilled practice (being awakened) or not can also no longer make any difference. In fact, nothing would make any difference for anybody.

These considerations suggest that interpreting the self as a sheer illusion overshoots the target. Neuronihilists take the criticism against the self too far. Thompson suggests that the problem with the self should be found somewhere else:

The illusion—or delusion—is taking the self to have an independent existence, like taking the mirror image to be really in the mirror. Notice that the image as such isn’t an illusion; it’s the taking of the image to exist in the mirror that’s the illusion. Similarly, it’s not the appearance of the self as such that’s the illusion; it’s taking the self to exist independently that’s the illusion. Notice too that contrary to neuro-nihilism, the illusion isn’t that the self appears to be a self-substance. That view of the self is theoretical and

doesn't accurately describe our experience. The conception of the self as a substance isn't a cognitive illusion; it's a false belief that derives from philosophy (Descartes in the West and the Nyāya school in India), not from everyday experience. Neuro-nihilism mistakenly diagnoses our self-experience as being committed to a certain philosophical conception of the self and thereby overintellectualizes our experience. (Thompson 2015, 365)

Thompson's positive proposal is to accept the natural experience of the self in the way in which it appears, while at the same time not being taken (and acting upon) by the semblance of real independent existence that it suggests. The paradigm he is looking at is similar to that of a lucid dream: enjoy the dream while also knowing that it is a dream, without having to wake up from it.

However, we can problematize this diagnosis further. Neuronihilism is a particularly strong form of reductionism, according to which the self is nothing but a sheer illusion and there is nothing in reality to which the self refers. This provides one extreme version of the immanentist pole of the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self we sketched in Lecture Zero. Thompson wants to push back from this pole, and he does so by claiming that the self is not an illusion, but perhaps a *delusion*, a real phenomenon that entails some form of cognitive mistake. The cognitive mistake has to do with the ontologization of the self. The self is a process, but this process gives the impression that what appears is in fact something real, a self-standing entity. *This* is the error nestled in the experience of selfhood. We can reject this error without rejecting the self altogether. We can simply acknowledge that the self is not a self-standing entity, it is just a process. A processual view of the self can thus function as an antidote to a nihilist view that would simply dismiss the self tout court. But what does it mean, from an experiential point of view, not to ascribe inherent existence to what is perceived as self or belonging to the self? What does that feel like?

To explore this issue, we can briefly compare the account provided by Jonardon Ganeri in his *The Self. Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance* (2012). Ganeri's project is based on a distinction between two forms of what he calls 'naturalism.' Hard naturalism is the attempt to reduce phenomena to explanations that can be derived or made compatible with those pro-

vided by the natural sciences. Hard naturalism provides an instantiation of the strong immanent pole of our spectrum of possible conceptions of the self. Neuronihilism would also fall into this camp. Ganeri differentiates hard naturalism from what he calls 'liberal' naturalism, which does not reduce all phenomena and explanations to those that can be offered by natural sciences, while still contending that all phenomena and explanations should be grounded within the natural world broadly construed. Liberal naturalism allows for phenomena that can be explained only by appealing to normative terms, values, reasons, and other notions that cannot be reduced to those handled by natural sciences. However, even liberal naturalism shares with hard naturalism its opposition to moving any further towards the opposite transcendent pole of the spectrum. The problem of the self becomes quickly paradoxical when treated from a hard naturalist point of view, but it is amenable to a more liberal approach.

Ganeri builds this account in a close dialogue between today's Western analytical philosophy and ancient Indian thought. His contention is that important voices of the ancient Indian debate attempted to reject both transcendent solutions *and* hard naturalist ones, and hence they can be particularly insightful for developing a new form of liberal naturalism. In Ganeri's reconstruction, Buddhist philosophers (especially in the first centuries CE), were keen to provide an account of experience that could explain the appearance of a first-person perspective, while they were also committed to show that this perspective entails some form of error. He summarizes:

All Buddhist philosophers, of whatever particular persuasion, claim that *I*-thought involves an error. I have now identified two putative sources of error in object perception. One is the mistake involved when one takes what is in fact only a quasi-object (an entity without determinate individuation criteria, such as a wave) as if it were the sort of object that falls under a sortal concept and so can be reidentified as the same again. The second candidate is the sort of mistake that is involved when one treats what is in fact relational as if it were intrinsic. [...] Alternatively, a Buddhist philosopher might seek to base their thesis that a mistake is involved in states of self-consciousness in the idea that *I*-thought mistakes what is in fact a wave-

like flow of subjective awareness as if it were the consciousness of a single, continuous entity. All there really is to the flow of subjectivity is that each mental happening is reflexively self-aware. (Ganeri 2012, 199)

This both rephrases and broadens Thompson's diagnosis of the problem nestled in the self. But contrary to Thompson, Ganeri relativizes the Buddhist concern (Ganeri 2012, 319-320). In his view, the Buddhist claim that self involves some form of error is indexed to one specific way in which Buddhist philosophers conceived of ownership of mental states, namely, in terms of causal agency. To really be owner of a state is to be the agent who causally bring about that state. But according to Buddhist philosophers (Ganeri refers in particular to Vasubandhu, active in India in the fifth century CE), there is no self that is prior to and exists behind thoughts and intentions. However, ownership can also be conceived of in different terms:

If the only model of ownership available were a casual agency model, then the conclusion that there are no selves might indeed be a legitimate one to draw, and this indeed is what leads to a natural scientific suspicion of self. A different reaction to the argument, however, is to say that other notions of ownership are available. One possibility is that there is genuine immersed ownership, and so legitimate conceptions of an immersed self distinct from any idea of the causal agent doing the thinking. Indeed, Vasubandhu's analysis of the phenomenal structure of self-consciousness and Dignāga's reflexivist self-model theory actually provide non-agentive analyses of the notion of an immersed sense of ownership, and I have argued that both are consistent with the rejection of the error-theory they are associated with. (Ganeri 2012, 322)

By 'immersed self' Ganeri understands a model of ownership based on endorsement and commitment. I am immersed in a desire or a perception when I am fully committed to it, believe it, take it to be true, and act accordingly. This notion of ownership as endorsement does not presuppose that I am an agent that somehow exists behind these processes, and it is fully compatible with the idea of the self as an emergent and complex system of different pro-

cesses. It is a naturalist account, but of a liberal variety, which entails no reductionism. If such an account is viable, then it is not true that *any* notion of self is inevitably bound to be mistaken. Only some account of selfhood is problematic, and one can take stock of the Buddhist analysis, without having to buy into their critique, since the error associated with the self can be actually dissociated from it, provided the right conceptual framework is available.<sup>29</sup>

One point on which both Thompson and Ganeri agree on is that the self is something to explain and understand, but this must be done without eliminating it and also without resorting to transcendent, non-naturalist accounts. Both authors provide fully embodied and relational accounts of the self. Thompson tries to re-interpret the traditional Buddhist criticism aimed at the self in terms of undue ontologization, but Ganeri shows that this critique itself has to be contextualized. Under appropriate changes in the theoretical framework (in the notion of ownership, for instance) the critique is no longer valid, and the ensuing view of the self is rescued from any inherent error or mistake. In trying to make sense of the Buddhist critique, Thompson shows why there is something mistaken in the enactment of the self. However, Ganeri's discussion shows that this diagnosis does not necessarily follow from a relational conception of selfhood and ownership. Commenting on the alleged 'error' nestled in the self, he notices that 'it [cannot] be right to describe it as an 'error' at all if it is not one from which human experience can be cured without the loss of its humanity' (Ganeri 2012, 201).<sup>30</sup> Ganeri seems to suggest that, pro-

•• 29 For a synthetic presentation of Ganeri's view of the self in the context of contemporary scholarship see J. Ganeri, 'The Self Restated' (2017). For a further development of his account, see also J. Ganeri, *Attention, Not Self* (2017).

30 Contemporary Western psychology recognizes that states of depersonalization or derealization can occur as a result of trauma or other psychologically overwhelming conditions. As a result, the subject feels alienated from their experience, detached from oneself, their body, emotions, and surroundings. The sense of reality is altered and everything can seem less real. This experience is usually perceived painfully or as something wrong, so much so that the subject might seek treatment for it. From the point of view of the early discourses of the Buddha that we shall discuss in Lecture Twelve and Thirteen, the point made by Ganeri should be interpreted as being aimed at avoiding this sort of traumatic depersonalization, or else rejecting the view that the realization of 'not-self' amounts to such a state. However, the discourses (e.g. MN 72, SN 22.85, 22.89 and 44.1) do point to the state of awakening as entailing a particular kind of depersonalization, which is (i) deliberately and voluntary induced by training (vs. the traumatic ordinary form of depersonalization), and (ii) connected with the realization that whatever the subject as appropriated as belonging to their own being is in fact inherently impersonal: it can be used, it is at disposal, but it cannot be kept or held at once's will. This

vided with the right theory, there is no problem with the self, and enacting the self is completely legitimate, something entirely humane.

Certain interpretations (hermeneutic constructions) of the self are untenable (for instance, they are based on undue assumptions), but this does not entail that *any* interpretation of selfhood must be necessarily untenable. The crucial issue thus becomes finding a way of constructing (interpreting) the self that does justice to the phenomenal experience of selfhood, but also allows one to take into account normative (soteriological) demands. We already touched upon the way in which Thompson's account incorporates these demands by considering all living beings as self-making processes operating in precarious conditions. Ganeri presents a similar point by stressing the fact that the experience of selfhood entails an unavoidable normative dimension that cannot be reduced to physical hard facts. The experience of being a self is not just that of taking at face value whatever happens or appears, but it is also involves choosing and deciding how to react to it. As Ganeri argues:

among our resolutions, evaluations, and emotions, there are some from which we do want to distance ourselves. We achieve this by making them into objects of consciousness, and thereby 'not self,' opening them to the deliberative question 'Shall I make them mine?' [...]. A tension between naturalism and the first-person stance arises only when it is imagined that this distancing can be achieved with respect to the whole of our mental life at once. For then it begins to seem that one must either imagine that there is a pure or formal self standing behind all awareness, or else that it is possible to become impersonal, without a first-person stance at all. The compatibility between naturalism and the first-person stance ceases to seem mysterious when one abandons the idea that one becomes estranged from the entirety of one's conscious life. Distancing oneself from one attitude always presupposes the avowal of others. One might indeed argue that it would be better to adopt the stance of merely witnessing one's anger or

.....  
 second point shows that 'awakened' depersonalized experience can remain fully functional in the sense that the awakened one (take the Buddha as an example) is fully able to engage with whatever current experience might demand and react accordingly, swiftly, appropriately, and without trouble, while also knowing that nothing in this same experience belongs to anybody in particular.

betrayal rather than inhabiting it; but my point is that one can assume a spectatorial stance with regard to some of one's states only if one is occupying a stance of endorsement with respect to others. (Ganeri 2012, 326-237)

Contents of experience advance normative demands, they ask whether I should endorse them or not. In Ganeri's interpretation, understanding ownership as endorsement allows one to take into account these demands, without having to compulsively subscribe to whatever they present. Taking any attitude as an object, it would thus become 'not-self' precisely because in distancing myself from that attitude I am assessing whether or not I should act upon it, hence there is no longer any automatic identification with that content of experience that becomes an object of assessment.

The sort of conundrum that Ganeri describes is important. Distancing from contents can be understood as moving in two extreme directions: one is distancing from the whole of one's mental life (disavowing any endorsement to all contents), another is moving into the direction of a transcendent Self that stands behind all experience. The former moves towards alienation, the latter towards metaphysical dissolution. Notice: both directions are ways of exercising a degree of mastery on contents, and *both* count (in our scheme at least) as ways of enacting a self. Ganeri's view is that moving towards a transcendent disembodied self is not viable from a naturalist point of view, but this does not commit to wholesale distancing either. The latter is the view that results from hard naturalism, and Ganeri's liberal alternative is that distancing can be selective, concerning only *some* contents. How does this work?

The two senses of ownership that Ganeri discusses, based on endorsement and causal agency, can be connected to one another. Endorsement is the attitude of avowal or disavowal towards contents that make their experience something that not only occurs to me, but in which I am also directly involved, in which I participate. Notice, this is not a diachronic account, in which first 'I am' here, while potential contents remain over there, and *then* it happens that I participate in them. Rather, the sense of 'I am' emerges *in the process* of participation with certain contents, in the same way the enaction of a character emerges when the actor steps on the stage and begins to play it. Ganeri's



account remains consistent with the basic intuition of enaction we discussed so far. But he adds important further nuances.

To quote Ganeri's own scheme one last time:

There is an *underself*, the subpersonal monitoring of the mental states, autonomous or alienated, that one embodies, 'ownership' here implying a relation of unconscious access to the content of one's states of mind. There is an *immersed self*, the element of first-person presentation in the content of consciousness, 'ownership' now referring to a phenomenologically present sense of mineness. Finally, there is a *participant self*, the inhabitation of a first-person stance, 'ownership' involving the relations of involvement, participation, and endorsement. Without an underself, one would have no mental life at all, and with only an underself, one's existence would be nothing more than that of a self-monitoring database. With an immersed but no participant self, one's desires and commitments would be as if that of a virtual avatar or simulacrum, experienced 'from the inside' but without any normative pull or demand. With a participant but no immersed self, one would be as if afflicted by a disorder in which one's occupation of a first-person stance is devoid of phenomenal substance, and while one is not alienated from one's commitments and desires, they do not feel alive to one. Fully first-personal subjective consciousness is at once *grounded* (in 'friction' with the world and subject to its constraint), *lived* (in experiential openness and presence to the world), and *engaged* (with the pulls and demands of emotion and intention on the world). Therefore, a self is a unity of coordination, immersion, and participation. (Ganeri 2012, 328-329)

Here, the constructed nature of the self takes yet another declension, as Ganeri now articulates three levels (underself, immersed self, and participating self) that together form the more ordinary sense of self, while they are also each of them in turn a cognitive-emotional construction.

Since Ganeri grants that this liberal naturalism is compatible with normative demands, we can safely assume that it must be compatible with a purposiveness of this self and its enacted unity. What Ganeri provides is a template for understanding various ways in which the self can exercise its *mastery* over

contents of experience (and exercising mastery always presuppose an acknowledgment that contents are uncertain, hence both susceptible to change and in need of being handled properly). Endorsement in particular plays a pivotal role in mastery, because mastery is a way of acting and dealing with contents, and this is possible only through participation (a detached witness is by definition someone who does not participate in what is observed, and hence does not *do* anything). But granting that endorsement and causal agency define two distinct ways of exercising ownership (mastery) over contents, they are not unrelated.

We can distinguish four broad scenarios: (i) there is an endorsement of contents that leads to causal mastery, in the sense that contents are endorsed in such a way that I conceive of myself as the agent behind them; (ii) there is an endorsement of contents that does not lead to causal mastery; (iii) there is a withdrawal of endorsement that leads to yet another form of causal mastery, in the sense that by experiencing contents as if I were just a pure spectator, I can pretend to be unaffected by them; (iv) there is a withdrawal of endorsement that does not lead to any form of causal mastery.

The first scenario can be envisaged as the main target of the critique advanced by traditional forms of Buddhist thought and practice, and also the one that both Ganeri and Thompson seem interested in avoiding. The third scenario is the way in which the hard naturalist project can be understood. It undermines any form of endorsement by denying that the self is anything real, but in doing so it establishes a form of mastery over contents of experience, precisely because having withdrawn endorsement contents can be neutralized and experienced as completely indifferent. This scenario also defines how ‘not-self’ is understood by modernist forms of Buddhism (and Buddhist meditation) discussed in Lecture One, which appear to be informed by a hard naturalist stance. From the point of view of our leading theme, both these views support a form of mastery, and hence they both count as a (paradoxical, if you like) enaction of a self. In the first case, the self is enacted explicitly, while in the second case it is enacted negatively, by reducing it to a pure observer.

Consider the fourth scenario. If some form of endorsement is a way of engaging with contents, then it must be something one *does*. Withdrawal counts as an action, and all actions must have a purpose. The core idea of the fourth scenario is not participating for the sake of not exercising mastery, which

amounts to withdrawing endorsement for the sake of extinguishing the self at all. Since one is no longer participating in experience, one's own disappearance as a self is also no longer experienced as my own disappearance. The resulting attitude is that of a pure inactivity: there is no longer any engagement with what happens or is experienced, and there is no attempt at doing anything at all with it. In this way, the soteriological problem of the self is solved by simply getting rid of the self in a form of metaphysical dissolution. As we shall see in Lecture Four and Six, this is a potential development of the quest for a transcendent Self, and something that in early Buddhist texts (e.g. Ud 3.10) is identified and rejected as the thirst for non-existence (Pāli *vibhava*).

This leaves us with the second option as a potential interpretation of the *positive* early Buddhist view, namely, what the early Buddhist training aims at achieving. The qualification *early* Buddhist is meant to stress that this interpretation might apply more specifically to the older and more practical-oriented formulations of Buddhist thought that we shall discuss in lectures Twelve and Thirteen, and perhaps less to the more sophisticated accounts that are discussed by Thompson and Ganeri (who draw mostly from classical Indian Buddhist philosophy in the fifth and sixth centuries CE). Anyway, insofar as it maintains a form of endorsement, this option keeps a form of participation in experience, and thus that sense of unity described by Ganeri as essential to human first-person experience. However, if this form of endorsement does not lead to mastery, it does not actually enact a self. Experience is grounded, lived, and engaged (to use Ganeri's formula), but it is no longer appropriated as genuinely 'mine.' How this can be achieved will be the topic of our last two lectures.

Before moving in this direction, though, we need to explore the first option in greater depth. After all, why should we give up mastery and selfhood if there is a successful way to control uncertainty? To begin addressing this issue, we can move further in the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self. So far, we discussed naturalist interpretations in which selfhood is closely related with an individual living body. But what if this connection is weakened to some extent? What sort of selfhood can emerge there? And what would be the problems connected with it? This is the topic of the next lecture.



# Lecture Three: Shamanism

### 3.1 Introduction

In the previous two lectures we began to explore what it means for the self to be a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction. In this lecture and the next, we shall focus on the aim of this construction. The self aims at mastering, in a way or another, the uncertainty that is inherent in its conditionality. We made already two important observations in this respect in Lecture Two.

First, we observed that in a number of more or less ordinary cases we can witness the relative fragility and fugacity of the self. Hypnagogic states and dreamless sleep are major interruptions in one's experience of selfhood, dreams offer various ways in which the same or different selves are enacted and transformed, with or without lucidity, while more extreme events can reveal how the seemingly unitary sense of embodiment can be broken and give rise to various forms of altered embodiment. While at times one global Self might arise as hegemonic, careful observation reveals that the experience of selfhood tends to be more complex, diverse, and fragmented.

Second, we also discussed attempts in cognitive science and philosophy to conceptualize the self as a fully embodied phenomenon, which emerges from the living processes of a biological body. This naturalist approach can be taken to a reductionist extreme. Neuronihilism offers one example of how scientific research can be used to explain the self away as an epiphenomenon of brain processes. But we also mentioned the problems with this form of 'hard naturalism' (to use Ganeri's expression). Even if the self is only an emergent phenomenon, i.e., a fully processual and relational event, this does not entail that it must be dismissed as a mere illusion. A more 'liberal naturalism' can acknowledge the self as something real in its own way, while also firmly maintaining that this reality does not move beyond or away from the bodily boundaries within which the self-process is rooted.

Both points illustrate one dimension of the uncertainty that forms the background scenario of the experience of selfhood. First-person experience and bodily processes are highly changeable and unstable, constantly dependent upon various conditions to maintain and preserve them. A naturalist perspective, by emphasising the constitutively relational nature of the self, exposes the uncertainty that is inherent in the self's conditionality. However, saying that the

formation of a water whirlpool is a highly unstable and unpredictable process has a markedly different emotional and cognitive impact than saying that *I am* that unstable and uncertain. Being a self means taking experiences and phenomena *personally*, as they happen *to me*. To use Ganeri's phrasing again, selfhood entails an endorsement of experience. Uncovering that one's own condition is thus extremely uncertain is more than just stating an objective and impersonal fact, it means denouncing a *problem*. This problem manifests at two levels: on the one hand, uncertainty of events and conditions is a challenge *for me* (for my survival, for the meaningfulness of my experience), but on the other hand, *I am* already an attempt at mastering this uncertainty (the experience of 'me' is co-determined and co-constituted by this very attempt at mastering uncertainty, it is not pre-given or independent from it).

We already discussed one possible way the self can master uncertainty by actually undermining itself as a genuine phenomenon. In Lecture Zero, we considered Taylor's genealogy of Western modern subjectivity. In Taylor's account, one way in which Western modern selfhood is constructed is by creating a disengaged rational observer of a fully disenchanted world. I am essentially a cognitive structure aimed at understanding how the great clockwork of nature works. Nature is the vast mass of matter ruled by certain regularities or laws, and these laws are rationally accessible through some mix of reasoning and observation. By knowing these laws, one can better understand how natural phenomena are brought about, and by generalization one might expect that the whole universe will abide to the same laws, possibly the simplest and most fecund (as someone like Malebranche would add). Disengaged rationality and disenchanted nature go together with a utilitarian approach in the domain of morality. Happiness is pleasure and a good life is a life in which pleasure is maximized over pain, possibly for the greatest number of people (even if this latter clause can provoke many clashes and debates, since there is no guarantee that greatest pleasure for *me* will coincide with greatest pleasure for the greatest number).<sup>31</sup>

•• 31 Historically speaking, Western Enlightenment ideals have been often blind to the fact that whole chunks of human populations were oddly excluded from enjoying them. Charles Mills, 'Non-Cartesian Sums. Philosophy and the African-American Experience' (2015) discusses how this problem applies in the case of Afro-American peoples.

The sort of hard naturalism that is displayed by some trends in today's cognitive science can be seen as inheriting this modern ideal of disengaged rationality. The opposition between first-person and third-person perspectives discussed in Lecture One can also be interpreted as a renewed attempt at attenuating as much as possible the experiential thickness of the subject. Ultimately, the self is a pure knower, what Kant and some later phenomenologists would call a 'transcendental-I.' The empirical person, *me* as a historical individual with a certain story, memory, emotions and so on, is just part of phenomena. In fact, neuronihilism would contend that *I am no thing*, this 'I am' is a spurious and dispensable part of experience. First-person perspective is just a biased perspective on experience, ultimately to be transcended in a purely impersonal, dispassionate, scientific view.

Hard naturalism is not a free-floating idea. There must be human beings who develop, argue, and propound it. Insofar as these human beings take hard naturalism as their own way of understanding their own experience, they can perhaps regard that experience in a completely neutral and dispassionate way. Uncertainty will no longer feel like a *personal* problem, because the *first person* has been silenced or disavowed, if not suppressed. Hard naturalism is thus a way of mastering uncertainty, and it does so by undermining the possibility of taking this uncertainty as a personal challenge, namely, by disavowing the legitimacy of the first-person perspective. In this sense, hard naturalism is one extreme way of constructing the self, where the self is constructed in such a manner that it cannot exist as a genuine entity. Instead, it is asserted only in order to say that it is not actually there. This is one extreme pole of the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self, and one which is also hard to defend and articulate even from within the scientific standards it adheres to. As discussed in Lecture One and Two, this reductionist attitude leads to a conflict between first- and third-person perspectives which threatens the overall meaningfulness of human experience. The talk about illusion and reality reinforces this clash, by presenting it in clearly adversarial terms, as a war in which only one contender can survive. Ironically, precisely because of its adversarial nature, hard naturalism shows that its solution to the problem of uncertainty is doubtful at best, given that this uncertainty now resurfaces as a struggle between first-person illusions and



third-person objective reality, both of which claim some legitimacy in the domain of experience.

Given these problems, we saw in both Lecture One and Two that various attempts can be made to move away from the extreme of hard naturalism. The self can be acknowledged as real in its own way, namely, as a real process. Granted that the self is a process, how exactly does this self-process deal with the uncertainty inherent in its conditionality? If uncertainty is not simply disavowed, it has to be recognized as something that matters *to me*. Appealing to natural science does not help here, because natural science can at best describe the scope and domain of uncertainty in a certain sector of experience. Technology can perhaps do a bit more, by offering devices to manage uncertainty to some degree. Hungry? Take this food. Ill? Take this drug. Aging? Follow this program. Bored? Watch this show. Lonely? Take this phone. Dying? Ask us later. However, technology works on a case by case basis. Uncertainty is a global condition, which affects not only this or that particular area of life, but the whole of life as such. Mastering uncertainty through technology is one way of constructing the self, perhaps a very prominent way in today's industrialized world. And yet technology by itself does not know what uncertainty is, it does not recognize it as a problem, because technology (so far at least) does not seem able to develop a full-blown sense of endorsement towards experience (if artificial intelligence will ever reach this point, it will be difficult to understand why it should be treated as 'artificial' anymore).

The idea of managing uncertainty through various technological means presupposes that one acknowledges and endorses uncertainty as one's own problem and interprets this condition as something that urgently needs to be addressed. Moreover, technology can be successful in managing uncertainty only if uncertainty is understood as something that is subject to change, a domain in which some form of action or intervention could make a difference. By taking a drug when feeling ill, I act upon the anxiety and pain caused by my sense of illness under the assumption that my action can make a difference, change my illness and restore my health. An uncertain condition can be a threat, but it has a potential to be reversed for the good. If this potential was not present, then action would be idle and managing would be meaningless. Hence, the technological managing of uncertainty presupposes a hermeneutic

scheme in which uncertainty is understood as a changeable condition, which can be threatening, but which can also be turned to one's advantage.

In today's industrialized world, technology offers a widespread and powerful way of constructing the self and managing uncertainty. In a sense, this possibility is an offspring of modern science and its capacity to transform and interact with physical reality in an extremely powerful way. However, for technology to be put to use in this way, an underpinning basic understanding of uncertainty as a reversible state needs to be in place. This understanding does not arise from within the paradigm of disengaged reason and disenchanted nature. Disenchanted nature has no preference, it does not know better or worse. As Descartes would say, a clock that fails to mark the hour is as good as a clock that does. Disengaged reason does not even see uncertainty as a problem anymore. The idea that uncertainty is reversible can be seen in fact as a much older idea, perhaps one of the oldest.

This lecture focuses on how the idea of reversibility gives rise to a distinctive form of selfhood, in which mastery over uncertainty is achieved by deliberately steering conditions in a favourable way. For this idea to work, the conditions and grounds upon which human life rests need to be interpreted as receptive to human steering. In a contemporary technological view, knowing how nature works allows humans to reproduce or alter natural processes, or even synthesize new ones. If nature is just clockwork, once the blueprint of the clockwork is known, one can interfere with it, either to repair it or to change it in some other way.

One of the pioneers of this approach was Francis Bacon, who at the beginning of the early modern period, strongly supported the idea of penetrating nature's secrets in order to better human life. Bacon himself, however, was already a later epigone of a much older attempt to master and steer nature in line with human needs. Unlike Descartes, Bacon did not fully subscribe to a disenchanted picture of nature as just matter in motion. In fact, a long and complex debate animates the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century discussions about whether this clockwork model of nature is a good model at all. To some extent, Descartes's project of presenting nature in a mechanist way is a reaction to other models in which natural phenomena are associated with forms of cognition, perception and agency, which extends even to apparently inanimate

beings like material elements (think about the Aristotelian doctrine of the ‘natural tendency’ of fire to move upwards, or earth to fall downward). More generally, the non-mechanist picture of nature that Descartes tries to displace is a picture full of powers, forces, centres of activity and agency, nestled in a complex web of affinities, sympathies and antipathies. Aristotelian and Renaissance natural philosophy offer good examples of the kinds of models that Descartes’s mechanism is intended to displace. The development of early modern natural philosophy ultimately does not culminate in a victory for Descartes’s project. Not only do certain natural domains (biology, chemistry) appear untreatable from a narrow mechanist point of view, but even in hard natural sciences like astronomy, the emergence of Newtonian natural philosophy as a new paradigm entails the acceptance that nature is not inert after all but shaped by forces. Newton and many Newtonians had no concerns with claiming that the force of gravity is the clearest proof of God’s involvement with the natural world.<sup>32</sup>

This short excursion should at least make plausible that ‘knowing how nature works’ does not necessarily mean endorsing a mechanist picture of natural phenomena. Sometimes this is feasible, but sometimes it is not (as contemporary failed attempts at reducing cognitive processes to brain functions show). To master the uncertainty of human condition (its embodiment in a natural and largely mysterious world of forces and processes) by steering it in a way that will be favourable for human flourishing, one needs to know how nature works. However, the idea that nature can work only in a mechanist fashion, like clockwork, is not the only option, and historically has not always been the dominant or even the most successful one.

Nature is active. By acknowledging that much, one is acknowledging that there is agency in nature, very much like there is agency in human beings. Natural beings *do* things. And what they do affects human beings’ lives. Uncer-

•• 32 For those interested in exploring the historical background of the evolution of early modern science, a good starting point is Denis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Thought* (1996), which offers an overview of the sort of scholastic views that many early moderns tended to reject. For an introduction to relatively standard historiographical picture of the seventeenth-century ‘Scientific Revolution,’ see Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (1996). For a radical criticism of this same Revolution, inspired by an eco-feminist perspective, see the provocative work by Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980).

tainty can then be understood as the fact that human beings, embedded as they are in a natural world full of other centres of agency, often have little knowledge and even less control of how these other beings operate, and yet nonetheless depend on them. Food supply, weather conditions, illnesses, and attacks from other animals are just some of the most obvious instances of how dependent human thriving is on surrounding circumstances. But if uncertainty is reversible, then knowing better, and possibly having some control of these circumstances, can transform them from potential threats into alleys and resources. What is needed is a way to get in touch with natural agencies, understand their order, and ensure that human well-being is taken into due account. Thus, what is needed is a form of communication between human and non-human agency, the creation of a sort of continuous dialogue that will make it possible for humans to ensure that conditions remain favourable, or else steer them in the right direction when they turn out unfavourable.

We begin to delineate a distinct form of selfhood in which mastery over uncertainty is achieved by steering it, by reversing uncertainty in one's favour. This form of selfhood presupposes an understanding of nature in which the whole natural world is seen not as an inert array of matter in motion, but rather as a complex and multi-layered playfield of various and often conflicting agents, each one endowed with its own tasks, powers, goals, and freedom. Once this view is accepted, the *technical* challenge becomes that of developing a way of communicating effectively with these other agencies, in such a way as to become able, through this communication, to steer them in the right way (namely, a way that is profitable for the human side). From time immemorial, perhaps from the very beginnings of humanity in prehistorical ages, views and techniques have been developed to address this issue. The most common way of referring to this domain is by using the term 'shamanism' and this is the topic we shall now address.

Shamanism is a subject of discussion in many fields such as religious studies, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, and cultural studies. Here, our focus remains more narrowly centred on the way in which the sort of evidence gathered around shamanism in these connected fields points to a specific way of understanding and constructing the self as capable of mastering uncertainty through a deliberate interference with it. We shall consider shamanism as a

paradigm for understanding this sort of selfhood, without reducing the multifarious historical phenomenon of shamanism to just this single aspect, nor by precluding that the same model of selfhood could be developed without explicitly presenting itself as a form of shamanism.

### 3.2 A communitarian model of agency

There are recurrent aspects that, despite variations and exceptions, define a set of core common features of shamanism, both across ethnic groups worldwide and in historical records. But before detailing these features, it might be helpful to introduce a more general model, largely derived from the insights we have gathered from the previous lectures about the relational nature of selfhood, in order to better understand how shamanism provides a distinctive way of constructing the self as a device for mastering uncertainty.

Imagine a small-scale community that relies on its own resources alone to survive and thrive. Small-scale entails that all members of the community can be directly and personally acquainted with all the others (no member of the community can be regarded as a stranger). The fact that the community needs to rely mostly on its own forces makes it particularly important to establish and maintain a degree of discipline and order among its members. This self-regulating communal structure needs to allow for both diversification of roles and for those roles to be complementary to one another. A well-functioning community of this sort might be described as *harmonious*. That is, it exemplifies the successful blending of distinct and yet symbiotically related individuals.

For harmony to be maintained, each member of the community needs to strongly endorse its social role within that community. Each individual depends on the whole community for its own survival and thriving, and the community as a whole depends on each individual fulfilling their role.<sup>33</sup> This mutual

•• 33 The term 'individual' should be interpreted here as referring to any functional biological unit that is commonly identified as a certain living body. The term does not necessarily entail further overtones about singleness of identity and personhood that might be attached to it in another context. In other words, it might be helpful to reserve the term 'individual' to refer to the basic physical and biological ground upon which personhood (any role or *persona* that is enacted by an individual as a way of expressing a certain form of agency) and identity (any attitude of appropriation through which a certain personal role is interpreted as belonging to the one who enacts it) can be superimposed. This

dependence is best served through a strong endorsement of social roles assigned to each member, which might include elements of identification with one's kin, endorsement of the community values, narratives, and cosmological views, and skilfulness in practicing those tasks assigned to each and necessary for the common good. If we consider endorsement a crucial component of the experience of being a self, then this emphasis on the endorsement of social roles leads members of this sort of community to first and foremost identify themselves with their own social role, which is the object of the strongest endorsement. In this scenario, what I am and how I define myself is profoundly shaped by my being a member of my community (I am a child of A and B, I belong to clan Z, I am the one who provide Y for the community, and so forth).

The self-organization of a harmonious community can be compared with the autopoietic genesis of a cell or a more complex organism (Lecture One). Like a cell or any other organism, a human community can survive and thrive only by constantly interacting with the environment within which the community lives. Just as with a cell or complex organisms, there is a symbiotic and mutual adaptation between environment and community. In the ideal case for the community, the environment naturally provides what is needed for survival and thriving, but most likely the community needs to act skilfully to get what it needs. The environment is not a general and amorphous entity, but it is itself a community of various beings, each one performing their own tasks, forming their groups, and behaving in different ways. And this is all subject to change over time. Finding the right way of fitting this ecosystem is the main task of the community. In the same way the community emerges as a coordination of different individual agencies, the environment itself can be seen as a larger community in which different agencies manifest and operate. The same process that tries to establish a form of harmony within the community must also be scaled up and applied to the relation of the community with the environmental agencies upon which it depends. Harmony must be achieved both within

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trichotomy shows that the three notions (individual, person, and identity) can converge or diverge in different ways and in different contexts. In the following, it will become clear that agents are persons, they can be hosted in individuals (an individual can host several agents) and they can become the basis for an identity, or else cause the disruption of it in case of conflict between different persons or agents within the same individual or between a certain individual and their community.

and outside the community, since the two dimensions are not really independent but mutually co-determined.

Notice how this model almost inevitably leads to a carving up of reality and experience not primarily in terms of entities and objects, but rather in terms of *agents*. The idea of entity or object has to do with something that is pregiven, self-standing, indifferent to its being engaged with (or not being engaged with) by a human being. Agents, instead, are realities capable of bringing about changes around them, potential interlocutors with whom one might interact. Agents can establish targets for their actions and treat certain aspects of reality as objects, but they are more fundamental and even more relevant (from the point of view of how to live in a certain reality) than objects themselves. Agents can be recognized because they appear as relatively autonomous and independent centres of change and activity, they start or steer processes, and they give birth to new events. Agents might sometimes operate in the most regular and predictable way, and yet their agency is distinctive insofar as it cannot be directly controlled or subjugated. In this sense, agency goes together with a degree of freedom, understood as the irreducibility to the full control of another agent.

Members of a community are agents in this sense. They are distinct persons and individuals because they can act in their own way, they are relatively independent, and this freedom is precisely what makes harmony not only necessary but also precarious. While it might be in the common interest of all members to act in a harmonious way, the possibility that this harmony might break apart is always present. The same applies to the environment. A community lives in a living environment, namely, a community of other agents, some of them might be other humans belonging to other human communities, but most of the agents in the environment are non-human. Animals are clearly agents in their own way, but plants are agents as well, and even what we would call 'inanimate beings,' like elements, rivers, stars, atmospheric phenomena and so on. Insofar as these beings *do something*, namely, perform certain actions, they are agents. The fact that different agents have different forms of agency is only to be expected if one understands agency as the essential irreducibility of any agent to the agency of others. Difference is constitutive of agency, and thus difference from human agency is but a further proof of the genuine nature of

non-human agency. If the environment on which the community depends is itself a community of agents, then even the harmony established with this environment is desirable but inherently precarious.

Before reflecting on this precarity further, it is important to appreciate how this broad view of reality in terms of agency shapes selfhood and endorsement. Each member of the community operates under a strong pressure to play their role within the community itself. This role has to do with one's specific form of agency within the community, defined by both what is required of the individual from the community, and what the individual can do within it and thanks to it. This endorsement is perhaps the most fundamental bond that keeps the community together. However, the notion of agency entails freedom, and the reverse of this entails that whatever cannot be fully reduced to one's own (endorsed) agency, must be recognized as a distinct agent in its own right. Since endorsed agency is defined by the community structure itself, any form of agency that manifests but is not reducible to what counts as endorsed agency, must be considered as somehow foreign, as another form of agency. The natural environment is itself a community of foreign and diverse agents, but a single human individual can also host a variety of different and alien sources of agency.

In this model, identity and difference are not sharply distinguished but relationally defined. An agent can *do things* only because it interacts with other agents that are relatively distinct and independent, but also available as potential partners, if not enemies. In this view, the crucial aspect is not how sharply identity is segregated from difference (since they cannot be segregated), but rather how the two are mutually co-determined. Insofar as different agencies are amenable to be harmonized, they can form a certain unity. At the social level, this happens in the harmonization of the different members, while at the individual level this can happen in the harmonization of the different sources of agency that might spring from within a single individual, and at the environmental level harmony can equally be established between the community and the larger agential ecosystem in which the community is embedded. The fundamental threshold in this view is thus the difference between harmonic coordination or disharmonic segregation. Unity does not entail simplicity (the absence of internal differentiation) but harmonization of the differences. In



this context, being *one*-self does not require having only one, absolutely simple source of agency and domain of endorsement, but rather being able to harmonize whatever sources of agency are present in such a way that the result can be endorsed as functional within the host community. The community as a whole must also reproduce the same scheme and find a form of internal harmony that will allow for a harmonic relationship within its host ecosystem.

This account of agency entails a relatively weak form of embodiment.<sup>34</sup> Weak embodiment means that there is no biunivocal relation between agents and physically individuated bodies. One single human body can host more than one agent, insofar as these agents are not harmonized and thus appear as genuinely different and relatively independent sources of action. More challenging for a naturalist view, though, is the fact that one single agency might not be tied to one particular physical body. As we saw in the previous two lectures, this possibility is precisely what naturalism denies. The sort of weak embodiment entailed by the view at stake here does not completely dismiss the notion of embodiment, but rather relaxes the idea that embodiment needs to occur with respect to an individual body. In this sense, weak embodiment takes issue with the very idea of strong physical individuality, according to which an individual body can be defined in its own right, as an entity or an object that is ontologically self-standing. The notion of agency discussed so far does not allow for this sort of rigid and substantial individuality, since it does not allow for rigid and substantial identity. Identity is always defined within a context of diversity and relationality. Moreover, since agency is more fundamental than entities and objects, agency cannot be grounded and depend on an individual physical body (an entity) because the latter can be identified as such only in virtue of the agency that it exercises.

•• 34 In today's Western philosophy, this sort of weak embodiment might fit accounts that see cognitive life as 'extended,' namely, as irreducible to the physical boundaries of the individual body. For an accessible outline of how such an account can be defended, see Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads. Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (2009). The enactivist account presented in Lecture One *might* be articulated along the lines of an extended approach, insofar as it takes the individual-environment relation to be constitutive and more fundamental than each of these relata taken in its own right. However, extended approaches can be developed in various ways and the one presented here is just one possible alternative.

Weak embodiment entails that agency is itself a relational locus of change, which arises from the whole environment in which it is embedded. On the one hand, weak embodiment sees the tie between an agent and a certain individual physical body as relatively contingent; it can be broken, replaced, transformed, without the agent being destroyed in this process. On the other hand, weak embodiment entails *ecological* embodiment, namely, agency is always dependent upon a whole ecosystem in which it acts and operates in its own distinctive ways. In this sense, agents are necessarily embedded, but *not* at the level of individual physical bodies, but rather at the global level of the whole system in which they operate. Weak embodiment does not deny any form of embodiment at all, but specifically rejects the *individualistic* model of embodiment that is taken for granted by more naturalistic views.

There are two sources of evidence that can corroborate weak embodiment. First, we already discussed in Lecture Two a number of instances in which one's own sense of agency and subjectivity can appear divorced from embodiment or identification with one's own physical body. Lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences are all cases in which the various components that usually participate in the construction of selfhood are somehow disarticulated, and the resulting experience is that of an altered form of embodiment. This array of experiences can provide first-person evidence for the possibility that agency is only weakly embodied.<sup>35</sup>

Second, from the point of view of a certain community, all the roles that are instantiated in the community are currently embodied by different individuals who endorse them. And yet, those roles and their corresponding agency can be detached from any specific physical individual and be reproduced by others. Social roles are weakly embodied in the sense that the same role can be instantiated by different individuals, and all these different individuals can equally strongly endorse the same role as their own self. Being a homeowner

•• 35 In Lecture Two, we discussed how Thompson (rightly) points out that these sorts of experiences do not warrant the *ontological* claim about the alleged existence of a purely non-material and dis-embodied self or a non-material world. Notice that the point made here, though, does not concern ontology (what there is), but agency (who acts), insofar as it takes these possibilities of experience as evidence for the fact that there is no one-to-one correspondence between physical individuality and agency.

or a child, a parent or a warrior, a healer or a hunter, a shaman or a farmer are all social roles, different patterns of agency that get instantiated at various times by various individuals, and provide to those who endorse them a core dimension of their own selfhood. For as long as the community keeps going, and despite inevitable evolutions and transformations in its constitutive roles, these roles are forms of trans-individual agency that are only weakly embodied, while remaining ecologically embedded in the community as a whole.

The naturalist might come up with counter-arguments, counter-evidence and new interpretations for dismissing this form of weak embodiment. However, for present purposes, let us take it as at least a conceivable option for now. Two major consequences follow. The first is that there can be more agents than individual physical bodies. One body can host more than one agent, and some agents might not be embodied in a particular individual body. The density of agents in the whole environment is greater than the discrete individual bodies within it. If each agent is such because it retains an inalienable and irreducible degree of freedom, this entails that the whole project of harmonization (at the three scales of community-environment, community-members, and within one single member of a community) is even more challenging. Even if a significant number of agents will remain neutral with respect to any given community, any time a certain agent acts on its own accord, despite the community's needs, harmony is under threat. Weak embodiment thus reveals that the survival and thriving of a harmonic community is inherently and profoundly precarious. Or, more accurately, it does justice to its inherent precarity by offering an explanation for it based on the inextricable density of agency on which the harmonic life of the community rests.

The second consequence is that disharmonious agency cannot be fully controlled nor prevented. When an agent manifests itself as recalcitrant to cooperate for the sake of harmonious symbiotic living, that agent cannot be controlled by taking ownership of it, since its very disharmonic behaviour is a proof of its relative independence and freedom. Disharmonious agency can be completely disruptive of the established identity upon which it acts. In this case, the form of selfhood that has been endorsed is subject to an alien source of agency, with respect to which it has no possible control, no right to claim, and also seemingly no escape. This option makes apparent the existential and

daunting dimension of uncertainty that characterizes selfhood. In the model presented so far, selfhood is first instantiated as a form of harmonic coordination, but this coordination is constantly exposed to its disruption by the very nature of the elements that it tries to coordinate, namely, a dense domain of different agents that always retain some degree of freedom to dissociate themselves or operate against the community's own interest.

This predicament is evident at the three scales discussed so far. At the individual level, one individual can host multiple sources of agency, and some of them might act in ways that are contrary to the social role that the individual has otherwise endorsed. Various drives, but also just states of illness, are instances of how the normal functioning of an individual can be disrupted by seemingly alien forces that act within it. At the community level, some individuals can begin to act against the community itself, as free riders, contesters, or just by trying to pursue other goals. Social conflict within the community is thus the socialized equivalent of the effects of individual illness. And yet at the environmental level, other human agents from other communities, or just other natural agents, can begin to act in ways that are detrimental to the community at large. Aggressions, natural catastrophes, or simply bad luck are the most obvious instances of a disharmony between the community's needs and the actions of other agents upon which the community depends. In these and similar cases, disharmony directly threatens the community's survival and that of its members. And given the shape of this model, disharmony ought to be understood as a conflict with *other* agents (the source of conflict cannot be itself endorsed, given that endorsement is directed by the community towards what fosters harmony within it).

Disharmony is the constant and immanent danger nestled in the ideal of harmonious living. It provides the main manifestation of the inherent uncertainty that characterizes the construction of selfhood in this model. If disharmony is not treated, it will simply overwhelm and eventually destroy the self. But to be treated, alien and disharmonic agency cannot be simply assimilated and overpowered, because in acknowledging the problem of disharmony the right of alien agency to exercise its own freedom of dissenting and challenging harmony is also acknowledged. The way disharmony can be defused and possibly dissipated is through *domestication*.

Domestication entails mutual recognition, communication, and negotiation. By mutual recognition, the alien disharmonic agent is recognized and acknowledged as an interlocutor in its own right who is expressing its freedom to act, even if this expression turns out to be detrimental for another party. Acknowledging entails a process of personification of the agent, which includes recognizing its identity, giving it a name and shape, making explicit the way in which the agent is embedded in the whole ecosystem. The alien agent is thus recognized as another with whom it is possible to establish direct contact and eventually induce its way of acting to change for the best. To achieve this change, there must be a way of communicating with the alien agent. Communication should not be seen here as a transfer of information, but rather as a way of sharing with and familiarizing oneself with others. Communication can involve language (including the more performative ways of speaking like praising, praying, supplying, and addressing), but it can also involve sharing of goods (sacrifices, offerings), or undertaking of deeds (exchange of actions). This whole complex process entails mediation and negotiation. Something needs to be done in order to convince the alien agent to support harmonic symbiotic living rather than disrupting it. As in any negotiation, one's demands must be balanced by conceding something to the alien agent in order to include, attract, and pacify it. This process of domestication is not dissimilar to (in fact, it might be seen as a further refinement and extension of) the process through which young children are taught to become members of their community, or certain non-human animals are tamed and trained to cooperate with human beings.

Insofar as domestication is successful, it leads to harmony, and thus it sustains and supports the communitarian form of selfhood described so far. However, domestication is not just something that is enacted in special circumstances. Selfhood here relies on harmonization, but harmonization of agency is structurally exposed to the risk of disharmony, at all scales, at all times. Hence, domestication cannot be a punctual or occasional practice, it needs to be a constant process of prevention of, and reaction to, ongoing centrifugal drives towards disharmony. There cannot be any harmony without keeping disharmony at bay, and hence a harmonic self can be constructed only through constant exercise of domestication. The model presented here envisages the

self as a specific way of mastering uncertainty through domestication. This can be seen as the core business of shamanism.

### **3.3 Shamanic communities**

Shamanism has attracted increased scholarly attention, especially from those working in the fields of religious studies and anthropology. On the one hand, practices and forms of life that can be associated with shamanism seem to exist worldwide and can be dated back to an immemorial time (as we shall see below). On the other hand, the study of shamanism is made tricky by the need to do justice to local variations and idiosyncrasies, which sometimes defy the very idea of studying shamanism as a single unified phenomenon. Moreover, shamanic traditions often rely on bodies of knowledge that are difficult to access or retrieve, because they are deeply embedded in oral traditions (which might be discontinuous), and the material culture they produce is difficult to interpret without first-hand cultural coordinates provided by their living context. For present purposes, we do not need to get into the details of this fascinating debate, nor do we need to see shamanism as a completely universal and unified phenomenon. Here, it is sufficient to acknowledge, as most scholars would do, that it constitutes a sufficiently robust and well-instantiated phenomenon—and is therefore an object of study in its own right.

Most often, shamanism is associated with at least four core features, that can receive various declensions depending on time, space and circumstances: (i) a strong embedding of shamanic practices within the life of a community, (ii) a publicly shared cosmological view among members of that community, (iii) specific forms of recruitment of the shaman, including subsequent training and mastery of techniques, and (iv) the use of these techniques in contexts like healing, divination, and the resolution of conflicts.

The word ‘shamanism’ draws attention to the role of one single individual, the shaman, who operates within a certain community. This emphasis on the shaman him or herself, though, can be misleading, since a core aspect of shamanic culture is the strong symbiosis between the community and its worldview and the enactment of a certain shamanic role by a particular individual at a particular time. While shamans are key actors, shamanism is

best seen as a way in which whole communities structure and understand their own identity and the identity of their members, even if most of them are not practicing shamans themselves. To explore this phenomenon further, a good guide is provided by Thomas DuBois' *Introduction to Shamanism* (2009), which offers a balanced synthesis of most of the current research in the field.

Shamanism is often associated with small-scale societies, which can be semi-nomadic and based on hunting and gathering, or can also practice forms of subsistence farming and agriculture. In these societies, the role of shamans is particularly prominent in the domains of healing, divination and conflict resolution. To understand this role, it is necessary to first appreciate the sort of cosmology that is usually endorsed by these communities and how the shaman fits it. As DuBois summarizes:

Although these cosmologies—and many others described for other shamanic traditions of the world—vary considerably in detail, certain commonalities are nonetheless evident. Unseen worlds are multiple, and become known to the human community through shamanic revelation. Shamans rely on spirit guides for assistance in traveling to one or more of these known worlds but often cannot travel to all the worlds known. The cosmologies often pay particular attention to the dead: there are often one or more locales for the spirits of the dead, and the dead must travel there on pathways known to shamans and their spirit guides. In hunting cultures as remote from each other as Inuit and Yagua, there are often deities of the hunt, who require some sort of placation or offering in exchange for hunting success. This, too, often becomes a task for a shaman. In terms of geography, the multiple worlds of the cosmos are often described as vertical in array, but spirits travel horizontally across the worlds as well. The primordial first shaman is often recalled as a key figure in the cosmos, and may live in his own abode, described as remote from the world of the living. (DuBois 2009, 50)

A key, recurrent feature of this cosmological view is what scholarship often describes in terms of 'spirits.' Spirits are associated with human beings, ani-

mals, plants, natural elements and phenomena. Spirits show agency and can become interlocutors meaning that communication with them is possible. For this reason, spirits are treated as persons, partners with whom humans need to get in touch and establish a fruitful relation. Even within one single human being, often multiple spirits are acknowledged, and the fact that some of them might depart or be stolen is one recurrent aetiology for illness and disease. Spirits are also weakly embodied, in the sense that human spirits can depart from a human body and still be considered alive in their own way, and there are in fact non-human spirits that do not exist in the human world in an embodied form. Spirit worlds are thus posited as further regions of the cosmos in which spirits exist and exercise their agency. The basic scheme is tripartite: the human realm is in the middle, and (at least) two other realms are posited above and below. These spiritual realms can (but not necessarily do) acquire moral overtones, so that spirits living there are of a particular moral constitution (bad or good) or experience a particular form of existence (blessed or doomed). Despite this cosmological hierarchy, spirits can freely travel throughout the cosmos and exercise their agency in all regions. Human life (both at the community and at the individual level) can be supported or disrupted by spirits acting in this way. Members of a community usually retain a particularly strong tie with the spirits of their ancestors, who can act as guides or protectors. For present purposes, we might understand this talk about *spirits* as a talk about *weakly embodied agents* as described in the communitarian model of agency introduced above.

Ordinarily, spirits are undetectable to human beings, although their presence can be discerned by examining and interpreting certain effects or events. The invisibility of spirits can itself be understood in broader metaphorical terms, as an impossibility to communicate and establish a relation of mutual recognition between an ordinary human being and a spirit. This barrier of incommunicability is precisely what is overcome by the shaman, who acts as the community's *medium*, or the bridge between the ordinary and spirit worlds. Notice that the ordinary world is not a world devoid of spirits, but rather a world in which communication with the spirits acting within it is blocked. The shaman's task is that of removing this blockage. As DuBois explains:



the cosmos which shamans describe tends towards both spatial and spiritual differentiation. Human beings find themselves in a mysterious web of seen and unseen forces. Frail and limited figures in themselves, they are set in largely unconscious relation to a vast array of powerful sentient beings who hold the keys to success or failure in their lives. Amid this complex and threatening world, the shaman emerges as a crucial mediating figure. Human in current essence, but on speaking terms with the spirit world(s) to which the shaman has occasional and possibly (after death) permanent access, the shaman bridges the gulf between the visible and invisible, the generally known and the largely unknown. Traversing realms unfamiliar to any but other specialists in the trade, the shaman performs tasks for the good of clients or the community at large: negotiating or effecting cures, divining the future, leading the souls of the dead to their proper afterlife destinations, securing luck or misfortune for individuals or their enemies. Set apart from other people by these mediating activities performed at the edge of the human community and the threshold of the spirit world, the shaman can easily experience a sense of alienation from both human and spirit realms. Yet often, by acting as a bridge between these worlds and interlocutors, the shaman instead becomes central: an esteemed (if not also feared) prime mover in securing the needs of clients and ensuring the wellbeing of the greater community, both human and spiritual. (DuBois 2009, 82)

The mediating role of the shaman fulfils a community need. Indeed, a crucial need, given the way the community understands itself and its functioning within its environment. The shaman's role as a bridge between spirit worlds (namely, the various domains of agency in our model) witnesses the community's struggle for domesticating alien forms of agency.

This point can be better appreciated by considering that being a shaman is itself a community-constructed role, and something that is otherwise inconceivable.<sup>36</sup> Individuals who become shamans are usually co-opted in this role

•• 36 In today's neo-shamanism, the strong community embedding that is witnessed in traditional shamanism around the world seems to be less prominent. While potentially interesting, this topic falls outside the scope of this present discussion. For a summary, see DuBois 2009, 264-290.

through a specific initiation procedure. Traditionally, a would be shaman receives a calling from a spirit or has some other kind of profound encounter with the spirit world. Often, the call happens in the context of a life crisis or a severe illness or life-threatening situation. This frequently occurs in adolescence. Shamanic initiation is sometimes kept within a family lineage in which the role is passed from one generation to the next, although in various cultures there is also room for individual initiative (both in deliberately seeking a shamanic call, and in declining one). In all cases, though, the spirit call must be complemented by societal approval, which often takes the form of explicit training of the new adept under the supervision of a senior shaman.

A very recurrent element in many traditions concerns a form of initiatory death and rebirth. During the crisis, the would be shaman is in a condition of profound suffering, due to external circumstances, physical illness, or mental discomfort. This is usually associated with forms of withdrawal from communal life, solitude, isolation, and other introverted behaviours. Such a crisis can be understood as a marked form of disharmony, which threatens the very nature and survival of the self. In this condition, the would be shaman receives a visit from a spirit, who will usually become his or her spirit helper, namely, the guide who will train the shaman and help him or her in their future career.

The encounter with the spirit helper can take various forms, from dreams to episodes of possession. Part of the initiatory process consists in the adept learning how to master and control the relationship with the spirit, how to establish a communication with it, and negotiate a form of partnership. In this new condition, the spirit will support the future shaman in their tasks, and the shaman will remain devoted and subordinated to the spirit. Domestication cannot be phrased in terms of a rigid dichotomy between activity and passivity, since the shaman is empowered by and in control of the spirit, but also dependent on it and on its support. Again, the relationship with a loyal trained animal might capture the sort of relationship that will link the shaman with the spirit helper (who often manifests in an animal form). In the process of establishing this relationship, though, the would be shaman undergoes an experience of death and rebirth, which is often described in terms of body disaggregation and regeneration. The adept might experience their own body being destroyed, and new bodily parts provided by spirits, so that

the new shaman body will be essentially different, regenerated, and more apt to perform shamanic duties.<sup>37</sup>

The way in which the would be shaman interprets their crisis, and the way they go through it and receive further training by senior shamans, is entirely predicated on having taken on board since the beginning the sort of cosmological view described above. That view is already shared and presupposed within the community and determines how their members interpret their crisis. Even those members who do not experience any particular shamanic call or special powers believe in a world actively shaped by spirits (agents) and in need of keeping good relationship with them. Falling short of establishing this relation is regarded as the basic cause for illness and misfortune, both at the personal and at the communal level. This same view also entails that *some* individual will provide the community with a suitable bridge towards the spirit world, namely, with a shaman. Who is going to play this role depends on circumstances, but the fact that the role will be filled is something expected and required. The process of initiation, co-optation, and training is thus a way for the community to enact a fundamental component of its founding worldview.

DuBois comments:

singular in spiritual experience and yet highly social in professional function and career, the shaman depends upon the ambient family, clan, or community as strongly as the community depends on the shaman. Recourse to supernatural assistance is a resource of tremendous value to a community, particularly one with a small number of members, great dependency on the vagaries of hunting, fishing, and gathering, and limited means of addressing serious treats like disease or misfortune. In this context, the shaman often plays a central role and is accorded prestige, or perhaps fear, in recognition of this fact. Although shamans may describe their callings first and foremost through reference to spiritual interlocutors, it is often their human communities which spell the success or frustration

•• 37 For historical details about initiatory practices, especially among Eurasian and Siberian shamanic cultures, see the classic study by Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964, first French edition 1951), chapters 1-4. For a more succinct discussion, see DuBois 2009, chapter 5.

of a shamanic career. For the shaman cannot mediate between the supernatural and human if the human community does not deign to participate in the act. [...] It is poignant to recognize the fragility of a shamanic calling that, on the one hand, seems to offer nearly unlimited recourse to supernatural aid but which, on the other hand, may be foiled by the skepticism, hostility, or dismissal of a decidedly human community. The shaman of traditional shamanism is an intensely social being, on serving a community whose interests ultimately animate both the shaman and the spirit world. (DuBois 2009, 105-106)

The shaman and their community exist in symbiosis. During the training phase, the adept learns the repository of wisdom, knowledge, and know-how accumulated by previous generations of shamans and passed on by the teacher. The adept can thus expand and innovate on this received body of knowledge, but they will also preserve it, eventually passing it on to new generations. During their career, shamans will often rely on human assistants (not infrequently a close kin), and their community will be able to judge their performance (which is always a public event), exercising a normative pressure concerning what is expected from the shaman, and how good or badly they fulfil this expectation. Not infrequently, different shamans can compete with one another, and the community will act as a judge.

### **3.4 Poietic practice and trance**

A crucial feature of a shaman's work is constituted by the shaman session (or *séance*), a complex ritual in which the shaman enacts his or her powers in order to achieve a specific goal (such as healing illness, divination, guiding the souls of recently deceased towards the proper afterlife place, or propitiation of specific spirits or deities). The session is a public event, in which the whole community takes part as (active) audience. Three elements are typical of shaman sessions: (i) a narrative framework, (ii) the use of various means (music, singing, dancing, and often the consumption of specific psychotropic ritual substances) to enter, sustain, and leave a particular cognitive condition, and (iii) the actual achievement of this condition (usually referred to as 'trance').

Scholars have sometimes given priority to one or the other of these aspects, with a propensity to focus on trance-states as a distinctive feature of shamanism.<sup>38</sup> During a trance, the shaman experiences an encounter with the spirit world, which often takes the form of a spiritual travel. The sort of cognitive states associated with trance varies considerably even during the same session, spanning from cataleptic states in which the shaman seems completely unconscious, to other states in which the shaman seems to retain some degree of awareness, including states in which the shaman may seem to be possessed by a certain spirit that speaks through him or her. Sometimes, the use of music (especially drums) or psychotropic substances is used as a means to achieve trance. However, all these aspects are always framed within a precise narrative framework, shaped and expressed through ritual songs, music and dance. This ritual framework embeds the hermeneutic coordinates of the cosmology that informs the whole shamanic worldview, and thus makes the shaman's performance meaningful for the audience.

Gilbert Rouget, in his *Music and Trance. A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession* (first French edition 1980) has offered one of the most systematic maps for navigating through these phenomena. First, Rouget helpfully distinguishes between 'trance' and 'ectasis' as belonging to two opposite side of the spectrum of experience: trance is a dynamic state, often associated with socialized activities (including music) and with sensory overstimulation, while ectasis a more static and introvert condition, most often pursued in solitude and silence, associated with a reduction or even deprivation of sensory stimulation. As we are going to discuss in Lecture Four, this understanding of ecstasy is more typical of what are often labelled 'mystical experiences,' which are worth distinguishing (in content, goals, and practice) from shamanic performances.

•• 38 Sometimes academic literature refers to these states as 'altered states of consciousness.' This expression has been introduced and used as a more value-neutral description, but it ultimately risks making what is described more obscure. 'Consciousness' is a debated notion and there is little agreement on how it should be best understood. Even more debatable is what would constitute a 'non-altered' state of consciousness. If the intuition is that ordinary waking experience is what provides the point of reference for a 'non-altered' state, this seems to miss the profound way that waking experience is shaped by endogenous imagination and it is ultimately inseparable from the continuum of other states, as discussed in Lecture Two.

‘Trance’ (from the Latin *transire*) literally means ‘going across’ and typically means ‘going beyond’ ordinary experience. Within the practices that rely on trance, Rouget further distinguishes between shamanic trance and possession trance, mostly based on the way in which they are performed and socialized. In shamanic trance, one individual is the main actor of their own trance, which is often expressed as a travelling through a different but connected dimension of experience, namely, the spiritual dimension. Shamanic trance has also a specific goal to achieve, like healing or divination. Possession trance, instead, is a more passive event, in which the body of an adept is taken up by the spirit of a certain divinity or other agent, which has been evoked by a ritual. The adept temporarily loses their own identity and becomes the divinity or spirit who possesses them. The adept then behaves and acts in a way that reveals the presence of the possessing spirit in them. In possession trance, it is often the very experience of possession that constitute a form of healing for the adept. In possession trance, a master of ceremony usually guides the possession without undergoing possession themselves, and the audience is significantly more involved in the performance, since they are responsible for singing and playing music. In shamanic trance the community assists and supports the shaman’s travelling by providing emotional and musical feedback to the shaman’s ritual, but it is the shaman him or herself who also actively performs the music.

Music is used as a stereotyped framework to induce trance, guide it (which is usually expressed through specific forms of dance or movement that the adept executes), and eventually bringing it to a close. In possession trance, for instance, fixed motives and gestures are associated with different gods and the fact that an adept begins to enact them is recognized as the manifestation of possession by this or that god. Shamans also learn complex repertoires of songs and motives that express various happenings in the unfolding of the narrative they engage with during a session. In general, music, dance and gestures are ways of expressing in a shared social space the sort of emotional and experiential transformation occurring during trance. At the same time, the social space also works as a frame that both receives and controls the unfolding of that experience. Once again, trance reveals a dialectic between individual and society, ruling the shareability of experience (or its lack

thereof), and the way in which different members of the same group interpret it.<sup>39</sup>

This quick overview makes it possible to understand possession trance as a sort of broader socialization of shamanic trance. What in some cultures is a sort of exclusive right of the shaman, in other cultures is available for sharing among a number of adepts. DuBois (2009, 59-60, 165) also cites the existence of more ‘democratized shamanism,’ especially among North America Natives, which might constitute an intermediary form between more traditional shamanic trance and possession trance. As Rouget notices, possession trance, like shamanic trance, has a healing function and usually presupposes a similar initiatory process, articulated in crisis, training, and becoming adept. We shall say a bit more about possession in Lecture Seven, in relation to Ancient Greece. In general, more recent scholarship tends to acknowledge that both shamanic-trance and possession-trance may coexist, albeit perhaps at different degrees, within the same culture.<sup>40</sup>

- 39 Rich Freeman, ‘The Teyyam Tradition of Kerala’ (2003), discusses the case of possession rituals (*teyyam*) in south India (Kerala), stressing their strong and complex social dimension, in which cast hierarchies, integration between Brahminic and Dravidic cultures, and performative rehearsals of (symbolic or historical) challenges to the socio-political status quo converge. In particular, he comments (p. 318): ‘there is no clear ontological break between the human and the divine in this cultural context, but rather a continuum of expressions of powers, always divine to the extent they manifest an awesomely heightened effectiveness, and always human, to the extent that they emerge from social relations in a narratively historical context. This narrative continuum of the human-divine power spectrum is fully consonant with, and perhaps even necessary, as the discursive support for a performative mode of worship whose whole rationale is the demonstrated transformation of low-caste human beings into the tangible embodiments of living gods. The worldview of *teyyam* clearly implies that the entirety of human life at its various levels—physical, social, and political—is suffused with unseen powers.’

40 See further discussion in Brian Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction* (2006), 22-25 and 37-40. Morris’s Chapter 1, devoted to shamanism, is a good overview of many of the topics discussed in greater detail by DuBois. Morton Klass, *Mind Over Mind: The Anthropology and Psychology of Spirit Possession* (2003) offers an in-depth discussion of spirit possession. Chapter 7, in particular, outlines an account in which spirit possession can be envisaged as a form of identity dissociation that is *not* pathological: ‘dissociative disorders studied and treated by psychopathologists are illness variants of a normal (that is, a *nondisorder*) capacity of humans to dissociate, by either external or internal suggestion. But there is another, and very important, difference between [dissociative identity disorder] and spirit possession. In [dissociative identity disorder], the new identities that surface are essentially unpredictable and idiosyncratic: in spirit possession, on the other hand, the new identities are those of entities known to and accepted as part of the individual’s (and the individual’s community’s) belief system’ (Klass 2003, 115).

Moreover, Rouget's analysis convincingly shows that there is no necessary connection between trance and music. All sorts of music is associated with trance in a range of different cultures, and it is not uncommon that musical qualities connected with trance are also present in musical forms that do not induce trance, or that trance-states can be entered without any music at all. What seems to be more constant in terms of accessing trance are (i) the adept's beliefs and dispositions to enter trance; and (ii) the appropriate social setting in which this state will occur and be supported. The entering into trance is not just a private affair, but it always has a social dimension. In the same way that initiation entails a transmission of knowledge from the senior to the junior practitioner, the enacting of trance entails a sharing of experience between the adept and the rest of the community.

These observations reveal that entering trance is directly linked with a preliminary decision, established by the individual, about the meaning of the experience itself. This meaning has been most often inherited and established through a preliminary initiation and passed from a generation to the next within the community. The experience of trance is viewed as a *social* experience, and it is because of this social aspect that the adept can enter the state of trance when the appropriate social conditions are given.

Considering shamanic trance as a *social* state provides a better understanding of it in the context of shamanic practice. Focusing narrowly on the shaman's own mental state during trance, Western scholars have offered various psychological and physiological accounts to explain what is happening during trance. These explanations range from association of trance with certain pathological states (epilepsy, hysteria), to neurological explanations based for instance on the activation and deactivation of different brain areas (see discussion in DuBois 2009, 109-120). Direct pathologization of trance is today mostly rejected as both scientifically unwarranted and culturally dismissive. A core aspect of shamanic trance, which sets it apart from pathological conditions, is the degree of control that the shaman retains all along on the performance of trance. While a spontaneous or natural trance-like state might be entered by the neophyte around the time of their crisis, becoming a shaman is essentially linked with the ability to deliberately master trance-like states and become proficient in entering them at will in appropriate circumstances and under



request. From Lecture One and Two we also know that while finding brain correlates for any mental or cognitive state can provide information on the bodily counterpart of first-person experience and indicate certain necessary enabling conditions for a given experience to occur, beyond the fuzziness of most of these associations, locating brain correlates cannot be effectively used to reduce the experience to ‘nothing but the activation of this brain area in this particular way.’ This dismissive reductionist attitude is unwarranted because (i) trance states are not private individual states, but socially embedded, and hence brain activation can be only *part* of what makes trance possible and meaningful; and (ii) the actual causal network that leads to a specific pattern of brain activation loops between brain activation and first-person experience, thus making it impossible to single out the brain as the main source or cause for the experience itself.

These reasons invite to consider shamanic trance in its proper social context. As DuBois observes:

From the performative perspective, it is often the shaman’s stirring narration of the spirit journey, and the hearing of the voices of spirit helpers or spirit enemies speaking through the body and movements of the shaman that create the most powerful impressions of the séance itself. With its oratory, song, dance, occasional ventriloquism, and startling feats of physical and manual dexterity and stamina, the séance can be a stirring sensory event, one which depends upon a shaman who is conscious and active for at least a large portion of its duration. Thus, altered states which permit the shaman to retain some active control of body and voice are important to the success of the shamanic role. (DuBois 2009, 126)

Perhaps it might be better to regard the whole shamanic session as a *poietic practice*, namely, as a way of enacting a certain worldview, and using it to foster the community’s wellbeing and harmony according to the way in which this wellbeing is conceptualized in the community’s own cosmology. Rouget notices that the performance of possession rituals is not qualitatively different from Western more secularized forms of musical playing, like opera. Accepting that even shamans are performers of a kind does not necessarily denigrate what

they do, but rather acknowledges the creative dimension of their role (and how that dimension persists in Western society, even if unacknowledged as such). An actor is someone who endorses a role; and endorsing a social role is something that everybody does in all sorts of societal contexts. We are all social actors to some extent. In today's Western world, following up on an old line of thought that goes back to Plato at least, theatre might be seen as a place in which something fictitious is represented, and the actor as someone who ultimately deceives the audience and perhaps themselves, by appearing as someone else. However, it is *this* particular Platonic view (profoundly shaped by a specific way of delineating reality from illusion) that could also be challenged. An actor might also be seen as someone who enacts a social role, by thus bringing to life a vital component of the actor's social milieu, something that the community to which the actor belongs needs for its wellbeing. This seems to be the case of shamans and their performances. It is during this performance that the whole cosmology upon which the shamanic worldview rests becomes publicly available, is restated, shared, and it is used as a hermeneutic matrix to negotiate and foster the community's harmony. In this way, shamanic performance supports the construction of a certain form of self: the self that knows how to domesticate uncertainty. The shaman, in their symbiotic relation with their community, offers a paradigm of this form of selfhood.

Poietic practice can be associated with the dream-like states discussed in Lecture Two. The common feature across these states is the activation of imagination. Visions, sounds, and a whole world are evoked and shaped in imagination, with a vividness and emotional charge that often overpowers more ordinary waking experience. Imagination and dreams offer a paradigmatic case in which experience seems to arise on its own and respond to genuinely independent sources of agency. Nonetheless, imagination is amenable to a form of control, as the potential for lucid dreams shows. Imagination and dream-like states thus offer the ideal middle ground for an encounter with agents and spirits. From a technical point of view, this encounter is induced, sustained and eventually debriefed through the regulated use of various means. Music, dance, and singing create a symbolic sensory shell around the shaman, in which the whole of experience progressively concentrates and converges on the main theme or task of the session. Psychotropic substances can be used to

further foster the activation of imagination, but it is important to notice that sounds and songs also do this work. Language is powerfully associated with visual images and it can evoke emotionally charged visionary experiences. Music, dance and poetry naturally induce visionary experiences and support a degree of concentration and absorption into them. Strong emotional commitment and physical endeavour (the shaman's performance is often physically very demanding both in terms of power and endurance) further contribute to a withdrawal of the cognitive processes and attention from more ordinary and scattered objects or concerns. This brings the imaginative experience to the absolute foreground, up to the point that the imaginative or poietic creation remains almost the only content of experience, as in a sort of deliberately induced and controlled dream. The presence of a participating audience, with its constant support and feedback, sustains and brings to completion the experiential closure of the whole session around the shaman's visionary travel.

Comparing poietic practice with dreams might reinforce in the sceptic the idea that the shaman is just feigning his or her encounter with the spirits. How do we know that the shaman encounters actual spirits in their visions, or even just the spirit that the shaman is supposed to meet? To some extent, the possibility of cheating is contemplated in shamanic cultures and this is the reason why the audience often plays a judging, normative role. But, at a deeper level, the sceptical worry misses the point of the whole shamanic endeavour and view of reality. The sceptic assumes a realist stance, according to which cognition is the passive acknowledgment of a pre-given external world, and then applies this stance to the issue of contacting spirits. If spirits are real entities, then they should exist in their own right in the world. The shaman's task is that of contacting these entities, and hence we need to ascertain whether this contact in his vision is a genuine contact with entities that would otherwise exist in their own right (if they exist at all). But if we take seriously the implications of the communitarian model of agency introduced earlier in this lecture, then this way of understanding the shaman's work is misleading.

The shaman is not a sort of detective who tries to disclose a hidden reality. Spirits are real insofar as they are genuine centres of agency, irreducible to someone's else agency. The space of imagination is a space of epiphany precisely because it allows for the manifestation of seemingly autonomous and free

### Lecture Three: Shamanism

sources of agency, which can be controlled to some extent, but cannot be entirely reduced to own's own endorsed agency (more on this point in Lecture Four). The spirit world that the shaman travels through is the same world inherited and shared by the shaman's community and its cosmology. It provides a common hermeneutic background that determines what to expect and what can be found in the domain of imagination (understood broadly as we did in Lecture Two). This background also allows the audience to judge whether the performance is perhaps going out of track. The shaman's spirit helper is the fundamental guide who made the shaman into a shaman. In a sense, the spirit helper is the shaman's other self, a domesticated agent that allows the shaman to remain in tune with the objects or levels of experience within which spirits manifest. At the beginning of the session, the shaman is provided with a task or a goal to accomplish, which is received from the community. During the session, the shaman elaborates on this goal, creates an answer, which is shared and socialized during the development of the session. The session is dialogical in nature, and when successful the audience finds in the shaman's creation a satisfying way of addressing the initial task or goal. The way of creating this answer is inherently experienced as a discovery of some relatively independent agent or spirit because the whole cosmology and underpinning assumptions of the shamanic session lead one to consider any source of agency that is recalcitrant to endorsement as something distinct in its own right. This sort of relational independence is not at odds, but rather compatible with its constructed and poietic nature. To construct and create does not mean to fake or to generate something illusionary.

This does not entail that the shaman cannot fail to satisfy their audience, or even deliberately fake their performance; quite the contrary. But this possibility is not due to a contrast between a good shaman who really gets in touch with genuinely existing spirits, versus charlatans who simply feign this contact with purely imaginary beings. A good shaman is one who is sensitive enough and has enough visionary power to genuinely see what the community is seeking for, and in sharing this vision is able to domesticate the alien forces that shape the community's life, by steering them towards a greater degree of harmony. This is a difficult task, which *can* succeed (even if not always) precisely thanks to the creative, poietic power of imagination.

### 3.5 Prehistoric sources of meaning

It has been mentioned that shamanism is not only widespread worldwide, but can be dated back to prehistory. How is it possible to support such a claim? As mentioned, shamanic cultures do not leave behind impressive monuments or elaborated written witnesses. Most of their culture is transmitted orally and left to individuals to preserve. One of the reasons why several historians and archaeologists have argued that something like shamanism must have been common even in prehistorical times has to do with two related facts. On the one hand, there are some similarities between archaeological findings and ethnographic evidence from today's cultures in which shamanism is still practiced. Based on these analogies, it is tempting to use evidence from contemporary small-scale cultures to interpret archaeological findings. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly for the present discussion, there seems to be a *conceptual need* to assume that prehistorical humanity operated and regarded the world in a shamanic-like way, in order to fully understand some of the major transformations and evolutions that humanity itself underwent. As an appendix to the above discussion, two connected case studies can be briefly considered: the invention of agriculture at the beginning of the Neolithic era (ca. 12,000 years ago) and the explosion Upper Palaeolithic cave art in the Franco-Cantabrian region (ca. 44,000 years ago).

How did humans begin to domesticate nature, by raising cattle and cultivating fields? In his *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture* (original French edition 1994), Jacques Cauvin suggested that this advancement has to be explained by taking into account changes in the way human beings understood the world and their place in it. Cauvin focuses on what has been called by former generations of archaeologists 'the Neolithic revolution,' namely, the period around 10,000 years BCE where human groups living in the 'fertile crescent' in the Middle East began to practice agriculture and animal farming. Relatively quickly, these practices spread to other regions and transformed the way of life of human groups, who shifted from being mostly nomadic hunter-gatherers to a more sedentary life in a fixed territory, eventually leading to the foundation of the first urban cultures in Mesopotamia some five millennia later. Domesticating wild plants and animals was

clearly a major step in the human quest for control and dominion over the natural world.

Cauvin's main claim is that previous attempts at explaining this transformation have given excessive attention to material, environmental, and utilitarian aspects, while neglecting equally important transformations that took place in the way in which Neolithic human beings thought and conceived their own experience. According to Cauvin, archaeology has been strongly influenced by Marxist ideas about the fundamental role of economic structures, shaped by power and production relations among the individuals constituting a certain culture. This Marxist ideology would then consider any intellectual activity, including symbolic expressions, art, and religion, as part of the 'superstructure' of a culture. Cauvin concludes his book by writing:

Scientific epistemology having evolved as it has, and the discipline of pre-history having run its course too, it is intriguing to note that it was the 'hard facts' of stratigraphy which contributed to making the materialist position untenable in this area. The hard facts of stratigraphy inverted the chronological order of the 'causes' and 'effects' in an important chapter of human history that is steadily becoming better understood. (Cauvin 2000, 211)

The hard facts mentioned in the quote concern archaeological evidence that (i) domestication of plants and animals cannot be explained simply by an appeal to growing populations (and needs for food supply), nor to a reaction to environmental changes; (ii) various elements that led to domestication were already integrated in pre-Neolithic cultures, without them necessarily being associated with the practice of agriculture or animal farming. Based on these considerations, Cauvin argues that something other than sheer utilitarian needs must have propelled certain human groups to experiment with domestication, and he locates this factor in what he calls 'the revolution of symbols.' Cauvin focuses on the Khiamian period (occurring just before the Neolithic) and identifies in it the emergence of a new form of symbolism, compared with those of previous periods. From the Palaeolithic period onwards, human beings produced images, mostly of a relatively restricted group of animals, and less commonly fully human forms (as we shall discuss in a moment). In the Khiamian

period, though, Cauvin sees a concentration of two key symbols: woman goddess and bull.

None of these symbols are entirely new. Female figurines were produced throughout the Palaeolithic, but according to Cauvin:

these at that time counted for very little in relation to the huge predominance of animal representations. What is new at this time [Khiamian] is their number, and also the indication that she was not only a 'fertility symbol' but a genuine mythical personality, conceived as a supreme being and universal mother, in other words a goddess who crowned a religious system which one could describe as 'female monotheism' in the sense that all the rest remained subordinated to her. (Cauvin 2000, 32)

In his discussion, Cauvin goes on to argue that the emergence of this new symbolic and religious thought increasingly dramatized the way in which former cultures represented the divine. He detects a new connection between the divine and a sense of tragedy, death, suffering; and hence the urge for change in order to find salvation:

A vertical topology is thus introduced in the very intimacy of the human mind, where the initial state of anguish can be transformed into a reassurance at the price of a truly experienced, uplifting mental effort in the form of an appeal to a divine authority external to man and elevated above him. This 'cult' is the other face of a misery that is experienced daily. The power of the god and human limitations are the two firm poles of this new drama which is established in the heart of man about 9500 BC. [...] This new chasm which was formed between god and man is dynamic in effect. It has no direct effect on the environment, but it must have completely modified the portrayal that the human spirit makes of itself, and through some kind of release of the necessary energy to see them through, it must also have stimulated new initiatives, like the countervailing effect of an existential malaise never previously experienced. Till then spectators of the natural cycles of reproduction in the living world, Neolithic societies now took it on themselves to intervene as active produces. Technically speaking, this would

have been possible well before, but neither the idea nor the desire ever came to them. (Cauvin 2000, 72)

According to Cauvin, this revolution of symbols created the mental energy needed for early humans to attempt domestication, and for this to eventually spread in time and space. The development of Neolithic culture thus also shows a development of religious cults, with sanctuaries constructed on the ground (in contrast with the use of natural caves in the Palaeolithic), increasingly rich and complex burial rituals performed, and a growing production of religious images. All of this occurred, though, without compromising 'the concept of an egalitarian structure for Neolithic societies' (Cauvin 2000, 120).

By countering a more materialist approach that identifies the main drivers of human change in economic and utilitarian motives, Cauvin shows that something more is needed to explain such a profound transformation as the one that occurred in the Neolithic period. Human thought, and religious symbolism in particular, need not be the only factors taken into account seriously, but can help explain the different mind-set that led prehistoric human beings to radically change their relationship with natural resources and, in turn, their whole way of life. However, Cauvin is very cautious in elaborating on the sort of thinking proper of Neolithic people. When he ventures in this domain, he seems to resort to a rather standard (and arguably anachronistic) interpretation of symbols as mimetic representations of concepts. Female figures are thus interpreted as representing 'mother,' hence perhaps 'security' and 'salvation,' while the bull is a symbol of 'virility.'<sup>41</sup> More significantly, Cauvin stresses the emergence of some form of transcendence, in which divine symbols are meant to represent a reality that (based on Cauvin's description) should be conceived as beyond the human realm, 'external to man and elevated above him.' This point seems necessary in order to create the dynamic element that Cauvin is looking for, as the propeller for an initiative of domesticating nature. His intuition seems to be that only by conceiving of something superior (and hence

•• 41 Among archeologists, Marija Gimbutas has offered the boldest and perhaps most controversial interpretation of goddesses' worship in prehistoric time, arguing that it would witness an archaic central-European gynocentric culture, later replaced by an androcentric and more adversarial culture that still dominates. For an overview of Gimbutas's thesis, see her *The Living Goddesses* (1999).



better, safer, more powerful, and so on), human beings could start thinking about how to improve their own material conditions. Thinking of the divine in a more vertical (if not transcendent) way would then offer a blueprint for imagining a better condition, and this would serve as a prelude to the human initiative of somehow actualizing or striving for improving the ordinary condition.

For present purposes, it should be asked: where did Neolithic people find their source of meaning, in Cauvin's reconstruction? If female images and bulls are symbols of the divine, where is their meaning located in the spectrum of experience? Fertility, mother, birth, virility, fight, seem to be the sort of meanings that Cauvin attributes to Neolithic religious symbols, and these are all accessible in ordinary waking experience. Hence, religious symbols talk about non-religious experiences, perhaps amplifying and embellishing them, but substantially remaining in the same spectrum of meanings. In other words, Cauvin's view entails a form of naturalism and realism in its interpretation of Neolithic religious symbolism.

To represent (or signify or create a symbol of) a domain of divine 'above-ness' (or 'transcendence'), human beings need to have access to the meaning of 'above-ness,' namely, they need to have a way of experiencing something (some content) that will then be signified as 'what is above.' Perhaps the best way of thinking about this involves taking something ordinary and imagining the same content but in a much more powerful and amplified way. However, the invention of meaning clearly does not work in this way. If the imaginative increase somehow added to the ordinary content does not create a qualitative discontinuity, then a very powerful bull remains just a bull, the most maternal woman remains a woman. On the contrary, if imagination creates the discontinuity, then it is only by equivocation that one might keep referring to 'mother' or 'virility' as the meaning conveyed by religious symbols, since these symbols are meant to refer to something qualitatively different (a content experienced in a different realm, or in a different domain of experience) with respect to the ordinary meanings (like 'mother' or 'virility'). Hence, Cauvin's realism either undermines his case for the indispensable role played by religious thinking, or it needs to abandon its realist stance and seek the meaning of religious symbols somewhere else than in the ordinary way of life.

Cauvin rightly points out that the material and technical conditions needed for the practice of agriculture were to some extent already present prior to the Neolithic period proper, although they were not put to use. Rightly, again, he contends that the activation of those potentials for transformation required more than just material or utilitarian stimuli, they required a change of mindset, what he calls a revolution of symbols. But symbols are products of human imagination, and their meaning is constructed, changed, and reshaped by how humans play with the power of their imagination. For present purposes, we do not need to decode prehistoric symbols and get clear on what exactly the change amounted to. It suffices to say that if a symbolic change seems necessary to account for a new mindset, this change must have originated in that domain of experience in which symbols are created and enacted, namely, in some sort of poietic practice. And *this* observation entails that those poietic practices must have been already well established at the time for them to undergo a profound reshaping. It is thus tempting to say that something akin shamanic poietic practices must have been established, and some change in their domain might have underpinned the revolution of symbols tackled by Cauvin.

In contemporary archaeology, David Lewis-Williams has been perhaps the boldest and most controversial advocate of the thesis according to which shamanic practices must have been operating in prehistoric time. More specifically, he used this hypothesis as a hermeneutic key to interpret significant monuments of prehistoric art. Lewis-Williams shares with Cauvin a dissatisfaction for the materialist approach, insofar as it has led to an overemphasis on utilitarian motivations as driving factors of human development. He also stresses that the earliest instances of human artmaking must be understood as the expression of religious experiences, which were so deeply felt that it urged humans to somehow fix them in outside artefacts and paintings. Lewis-Williams develops this interpretation by drawing explicitly from ethnographic studies on today's shamanism and on (early) neuroscientific studies on altered states of consciousness. Combining these strands, he contends that since the Palaeolithic period, human artmaking has been an attempt at expressing experiences resulting from the induction of altered states of consciousness, then interpreted in religious and cosmological terms. It was this sort of experiences

that fashioned the Palaeolithic worldview and must also have impacted social interactions (and possibly early forms of discrimination not based on age and sex, but on the ability of ‘seeing’ or experiencing those altered states). Lewis-Williams has extended this interpretation from the Palaeolithic to cover Neolithic art as well (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005) discussed by Cauvin.

The genre of Palaeolithic art discussed by Lewis-Williams (2002) mostly concerns cave paintings in France and Spain, which can be dated between 45,000 and 35,000 years ago. Cave painting is also associated with the first ritual burial decoration and the production of portable art (little carved objects). Lewis-Williams confidently asserts that

there is no doubt in any researcher’s minds that Upper Palaeolithic people had fully modern language—that is, they were able to create arbitrary sounds with meanings, to manipulate complex grammatical constructions, to speak about the past and the future, to convey abstract notions, and to utter intelligible sentences that had never before been put together. (Lewis-Williams 2002, 88)

This point on language seems to be crucial for Lewis-Williams’ argument, since he associates language skills with the ability to entertain a higher form of consciousness, capable of acting upon memories and anticipations, and also of experimenting with altered states. This form of consciousness would be typical of *homo sapiens*, but perhaps lacking in Neanderthals.<sup>42</sup> Lewis-Williams then argues that having access to this more sophisticated consciousness, early human beings had also to face its implications, and they had to come to term with them, or rather decide how to interpret them. The evolution of human society can then be seen (from such an early period) as a progressive negotiation between the ‘spectrum of consciousness’ and social settings in which individuals experiencing various conscious states (more or less altered) lived. There is an interplay between a ‘social contract’ and a ‘consciousness contract’ (Lew-

•• 42 For a more detailed discussion of a phenomenological account of various forms of language that might have evolved in prehistoric time, see Corijn van Mazijk, ‘Symbolism in the Middle Paleolithic / Middle Stone Age: A phenomenological account of practice-embedded symbolic behavior’ (2022).

is-Williams and Pearce 2005) that determines what each society at each stage of its history accepts as normal and meaningful in terms of the range of experiences available to its members.

A key point in this reconstruction is the fact that both individual experience and how this experience is framed in the social context co-determine the construction of meaning:

the unavoidable process of coming to terms with the full spectrum of human consciousness has to be agreed on by most members of a community; without such agreement, ordinary life is impossible. Further, the way in which only certain people are allowed to experience the far end of the intensified trajectory are socially governed. (Lewis-Williams 2002, 157)

While Cauvin stressed that even Neolithic societies remained fundamentally egalitarian (and significant social structures and hierarchies would not emerge until the age of the first urban cultures), Lewis-Williams sees social differentiations (hence inequality and even forms of discriminations) as intrinsic to human sociality almost since the beginning of it.

The core of this interpretation consists in rejecting any form of direct realism or mimetics between an outside reality and image-making. In order to explain, for instance, why Palaeolithic people chose to focus only on a relatively restricted number of animals in their paintings, it is necessary to understand what these animals *meant* for those people. However, ‘people did *not* invent two-dimensional images of things in their material environment. On the contrary, a notion of images *and* the vocabulary of motifs *were part of their experience* before they made parietal or portable images’ (Lewis-Williams 2002, 185). Images and motifs (the interpretation goes) were provided by the induction of altered states of consciousness, which (in Lewis-Williams’ account) show recurrent patterns and structures, albeit variously inflected based on different cultural and historical circumstances.

Palaeolithic caves were used to seek and induce altered states of consciousness (or trance-like states, to use the terminology introduced above), which then served as basis for artmaking in the same caves; images thus became prompts for resurrecting and re-experiencing those altered states. Moreover, access to

caves (and hence to altered states) was socially regulated and constrained, and the source of meaning was controlled and asymmetric. Not everybody had the same opportunity (or even the right) to have the same experiences. Artmaking was thus not only socially cohesive (insofar as it provided an embodied repertoire of meaningful signs), but also divisive and discriminative.

Lewis-Williams' account entails that meaning does not come from outside material experience, but from the autogenous power of imagination, its visions and its emotions, which urge humans to express and socialize them. The divine is presented as somehow 'above' humans in order to express this difference between ordinary daily states and altered states. But the experience of the divine is not just a sheer fancy. It is as real as any other experience, albeit it happens in a mode of experience different from the one usually encountered in daily life. However, once this mode of experience has been explored and taken as the source of meaning, it sheds its light on all the other aspects of experience. Cave walls become 'membranes' that separate human seers from the spiritual realm, and stones are not just inert materials but speaking entities. As happens in shamanic cultures, religious meanings forged in the domain of altered states determine the cosmology that is then used to interpret all other aspects of experience, which progressively become nothing but signs of those meanings. Poietic practices bring forth a whole world of meaning together with those who inhabit them.

Lewis-Williams's account is provocative. While its early reception was positive, it has, more recently, received sharp criticism. The most complete account of this controversy is available in Paul Bahn's *Prehistoric Rock Art: Polemics and Progress* (2010, especially chapters 3 and 4). The main objection put forward is that Lewis-Williams' model is at best an unfalsifiable hypothesis, and at worse wishful thinking based on an ad hoc selection of data. For instance, the notion of 'shamanism' seems either too broad (and thus explanatorily insufficient), or too focused on the case study of circumpolar Asian shamanic cultures, and thus unsuitable for the interpretation of other cultures around the world, especially Palaeolithic art. Lewis-Williams used a specific neuroscientific model to analyse altered states of consciousness and derive fixed experiential patterns to be uncovered in artmaking. But this model was based on studies conducted with hallucinatory drugs (LSD), which have unique effects, and which are unavail-

able in many cultures and (most likely) in prehistoric times. Hence, the kinds of patterns discovered by Lewis-Williams would not be something 'wired in the human brain,' but heavily shaped by the use of specific psychotropic substances. What seems at stake in these (and other) criticisms is a concern with the sort of 'one-fits-all' explanation that Lewis-Williams's account suggests.

Critics of Lewis-Williams favour an approach that involves accurate description of different cases considered in their own right, without jumping to undue generalizations, and an acceptance that most information about prehistoric times will be unrecoverable for us. Yet, one might question whether this line of criticism strays too far from the essentials of Lewis-Williams's approach that have been briefly presented above.

Derek Hodgson, one of Lewis-Williams' critics, has presented a significantly different account. He introduces a different neurological model based on the visual mechanisms that allow the brain to recognize visual patterns and geometric forms in order to articulate and make sense of experience. Concluding his discussion, Hodgson states:

These insights suggest that parietal art was closely related to the ecological environment in which the human perceptual system was embedded to the extent that this art reflected the priorities of this system as it engaged in the world at large. An approach to the subject from this standpoint is not dependent on hunting as an explanation, although this constitutes one strand of a complex dynamic involving many interrelated factors. A key aspect of this dynamic would have been the necessity for knowledge of many kinds of animals that allowed the discrimination of the threatening from the useful and benign. Because of this complex relationship, it may not always appear that the animals depicted were related to hunting, though this will sometimes have been the case. (Hodgson, 'Altered States of Consciousness and Palaeoart' 2006)

Altered states and shamanism are dismissed as inadequate. A neurological explanation is retained, but of a much different kind, since Hodgson's account is motivated predominantly by evolutionary and utilitarian factors. Prehistoric human beings privileged certain shapes (either certain animals or geometrical

patterns) and even reproduced them in their art, because doing so constituted a certain adaptive advantage. This would entail that caves were perhaps more akin to ‘schools’ than to ‘sanctuaries’ (although, it might be added, the difference between the two is notoriously difficult to trace).

But what animal is so badly adapted to its environment and so slow-minded that it needs to ‘take notes’ (even invent painting) in order to discriminate ‘the threatening from the useful and benign’? If this were the case with humans, they would probably have gone extinct long ago. Even granting that cave art might have *also* had utilitarian benefits (since art usually tends to have multiple reasons and ways of employment), seeking the origin of art in these utilitarian factors seems to run into the same problems already exposed by Cauvin. In fact, more recent critiques of Lewis-Williams tend to incorporate a more serious consideration of other rationales.

Bahn himself, for instance, accepts that

it is highly probable that most rock art was intended to convey information of different kinds, and myths—particularly creation myths, tribal legends, and so forth—must have featured very prominently in most societies. It is therefore to be expected that a high proportion of rock art relates to narratives of this sort. (Bahn 2010, 32)

Myths are not far from what Cauvin called ‘symbolism.’ Why are myths relevant? Because of religious values associated with them. Why do religious values matter to people (past and present)? Because of the emotional overtones of religious experiences, because of the meaningfulness that they possess.

In a more recent paper, Patricia Helvenston and Derek Hodgson (‘The Neuropsychology of Animism,’ 2010) proposed replacing ‘shamanism’ with ‘animism,’ and then offered a neuropsychological model in which ‘animism’ would be connected with neural mechanisms through which human beings project life onto non-human objects (e.g., their having a ‘spirit’ or enacting a form of agency) and interpret them as somehow partaking in the same ‘spiritual world’ as human do. This model is based on the mechanisms that underpin visual perception and claims to more accurately explain artmaking, although the authors make absolutely clear that the actual attribution of *meaning* to

images is deeply shaped by emotions. Helvenston and Hodgson note that human-forms are attributed to other objects most likely in conditions of uncertainty. Animism itself might have a ground in neurophysiology and neuropsychology, but it is actually seen as a meaningful option because it allows individuals to cope with uncertainty by decoding their experience while keeping fear and anxiety at bay. When the authors contrast animism with shamanism, they focus on the relatively more structured core of beliefs that is found in relatively late versions of the latter:

The main characteristic of shamanism consists of ecstatic states, such as in dreams or trance, and as Eliade points out, these constitute the originating experience (long predating complex religious ideologies), which stretch far back into human pre-History as Hodgson and Helvenston (2006) have previously proposed. Many complex religious beliefs over the past 2000-3000 years, however, form a cultural matrix surrounding the practice of shamanism, which is a specific array of techniques for the purpose of healing and not a religious system in and of itself. Such healing takes place while the shaman is in an ecstatic state, and is assisted by animal helpers whose presence is often symbolized by assorted body parts of actual animals. While in a trance state, the shaman may ascend to the heavens or descend to the underworld, encountering various spirits there who may assist in the spiritual healing of the patient. Without explicitly stating the fact, Eliade (1964) therefore described the main traits involved in animism that predated the very complex type of shamanism first observed by Western travelers. Thus, we argue that the 12000-years old ‘shaman’ was probably a ‘spiritual healer,’ perhaps using trance, but in a more loosely organized system of beliefs such as animism, rather than the highly syncretic religious beliefs and shamanistic practices of central and northern Asia of the late 17th century. As Eliade clearly stated, the practice of shamanism does not occur alone, but is always embedded in a system of organised religious beliefs. Clearly, it appears that the shamanism of the past few hundred years developed out of *a corpus of preceding animistic beliefs and primordial ecstatic experiences dating back many thousands of years that subsequently became embedded in many different organised religious traditions.* (Helvenston and Hodgson 2010, emphasis added).



What is at stake here is mostly a matter of definition. In short, the authors propose using the term ‘animism’ to refer the older and less-systematic set of beliefs concerned with the idea that all sorts of non-human entities were endowed with ‘spirit,’ while reserving ‘shamanism’ only for a more specific, structured and localized (both in space and time) phenomenon, which should not be overly generalized and used as a paradigm for ‘animism.’ In this perspective, shamanism is a *form* of animism, but animism is not reducible to shamanism.

This being said, the authors do *not* deny that animism is associated with ‘primordial ecstatic experiences.’ In fact, without such experiences, it would be impossible to explain why the projection of spiritual forces upon non-human entities should have been taken seriously by individuals, instead of being dismissed as a perceptual mistake. When the stick looks broken in water, one might think that one’s eyes are tricked, or that something supernatural is going on. Why opt for one interpretation rather than another? It depends on the source of meaning. ‘Primordial ecstatic experiences’ (or trance-like states, to come back to Rouget’s more precise terminology, or ‘poietic practices’ to use the expression introduced in this Lecture) seem necessary to make sense of the fact that ‘primordial people’ acted in ways that clearly suggest they were deriving meaning from a specific mode of experiencing reality, endowed with a cogency and emotional vividness probably different from that of more ordinary waking experience. Having put the source of meaning there, they interpreted other aspects of their experience from that point of view. However, can we know what ‘primordial ecstatic experiences’ might have been like? If ‘ecstatic experiences’ were completely lost, the expression could not make any sense. But this is not the case, since ethnographic evidence shows that they are still practiced (in a rich variety of ways) by a large number of different cultures around the world, and historical records suggest the same is true of the past.

Margaret Bullen, in another critique of Lewis-Williams’ neurological model, concludes:

The ability of ‘clever men and women’ to use trance to travel through time and space is well recognised and it is highly likely that people with that ability were very important to their society ten thousand years ago. [...] It

would seem likely that it was special people who had the ideas and also the courage and ability to put them out for others to see. They were perhaps the earliest clever people capturing their dream images on the walls around them. (Bullen, 'The Role of Trance in the Creation of Rock Art Images,' 2010)

Here, again, the ability of prehistorical people to access trance is not questioned but granted. Image makers are described as 'clever people capturing their dream images.' Dream images are usually taken as a (mild) instance of altered states of consciousness. Hence, cave art comes from altered states. The issue for such critics seems to be the implicit determinism lurking in Lewis-Williams neuroscientific model. In turn, their aim seems to be to defuse the potential threat that it might represent for human (artistic) agency. This is surely a point worth stressing. But this concern leads us away from what is perhaps the most important philosophical point in Lewis-Williams's account: the centrality of a directly felt poietic experience in prompting Upper Paleolithic people to express that experience in images. It was this sort of experience that established a sign-meaning distinction. With this distinction in place, trance-like states become the source of meaning that is then expressed through the manipulation and interpretation (more or less advanced) of natural objects like cave walls, which are then transformed in signs referring to that meaning.

We might swap shamanism for animism or mythology, but the fundamental sort of poietic experience cannot be removed without jeopardizing the intelligibility of the signs left in prehistoric art. Perhaps 'shamanism' is too broad or fuzzy a category and perhaps 'animism' is more precise and accurate. Lewis-Williams offered an outdated and partly biased neuroscientific model directly based on altered states of consciousness. But also Helvenston and Hodgson provide a neuropsychological model for the 'animist projection' that the human brain makes onto various entities that must be complemented by some account of the emotional charges and structures that would induce individuals to take this projection seriously, instead of dismissing it as a mistake. In any case, as we discussed in Lecture Two, neuroscience can help us appreciate the enabling conditions for first-person experience, but it cannot be used to reduce the latter to an epiphenomenon of brain states.

Shamanism, however constructed, is a sufficiently clear and well-instantiated phenomenon that allows us to look more closely at how particular domains of experience are used as a source of meaning and then provide a basis for creating signs expressing those meanings. It also shows how this process is embedded in a social substratum, which is made not only of material needs and power-relations, but also of a diverse and complex set of beliefs and emotional structures. Moreover, poietic practices are explicitly enacted for a purpose, namely, that of mastering uncertainty, in whatever way it is manifested and felt by both individuals and their community. In this process of mastery, the goal is to restore a form of harmony between different centres of agency that are involved in human affairs and upon which human wellbeing depends. But poietic practices do more, because in the enaction of a world of spirits and agents, and in the narration of how they can interact, clash, fight, or be pacified, they help one to construct a distinctive form of selfhood. On our spectrum, this form of self is further away from the more naturalistic accounts we discussed in the previous lectures, insofar as it relies on a form of weak embodiment that denies a one-to-one correspondence between agency and physical individual bodies. As we saw, this form of selfhood has its own specific approach to the problem of uncertainty (domestication), its own techniques (poietic practices), its own heroes (shamans), and its own problems (the precarity of harmony).

What if we move even farther away from the naturalist ways of conceiving of the self and pursue even further that idea of ‘above-ness’ or even ‘transcendence’ evoked by Cauvin? This is the topic for the next Lecture.



Lecture Four:  
Mysticism

## 4.1 Introduction

The guiding theme of these lectures is that the self is constructed in order to master uncertainty. In Lectures One and Two we explored what it means to posit the self as a construction and see the self as a constitutively relational phenomenon. Hard naturalistic accounts of the self offer a peculiar way of mastering uncertainty, in which it is regarded in a purely third-person perspective and the self is dismissed as illusory. This reductionist solution is one pole on the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self that we are exploring. Naturalism is based on a form of strong embodiment, in which the self is understood as essentially dependent upon an individual living (human) body.

In Lecture Three we moved one step away from this assumption, by exploring the possibility of weak embodiment. This view is presupposed by a rather broad, and probably ancestral way of constructing the self and its world, namely, shamanism. Not only is shamanism not a homogeneous phenomenon, but it is surely not reducible (or even analogous, for that matter) to a ‘philosophy’ in the contemporary Western sense of the term (a discipline concerned with rational and argumentative analysis of various domains of experience). Nonetheless, shamanism does come with its own cosmology and with a set of practices, which are all strongly connected with a specific set of views and ideas about how the world works and how individuals operate within it. These views might not be explicitly stated in their own right, but they are constantly operationalized and interwoven in shamanic cultures and practices. The weak embodiment upon which shamanism is predicated entails a peculiar notion of agency (the communitarian model of agency previously described), which has direct consequences for how the self is constructed.

Although naturalist accounts (especially the more liberal ones) do acknowledge the importance of social relations in the constitution of the self, they tend to conceive of these relations in rather general terms, as ways in which individuals are bound to other individuals. The shamanic view takes social relations in a stronger sense, as relations within a specific local group, usually a small-scale community in which all (or most) members know each other directly and define their own agency and identity in this kinship. We can observe that this stronger value attached to concrete communitarian bonds goes together with

a relatively weak understanding of embodiment. The individual self, understood as an agent, is no longer something to be confined within the boundaries (i.e., skin) of one particular human body. The same body can host multiple agents, and an agent might occasionally leave a certain physical body. Weak embodiment (as introduced in Lecture Three) entails a form of ‘extended’ embodiment, in the sense that the same agent can be located or travel through the whole environment, and all elements that constitute the environment can be interpreted as sources of agency if they show irreducible activity. This view renders agency something shared throughout the spectrum of experience, including the whole of animal life and other non-human forces. If strong embodiment (which ties the self to an individual body) defines the naturalist project, then shamanism represents a worldview that is not-naturalist.

In this lecture, we move to the other end of our spectrum, exploring yet another way of constructing the self which is at odds with both naturalism and shamanism. Using a term that is not ideal but is nonetheless by now established in existing scholarship, we shall refer to this other pole as ‘mysticism.’ Mysticism can be defined as the dissolution of the self in what is experienced and interpreted as the ultimate, transcendent ground of reality. Four important remarks are in order.

First, mysticism entails *both* a certain experience and a certain interpretation of it. The experiential component is what one directly witnesses, feels, and to some extent (often limited) can relate to others. The interpretation consists in the meanings given to this experience, which are framed within existing and previously accepted views. Interpretation attributes further values and implications to the experience itself. Given a certain theistic framework, a mystical experience will be expected to entail, and will be then experienced as entailing, an encounter with the ‘God’ posited in that same tradition. A Christian mystic inevitably encounters the Christian God, although it might be possible for some individuals to draw more universalistic consequences from their experience (thus changing its interpretation). But one cannot encounter any god if the notion of ‘god’ is not already formed or accepted to some extent, even if only in an inarticulate way. Mystical experiences have an unavoidable conceptual dimension (which might or might not be fully spelled out or articulated) insofar as they presuppose a certain understanding of experience in general,

and what can be expected to occur within it (remember Thompson's observations about conceptuality we briefly discussed by the end of Lecture One, and Taylor's notion of articulation mentioned in Lecture Zero).

Second, mysticism can be seen as a dissolution of the ordinary, empirical, biographical, daily self. This dissolution does not lead to annihilation but to some form of subsumption, reunion, or reintegration with the broader ultimate reality that is encountered. One of the most common ways mystics frame their experience is by referring to it as a union with what they identify as the supreme or unconditioned principle (God, the One, the Self, or anything else that plays this function), or even as the uncovering of the fundamental identity with it.

Although this experience is traditionally seen as mystic, it can also be studied from a more empirical point of view as the occurrence of a specific form of consciousness that is available in the spectrum of conscious experience. This approach has been taken by Gamma and Metzinger (2021), whose working hypothesis has been the following:

there exists a form of "minimal phenomenal experience" that lacks time representation, spatial self-location, agency, autobiographical self-awareness, and a phenomenally experienced first-person perspective. This can be understood as an unstructured form of global content that is also devoid of perceptual, motor, affective, conceptual and propositional content.<sup>43</sup>

Gamma and Metzinger based their analysis on the reports of 1403 experienced meditators belonging to various traditions, but most of them familiar with a Buddhist background. They distinguish twelve factors concerning the experience of pure awareness, which can all play a more or less dominant role in defining the meditator's experience. Commenting on the role of several of these factors, they show that an important one is associated with what they call 'self-knowing,' which addresses the question: 'Did the experience have a quality of knowing itself?' In this respect, they notice that the association of pure awareness with this factor entails that

•• 43 Alex Gamma, Thomas Metzinger, 'The Minimal Phenomenal Experience questionnaire (MPE-92M): Towards a phenomenological profile of "pure awareness" experiences in meditators' (2021).



‘pure knowing’ also lacks the phenomenal experience of personhood, a conscious representation of being a rational individual possessing specific personality traits or any form of autobiographical narrative. Phenomenologically, pure awareness simply knows itself, timelessly. The interesting discovery is exactly that there is now empirical evidence for a non-egoic, homunculus-free form of self-awareness. (Gamma and Metzinger 2021)

What is captured in this study is the possibility for certain practitioners to suspend the experience of their own ordinary, biographical self (the one who acts, feels, and interprets experience as the experience of this particular person, me, who has this particular story, and so forth). In other words, it is possible to have an experience that does not ‘feel like’ (i.e., does not have the qualitative flavour of) being ‘mine’ in any way. This is not a pure experiential blackout, and yet is a ‘minimal phenomenal experience’ in the sense that barely attests the fact that something is happening, without further qualifications. As we shall see, one way of interpreting mystical experiences is by seeing them as aimed at the approximation of this state of ‘minimal phenomenal experience’ (or ‘pure awareness’ as it is phrased in certain traditions), while interpreting it more or less explicitly as the reaching towards a more fundamental, universal, and ultimate reality (which can be interpreted variously, in personal or impersonal, theistic or non-theistic terms, and so forth). The dissolution of the ordinary empirical self is a more general and shared feature of mystical experiences than the way in which this is further interpreted and contextualized in various theoretical and soteriological frameworks.

Third, mystical experience usually entails an overcoming of ordinary sensory-based experience. Mystical experience is not reached by an intensification of the visionary power of imagination (although this might play some instrumental role), but its pinnacle is the emptying of experience of all sensory contents. For this reason, we shall consider the deliberate process and practice aimed at achieving this experience as a form of *trance*, but unlike the shamanic trance aimed at a particular kind of vision, mystic trance is better understood as a form of *anaesthetic* trance, in the sense that it aims at stopping sensory perception (an-aesthesia) in order to uncover the deeper and more fundamental connection that lies between the self and the ultimate reality. This process

remains ‘deliberate’ in the sense that it is intentionally undertaken by the individual who is involved with it, even when (paradoxically enough) this deliberate involvement entails a complete surrender to the experience itself. Deliberately surrendering to experience is still a way of dealing with it, and still counts as an intentional attitude towards experience (we shall come back to the idea that ‘inaction’ is still a form of ‘action’ in Lecture Six).

The ordinary self is part of the world of sensory experience. The ordinary self is a patchwork of various sensory impressions, memories, and so on. Mystical experience culminates with a relinquishment or temporary suspension of this ordinary self, and finally with its dissolution. In some cases, the extreme output of anaesthetic trance can be compared with the experience of deep dreamless sleep, a completely intransitive form of awareness, which has no object, and hence cannot be defined or specified in any way (hence the ineffability usually associated with mystical experiences).<sup>44</sup>

- 44 In making this generalization, two important caveats need to be taken into account. Several practical accounts about *how* to cultivate a mystical state usually entail a form of progression, which moves smoothly towards ultimate anesthesia, without implying that it should occur at all stages. As we shall discuss in Lecture Six, ancient Indian instructions suggest a progressive quieting of the senses first, and of the inner faculties later, which is a procedure echoed by some Christian mystics like Teresa of Ávila. In the ancient Buddhist context, meditation stages are sometimes presented as progressive forms of ‘cessation’ (Pāli *nirodha*), but only the ninth (and last) stage genuinely entails a complete cessation of all experience. In this respect, the reference to *anaesthetic trance* is used to indicate a trend or a directionality, more than a categorical state. Second, in different traditions the actual state of cessation of all experience is interpreted differently. To quote Gamma and Metzinger (2021) again: ‘For many centuries, meditators have reported states of direct perception, the experience of seeing *what is*. Seeing *what is* out of a state of pure awareness often reveals another particular and interesting, phenomenal quality, namely the experience of “suchness” or “thusness,” the ineffable uniqueness and particularity of any individual instance of non-conceptual content. This suggests another evidence-based, phenomenologically grounded reading of the “purity” of pure awareness, not as the absence of perceptual content, but as a complete lack of conceptual overlay and cognitive penetration, including time experience and judgements as to the “existence” or “non-existence” of what is perceived.’ Mystical states might be defined more broadly and thus be associated with this sort of new understanding of contents of experience once they are freed from conceptual overlayers. However, for present purposes, we shall take a more restrictive notion of mystical states that connects them with the (more or less complete) cessation of perception, rather than just a reinterpretation of it. The sort of reinterpretation described in the quote from Gamma and Metzinger is quite typical of certain strands of Buddhist thought and practice. A final *caveat* concerning non-conceptuality: the fact that any mystical experience is subject to interpretation and decoding already shows that any non-conceptual element that might be entailed by that experience is organically reintroduced in a conceptual framework in order for the experience itself to make sense and be relatable. But since ‘conceptuality’ itself is a concept and is thus subject to definition, the experience of any ‘non-conceptual’ element is also subject to definition. If by ‘concept’ one understands a way of structuring contents of experience, then any experience that is not purely intransitive (that is not a pure black

Fourth, compared with both naturalism and shamanism, mystical experience entails a shrinking of the social dimension of experience and a form of disembodiment. When the self is dissolved, this clearly prevents social ties from playing any significant role. And yet, mystics often retain a flavour of sociality in the rarefied and sublimized form of a feeling of love or similar affects towards the supreme reality in which they feel a part. As a result of their experience, mystics often develop universalistic and philanthropic attitudes towards their own near fellows, or even towards the whole of humanity. Sociality is not erased entirely, and even the most solitary mystics will retain some way of thinking about their life in the context of a relation with an Other, and others. But this form of sociality is radically different from the ordinary sociality discussed in naturalist theories, or even from the communitarian embeddedness found in shamanic cultures. Most crucially, since anaesthetic trance entails a cessation of ordinary sensory-based experience, it precludes any form of actual engagement with the world or the environment. As this experience receives the highest value, it will be interpreted as a *transcending* of the world, because in the union with ultimate reality the world is simply no longer there as part of experience. The body is what roots the self in the world and what mediates one's relations with the others. For the mystic, as the world is transcended, the relation with others is transfigured, and one's identification with the physical body is severed.

This quick overview should give a sense of the gulf between mysticism and the views discussed so far. At this stage of our exploration, the goal is to identify certain distinctive and apparently irreducible ways of constructing the self in order to map the whole width of our spectrum. With mysticism, which defines the most radical alternative to hard naturalism, we come to the opposite

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 out) but is about something, *does* entail a minimal conceptual layer (in which 'something' is recognized as different from a pure black out). This point is made explicit in the early Buddhist taxonomy of meditative stages, in which the penultimate stages ('the base of no-thing-ness' and 'neither-perception-nor-non-perception') are recognized as extremely subtle, almost entirely void of conceptual contents, and yet *not* entirely void, but still constructed to some extent. Only the 'cessation of perceptions and feelings' is considered to be entirely void of conceptual content, but then it occurs in the form of an experiential blackout during which the practitioner is no longer aware of having this experience. The conclusion is that for as long as there is the slightest form of experience, there is a correspondingly slight layer of conceptuality involved, and when conceptuality ceases entirely, experience also ceases with it (despite Gamma and Metzinger's interpretation of their data).

extreme of this spectrum. If hard naturalism dissolves the self by reducing it to its individual physical basis, mysticism dissolves the self by subsuming it into a reality that transcends any physical basis and that is by its very nature eternal, immutable, absolute, and beyond any uncertainty. Both poles are extremes exactly because they entail, in different ways, a *dissolution* of the self. In this sense, they represent two divergent forms of reductionism. Liberal naturalism and shamanism would then stand in the middle of these two extreme poles. Constructing these views as a *spectrum* is a way of both articulating major alternative ways of constructing the self, and also appreciating the possible continuity that could lead, through a series of variations and alterations, from one to the other. To put it negatively, the idea of a spectrum avoids the misleading blending of all differences, as if all views could be reduced to more or less the same amorphous insight, but also the problematic idea of radical incommensurability, as if differences arose across isolated and incommunicable worlds with no relation to one another. With this lecture, we shall thus try to reconstruct the *extreme* pole of our spectrum that is opposite from the point of departure we took in Lecture One. The subsequent set of lectures will investigate more specifically some historical examples in order to explore the interplay of variations and problematizations through which one could travel through this spectrum.

For our purposes, William James, in his series of lectures published under the title *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (originally delivered in 1902), offers a very helpful guide through these waters. James's overall concern in his lectures is to vindicate what might be called the 'existential' value of religious experience, or what he might be more inclined to call its 'pragmatic' (James is a paradigmatic 'pragmatist' philosopher) value, namely, how religious experience has palpable and positive effects on the lives of those who undergo it. James seeks to distinguish and disentangle religious experience from a series of pitfalls. He tries to reject overly rationalistic interpretations of religion, coming either from philosophy or from science, while also avoiding sheer relativism when confronted with the variety of ideas and forms that religious experience takes.

Talking about religion is tricky. Various groups, at various times and places, have invested significant efforts and developed more or less explicit agendas

(cultural, contemplative, and political) to establish what religion should be. Unsurprisingly, the term ‘religion’ and its cognates has been often shaped around the religious paradigms that have been or still are dominant in the West. James’s emphasis on ‘religious *experience*’ already signals an effort of moving away from these particular and politically embedded debates and towards something more cross-cultural. Whether James succeeds in this respect might be matter of contention. But we shall leave this debate aside in the following discussion and simply use the term ‘religion’ and ‘religious experience’ in keeping with James’s own usage of these terms, to keep things as simple as possible in the discussion that follows.

More generally, we shall make selective use of James’s discussion in order to highlight some core features of mystical experience, and how it relates to the construction of the self and its attempt at mastering uncertainty. Although James makes several passing references to Hinduism (especially Vedanta), Buddhism, and Islam, his discussion is mostly focused on Christian sources, most often from the Lutheran reformation period onwards (including then both Catholic, Protestant, and smaller groups). He seems aware and informed about non-Christian and Indian views, but usually he takes the similarities with his Christian samples as self-evident and in need of no further specification.<sup>45</sup>

•• 45 Edward F. Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, Adam Crabtree, Alan Gauld, Michael Grosso, Bruce Greyson, *Irreducible Mind: Towards a Psychology of the 21st Century* (2007), chapter 8, provides an updated discussion of contemporary debates on mysticism, especially in the domain of psychology. The chapter offers a good synthesis of James’s views, addresses further evidence gathered by more recent scholars, and potential methodological objections to the idea of seeking a common ‘core’ of mystical experiences across various traditions. The more encompassing evidence discussed does not significantly alter the core elements of James’s analysis that we shall present here. Concerning the methodological objection, it is claimed that since all experiences are culturally embedded and constructed, they cannot be genuinely compared for uncovering some ahistorical essential core. This form of constructivism is a radicalized version of the idea that all experience is conceptually constructed and thus culturally and historically indexed, which we already introduced at the end of Lecture One. But insofar as it leads to a strict form of nominalism, according to which no valid generalization can be made on the basis of data coming from different cultures, it is also problematic. First, it assumes that cultures are historically impenetrable to mutual influences. This is often not the case, as we shall see with respect to mystical experiences across ancient India and Europe, especially in Lecture Six. Second, generalizations and models can still be methodologically fruitful in order to single out the aspects or features of these experiences that are most dependent on local conditions, versus those features that would be expected to occur in a broader range of possible situations. Third, in the case of deliberately trained and cultivated mystical experiences, we do have access to a number of training manuals, instructions and traditions, and we can compare cross-culturally the sort of practices that were considered (and still are) as leading to the achievement of certain states. Kenneth

## Lecture Four: Mysticism

Moreover, James tends to bracket social and ritual dimensions of religious views and practices, focusing on the experience of particularly emblematic (or idiosyncratic) individuals. In this context, James considers the religious experiences he discusses qualitatively different (and seemingly more profound and mature) than so-called ‘primitive religions,’ including shamanism. These are all aspects of James’s treatment that might call for criticism, given that religious practices are largely unintelligible when abstracted from any social context.

However, for our purposes, these limitations can be turned into resources. The paradigmatic role played by Western and Christian forms of mysticism ties in with our interest for better understanding how the self has been shaped and created in the West (following up on Taylor’s analysis introduced in Lecture Zero); it will prove a good ground for comparing both ancient and non-Western forms (which we shall discuss in Lecture Six); and it will provide the background to our discussion of criticisms of this approach in the last part of this series (from Lecture Eight onwards).<sup>46</sup> As mentioned above, in mystical

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Rose, *Yoga, Meditation, and Mysticism: Contemplative Universals and Meditative Landmarks* (2016) offers an extensive discussion of the scholarly debate around mysticism in different cultures and defends the possibility of identifying common structural features in the meditation practices (he discusses mostly *concentration* practices) of different traditions, such as Theravāda Buddhism, classical Yoga, and modern Christian mysticism. Barrett and Griffiths provide a review survey of current research on the connection between mystical states and hallucinogens. They connect several of the core phenomenological qualities of mystical states to alterations in the functioning of brain areas, which might also be induced through meditative practices. They suggest: ‘the experience of unity that is central to mystical experiences involves a decrease in self-referential processing. There is compelling evidence for a network of brain areas (i.e., the nodes of the [Default Mode Network]) that are involved in self-referential processing and maintenance of a sense of the self in space and time. Decreased activity in these areas has been observed using multiple imaging modalities, both after administration of classic hallucinogens and during meditation practices’ (Frederick S. Barrett and Roland R. Griffiths, ‘Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates,’ 2018, 422).

46 It should be noted, though, that Christianity is far from being a homogeneous and coherent entity, and there are tensions between different Christian ‘mysticisms.’ One interesting way of framing this issue is provided by Foucault in his lectures *On the Government of the Living* (2012), delivered in 1979-1980. In his sixth lecture, commenting on the way Tertullian reconceived the sacrament of baptism, Foucault observes: ‘This idea that baptism must be prepared for with fear and maintain the Christian in a state of fear basically dismisses the theme that was so important throughout Antiquity, the Hellenistic period, and the first two and a half centuries of Christianity: the theme of the pure, the perfect, the sage. To tell the truth, it is not a definitive dismissal because the whole history of Christianity, even of Western Christianity, will be constantly traversed by the return, the recurrence of this theme, or, if you like, by nostalgia for a state of wisdom to which one might gain access through a particularly intense purification, a particularly effective asceticism, or quite simply by the fact of election and being chosen by God. The whole debate with the Gnosis, with Manichaeism, with the Cathars in the Middle Ages, with quietism in the seventeenth century, the debate, also, throughout

experiences social relations shrink to the bare minimum. James is sensitive to the social implications of mysticism, and he does emphasize how the preliminary social and intellectual context provides to the mystic the basic hermeneutic matrix that they will use for conceptualizing experience. In this sense, James's discussion is not entirely abstracted from social dimensions, although he is right in emphasizing that mysticism entails a complex relationship with the social world, a relationship that is often constructed in adversarial terms, aimed at overcoming or transcending the world. James's emphasis on this point is convenient for our purpose of picking out (a form of) mysticism as one extreme pole in our spectrum.

James is also right to contrast mysticism and shamanism, and several scholars of shamanism (including Eliade, Rouget, DuBois encountered in Lecture Three) would agree with this distinction. However, the distinction might be traced for the wrong reasons. James seems to subscribe to some form of genealogy or evolution in religious thought, which sees shamanism as more 'primitive' and 'immature' than mysticism. More recent scholars instead tend to stress a practical difference, based on the idea that the shaman is someone who travels *outside*, to the spirit worlds, while the mystic is someone who moves *inside*. Discussing Taylor in Lecture Zero, we noticed how this notion of inwardness is historically constructed. We also saw that the shaman's traveling remains entirely *within* the cultural and even physical boundaries set by the community to which it belongs. And reflecting on the most common aspects of shamanic culture, we observed how most of them derive from a communitarian account that fits best small-scale societies. But being small-scale has nothing to do with axiological judgments about being 'primitive' or 'immature' because the evolution of a small-scale society should be judged on the basis of what a small-scale society can actually be or give rise to, and not on the basis of its potential for becoming something entirely different (a large-scale society). For

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 Christianity with any form of mysticism, will be nothing other than the recurrence or reappearance in these different forms of the debate between anxiety and purity' (Foucault 2012, 126). Mysticism, with its promise of granting the individual a direct experience of divine reality in this life, relies on a model of original purity that is shared by other traditions, Western or not, but that is at odds with the idea of an inherently corrupted nature that also begins to gain traction in early Christianity. For present purposes, it is important to keep this tension in sight, so as not to take the discussion of Christian mysticism as somehow normative or representative of Christianity as a whole.

these reasons, contrasting shamanism and mysticism either in terms of evolution (from primitive to developed) or in terms of direction (going inside or outside) might be misleading. Here, we shall build the contrast rather in terms of different forms of trance that these two practices entail: while shamanic practice is poietic (it is an attempt at deliberately cultivating and sustaining the visionary powers of imagination that produce new contents of experience), mystic practice is anaesthetic (it attempts at deliberately emptying experience from any content, by stopping the activity of imagination to the point that experience becomes entirely intransitive). For our purposes, shamanism and mysticism also differ in terms of the main strategy they provide for mastering uncertainty (and thus for the sort of self that they enact): while shamanism is aimed at the domestication of uncertainty without uprooting it, mysticism is aimed at completely transcending uncertainty by reaching a domain of reality that is absolute and eternal.

#### **4.2 The field of consciousness**

Reversing the order of James's own discussion, we shall begin from his last lecture, in which he advances his own account of the nature and meaning of religious experience, based on the more descriptive discussion he builds up in his previous lectures.

For present purposes, we shall leave aside James's elaborate rejection of what he calls the 'survival theory,' namely, the idea that religious life is simply some form of relic of more primordial and archaic times, and that should be dispensed with today. In this discussion, James makes two points that we already covered in our previous lectures coming from different angles. First, 'primitive' religious forms (among which one might want to include shamanism) are based on dreams, hallucinations, or revelations, and this interweaving of 'altered' experiences with religious life seemed to have remained fairly normal up to the modern period. Second, in considering these aspects an anachronism and attempting to discard them using scientific findings, the survival theory draws too sharp a boundary between subjective experience and the scientific objective worldview. This problem is akin to the divide between first-person and third-person perspective introduced in Lecture One



and further discussed in Lecture Two. James is vocal about this: ‘it is absurd for science to say that the egotistic elements of experience should be suppressed. The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places’ (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XX, 499-500). James stresses that a subjective view can never be fully abandoned, and since religious experience is primarily encountered through this subjective view, neither religion nor science can ever be entirely free of it.

These two points illustrate how refreshing James’s discussion on these matters is. Many of the worries and concerns he voices still inform today’s debate, albeit often phrased using different keywords. However, given time and space constraints, we might skip these nuances and move on to the core of James’s reading.

Based on the phenomenology of religious experience that he has provided, James presents the following generalization:

Summing up in the broadest possible way the characteristics of the religious life, as we have found them, it includes the following beliefs:—

1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance;
2. That union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end;
3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof— be that spirit “God” or “law”—is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.

Religion includes also the following psychological characteristics:—

4. A new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism.
5. An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XX, 485-486)

James suggests that despite the diversity of ideas, creeds, and philosophical or theological views that can be used to flesh out the five points just mentioned,

all religious experiences abide to a relatively simple psychological structure: uneasiness and solution, wrongness and salvation. In other terms, the underpinning scheme is soteriological: there is some fundamental problem with the ordinary human condition, *but* this problem can be met and solved in a way that leads to a transcendence of the ordinary condition.

This point builds on some elements of James's psychological theory introduced sparsely in his previous lectures and now used to build his account of the facts presented. Two elements are particularly relevant. The first is James's view that personality, or the sense of self, has a 'centre.' In Lecture IX, introducing the topic of conversion, James made the following remark:

When I say 'Soul,' you need not take me in the ontological sense unless you prefer to; for although ontological language is instinctive in such matters, yet Buddhists or Humians can perfectly well describe the facts in the phenomenal terms which are their favorites. For them the soul is only a succession of fields of consciousness: yet there is found in each field a part, or sub-field, which figures as focal and contains the excitement, and from which, as from a centre, the aim seems to be taken. Talking of this part, we involuntarily apply words of perspective to distinguish it from the rest, words like 'here,' 'this,' 'now,' 'mine,' or 'me;' and we ascribe to the other parts the positions 'there,' 'then,' 'that,' 'his' or 'thine,' 'it,' 'not me.' But a 'here' can change to a 'there,' and a 'there' become a 'here,' and what was 'mine' and what was 'not mine' change their places. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture IX, 195)

The key point is that the experience of a conscious subject can be represented as unfolding in a space-like field, some parts of which are identified as nearer to the centre of the field, while others as being more remote. James notices that this view can be accommodated even in frameworks in which no substantial soul or self is accepted, like those of Hume or *Buddhists* (his association between the two seems to go without need for explanation). The aspect that James stresses, though, is that what constitutes the centre is dependent upon the emotional charge or energy associated with certain contents. As the same passage continues:

What brings such changes about is the way in which emotional excitement alters. Things hot and vital to us today are cold tomorrow. It is as if seen from the hot parts of the field that the other parts appear to us, and from these hot parts personal desire and volition make their sallies. They are in short the centres of our dynamic energy, whereas the cold parts leave us indifferent and passive in proportion to their coldness. [...] Now there may be great oscillation in the emotional interest, and the hot places may shift before one almost as rapidly as the sparks that run through burnt-up paper. Then we have the wavering and divided self we heard so much of in the previous lecture. Or the focus of excitement and heat, the point of view from which the aim is taken, may come to lie permanently within a certain system; and then, if the change be a religious one, we call it a *conversion*, especially if it be by crisis, or sudden. Let us hereafter, in speaking of the hot place in a man's consciousness, the group of ideas to which he devotes himself, and from which he works, call it *the habitual centre of his personal energy*. It makes a great difference to a man whether one set of his ideas, or another, be the centre of his energy; and it makes a great difference, as regards any set of ideas which he may possess, whether they become central or remain peripheral in him. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture IX, 195-196, original emphasis)

Emotional charge (arguably shaped by desire or aversion) determines what gets to the centre of experience, and hence what is appropriated as the core of 'my' experience. If this emotional charge is wavering and oscillating, then the sense of self that ensues is equally unstable and struggling, while if the charge becomes constant and unwavering, then the sense of self becomes established and more fixed. Religious conversion is one instance of this process of stabilization, although in James's account it has its own peculiarity. Non-religious stabilization usually draws from any emotional force directly available to the ordinary scope of consciousness, while religious conversion (the stabilization of the personality centre around a core religious experience) draws from forces that are usually *not* part of ordinary experience. This is where another important psychological idea of James's account comes into the picture.

## Lecture Four: Mysticism

James presents consciousness as a field and argues that its boundaries are fuzzy. James's terminology on this point is not always fixed, and he usually speaks of 'subconscious' or 'subliminal,' more rarely 'unconscious,' regions. In his words:

The expression 'field of consciousness' has but recently come into vogue in the psychology books. Until quite lately the unit of mental life which figured most was the single 'idea,' supposed to be a definitely outlined thing. But at present psychologists are tending, first, to admit that the actual unit is more probably the total mental state, the entire wave of consciousness or field of objects present to the thought at any time; and, second, to see that it is impossible to outline this wave, this field, with any definiteness. As our mental fields succeed one another, each has its centre of interest, around which the objects of which we are less and less attentively conscious fade to a margin so faint that its limits are unassignable. Some fields are narrow fields and some are wide fields. Usually when we have a wide field we rejoice, for we then see masses of truth together, and often get glimpses of relations which we divine rather than see, for they shoot beyond the field into still remoter regions of objectivity, regions which we seem rather to be about to perceive than to perceive actually. At other times, of drowsiness, illness, or fatigue, our fields may narrow almost to a point, and we find ourselves correspondingly oppressed and contracted. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture X, 231)

Let us pause and point out a few remarkable features of this view. First, experience ('consciousness,' in James' terminology) is best conceptualized as a sort of holistic state, in which the overall content that is present affects the nature of the experience, rather than a sequence of discrete units or 'ideas.' My experience of what is happening is not a collection of discrete units or bits of information that somehow represent different objects independently from one another. Rather, I experience an overall complex situation, within which, depending on the movements of attention and on the underpinning motives and drives that steer it, I can discern relatively discrete units and pick them out for deeper inspection or engagement.

Second, the complex contents (or else the manifold of contents) that appear within a field of experience are not static. In fact, these fields succeed one another in a flow, which seems reminiscent of the theory of ‘mind-moments’ developed in Buddhist Abhidharma (which underpins some of the discussion of gappyness encountered in in Lecture One and Two). Third, the scope of these fields (how broad or narrow they appear) has not only a cognitive implication (how many different contents one experiences, or how complex that content can be), but also an emotional component. The narrower the field, the stronger the sense of constriction; the wider the field, the stronger the sense of relief. We will see that this point is important. Before getting to it, here is how James continues:

The important fact which this ‘field’ formula commemorates is the indetermination of the margin. Inattentively realized as is the matter which the margin contains, it is nevertheless there, and helps both to guide our behavior and to determine the next movement of our attention. It lies around us like a ‘magnetic field,’ inside of which our centre of energy turns like a compass-needle, as the present phase of consciousness alters into its successor. Our whole past store of memories floats beyond this margin, ready at a touch to come in; and the entire mass of residual powers, impulses, and knowledges that constitute our empirical self stretches continuously beyond it. So vaguely drawn are the outlines between what is actual and what is only potential at any moment of our conscious life, that it is always hard to say of certain mental elements whether we are conscious of them or not. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture X, 232)

The field of experience is thus relatively fuzzy. Ordinary consciousness is consciousness of what is right in the middle of this field, but beyond it there is a vast and potentially unlimited region that at the same time is related with ordinary consciousness (since without subconscious memories and cognitions, ordinary consciousness could not properly work) but also escaping from its reach. On this point, James signals his discrepancy with the more standard psychological view he is referring to so far. Contrary to this standard position, James refuses to characterise what lies beyond the conscious margins as merely non-existent and non-conscious at all. James recalls that

in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual centre and margin, but an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs. [...] The most important consequence of having a strongly developed ultra-marginal life of this sort is that one's ordinary fields of consciousness are liable to incursions from it of which the subject does not guess the source, and which, therefore, take for him the form of unaccountable impulses to act, or inhibitions of action, of obsessive ideas, or even of hallucinations of sight or hearing. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture X, 233-234)

This view adds significant depth to James's analysis. On the one hand, the field of experience has a centre that can and does shift due to the oscillations in emotional charges. The scope of the field itself can also be broader or narrower, and this in turn affects the sorts of emotions that experience elicits. On the other hand, the whole field of ordinary waking experience is surrounded by a vast and largely unmappable space, which directly affects the field. James uses this account to explain the nature of religious experience and any claims to truth based on that kind of experience.

In particular, religious experience seems to turn on a kind of excess, something 'more' that goes beyond what is ordinarily available, and which deeply affects and shapes it. Conversion is the process of opening up to this 'more,' and religious practice (like prayer) a way of keeping in touch with it. James thus suggests:

Let me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the 'more' with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life. Starting thus with a recognized psychological fact as our basis, we seem to preserve a contact with 'science' which the ordinary theologian lacks. At the same time the theologian's contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take on objective appearances, and

to suggest to the Subject an external control. In the religious life the control is felt as ‘higher;’ but since on our hypothesis it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XX, 512-513)

What Christians call ‘God’ could be understood as the force that occupies and shapes the space that lies beyond the fragile boundary of ordinary consciousness. James advocates that this power is real, since it produces tangible effects in people’s life. This might not entirely square with more traditional views about the nature of God. As James acknowledges, it would require some other ‘over-belief,’ chiefly the idea that this ‘power’ that lies in subconscious spaces is the absolute world ruler. But the most precious conclusion that results from James’s discussion is his acknowledgment of the need to widen our conception of what counts as conscious experience. As he writes:

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XX, 519)

From this point of view, religious experience amounts to an enlargement of the sense of self, insofar as it establishes a more stable contact with the regions of experience that are usually inaccessible to ordinary waking experience. This broadening of experience entails a positive emotional component, which is witnessed as an essential ingredient of religious life, and in turn helps consolidate the new personality centre that is established at the moment of conversion.

The idea of a gap between the ordinary waking (narrow) domain of experience and the unfathomable and yet real space that lies beyond its boundaries is robust enough to account for the ‘transcendence’ of ‘God’ with respect to an

ordinary individual, without any further need to invoke further ontological divisions. Transcendence is experienced in religious life, and thus it must happen *within* the overall field of experience, and it does so by enlarging that field. In this respect, the traditional question about the existence of God is somewhat defused. In a way, it is positively answered, insofar as there is more to experience than what waking ordinary experience can witness; yet, in another sense, God does not exist in the sense of being ontologically separated from the field of experience as a whole. The latter point results from James's analysis of religious experience as a witnessing of the *union* with God, rather than of the separation from it.

However, the remark just quoted invites also a further step, which James does *not* take, but which we shall take regardless. The kernel of religious experience has relatively little to do with 'God' conceived as a self-standing entity and very much to do with 'me' and 'my' struggle. Of course, according to most of the Christian sources discussed by James, God is the solution to that struggle. However, the whole problem turns around 'my' sense of self and its relatively narrow conception. To inject our leading claim at this point, the ordinary self struggles to control its limited domain of experience. The feeling and overwhelming awareness of the impossibility of succeeding at this task is what leads to a *crisis* of that sense of self, and at this junction a religious experience can arise as a solution. James acknowledges that religious life is very much about the broadening of the sense of self until it gets almost dissolved in the mystical union with God. We can dispense from any further speculation about God as such and take this sort of religious approach as chiefly aimed at producing the dissolution of the sense of self. If the ordinary self is a problem (because its attempt to master experience is doomed to fail), the dissolution of the self is also a dissolution of the most pressing problem, and therefore (in fact) a relief. To support this view, we can review the phenomenology of religious life that James presents and distill further elements from there.

### 4.3 Self-transcendence

James's survey reveals a soteriological twofold structure of religious life based on problem and solution. The problem consists in a sense of dissatisfaction,



uneasiness, or even wrongness with ordinary life, affected by a perception of some sort of evil. The solution is provided by overcoming this problem through the opening up of the ordinary self to something that transcends it, which in Christian documents is commonly identified as God.

This basic pattern occurs in a simplified form in what James calls the ‘healthy mindedness’ (in his Lectures IV-V), an attitude towards life that tends to emphasize its inherently positive qualities, while dismissing evil as a pathological deviation. At the core of this approach lies the idea that surrender and relaxation can by themselves produce positive effects. Sustaining a positive attitude towards life and events and cultivating positive thoughts is regarded as having direct impact on biological and psychological aspects of one’s existence. As representative of this attitude, James focuses on the ‘mind-cure’ movement, originating in the United States in the nineteenth century. Today, he would have perhaps included the ‘mindfulness’ movement as well, started in the United States in the 1970’. James’s overall issue with this approach is that ignoring the reality of evil seems to bypass an important aspect of human experience too quickly and superficially. The sort of state reached through the ‘healthy mindedness’ approach is a sense of union with nature and a psychological relief. In itself, this state is not substantially different from that achieved by the more tortuous path that is confronted directly by evil and sorrow in ordinary life. For this reason, we can consider this ‘healthy mindedness’ attitude a sort of shortcut and focus on the more complex version of the unfolding of religious experience.

According to James, the problem of evil in life is real and cannot be entirely avoided or ignored. Even in the luckiest circumstances in which one is personally spared much suffering, the structural conditions of biological life are inherently shaped by their progressive moving towards decay and death. There is an irreducible degree of pain and sorrow in life that cannot be washed away, despite the goodness or pleasure that one might otherwise gain. As he writes:

In short, life and its negation are beaten up inextricably together. But if the life be good, the negation of it must be bad. Yet the two are equally essential facts of existence; and all natural happiness thus seems infected with a contradiction. The breath of the sepulchre surrounds it. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture VII, 139)

While James is drawing here mostly from Christian sources, it is not difficult to identify this sort of observation in a variety of different contexts as well. For instance, this is also the starting point of Buddhist reflection: any form of existence is inherently uncertain and doomed to become otherwise, and this makes it painful (e.g. SN 56.11, Ud 3.10). Uncertainty is on display everywhere. James recognizes that this sort of consideration leads to ‘religious melancholy,’ which is characterized by two key features: a loss of appetite for the values and goods of ordinary life, and a consequent sense of estrangement from the world. Both aspects are symptomatic of a state of crisis, which can be analogous to that encountered also in shamanic cultures, although in the present context this crisis is interpreted differently and receives a different solution.

Melancholy can be understood as an experience of division and contradiction within the personality. The ordinary reality one is confronted with is not accepted and taken as one’s own, and instead it is lived with a sense of alienation, as if one did not belong to it. I am in the world, but I do not belong to this world. I have this experience, but I cannot approve nor enjoy it. This condition is characterized not just by a factual lack of endorsement of the contents of experience, but also by an inability to fully endorse and embrace how life appears. Usually, adolescence is the period in which various strands in one’s growing personality progressively enter in a process of negotiation, out of which a more or less unified sense of being a particular person emerges. The greater the struggle between these strands or their mutual incompatibility, the greater the uneasiness and suffering that the process brings about. And if, or insofar as, the final unification is not successful, this sense of uneasiness will stick to the person. James sees religious life as undergoing a very similar process, in which ‘conversion’ marks the point of unification and the ‘faith-state’ expresses the achievement of unification through a stable sense of confidence, relief, and joyous happiness.

We already touched upon the psychological model of the ‘field of consciousness’ that James uses to account for this transition. Conversion and unification can be understood from two points of view. From the point of view of the divided and unhappy self that undergoes the experience (which occupies the centre of the field at that point), conversion is experienced as the opening

up to something other or ‘more,’ that lies beyond the margins of ordinary consciousness. However, from the point of view of the whole field of consciousness, the same process amounts to a (partial, at least) removal of the impermeability that separates the sense of self from that which inhabits the spaces beyond the margins of ordinary consciousness. From this point of view, religious conversion consists in an integration between the different components of the field of consciousness into a more cohesive whole, which also makes the self experienced at the centre of ordinary experience less pivotal and more like a mere receiver of a much larger, vaster, deeper and happier influx of experiences coming from all around.

Conversion might be either a gradual process, or it can mature without being noticed and then be experienced in the last moment as a sudden and instantaneous switch to an entirely different way of experiencing reality. In either case, conversion is usually based on what James calls ‘mystical states,’ which he describes in his lectures XVI and XVII. In his account, these states are based on four primary qualities:

1. *Ineffability*.—The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one’s self to understand a lover’s state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.
2. *Noetic quality*.—Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance

and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.

These two characters will entitle any state to be called mystical, in the sense in which I use the word. Two other qualities are less sharply marked, but are usually found. These are:—

3. *Transiency*.—Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day. Often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance.
4. *Passivity*.—Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XVI, 380-381)

Ineffability is usually due to two concurrent components: on the one hand, a pronounced emotional component, usually in the spectrum of joy, happiness, and love, while on the other hand, perceptual aspects are faint or even absent. In ordinary life, the feeling of joy is usually provoked by objects and perceptions that are associated with joyful states, although they are not inherently joyful in themselves (the joy of the sunset is in the eyes of who looks at it, not in the sunset as a natural phenomenon). The key point is that joy seems mostly to require an external trigger to be activated. But in a mystical experience, one feels joy (often significantly more intense than ordinary joy) without this being connected with any particular object of the senses that is currently perceived. In fact, mystical states can also unfold in such a way that ordinary perception is more or less completely suspended, and yet there remains the experience of feeling. Ineffability (in this context) results from the fact that these experiences are not something too deep for words to express, but rather from the fact that

they are originally non-linguistic, and often intransitive (there is no concrete object to express or designate).

The noetic quality of mystical experiences should be further distinguished in two aspects. On the one hand, the working assumptions and presuppositions that shape the subject's system of beliefs also shape the meaning attributed to the mystical experience itself. One who believes in the Christian God, will tend to interpret the mystical experience in terms that fit this belief, e.g., as an encounter with that God and so forth. In this sense, the noetic quality of mystical experiences is confirmative: it tends to verify and provide direct experiential support to views, ideas, beliefs and convictions that the subject already held but that might not have been fully endorsed (especially prior to conversion) or that might not have been integrated as an active and dynamic force in the subject's field of experience. James stresses this aspect as particularly salient:

The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in their framework for its peculiar emotional mood. We have no right, therefore, to invoke its prestige as distinctively in favor of any special belief, such as that in absolute idealism, or in the absolute monistic identity, or in the absolute goodness, of the world. It is only relatively in favor of all these things—it passes out of common human consciousness in the direction in which they lie. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XVII, 425-426)

In his subsequent Lecture XVIII, devoted to the role of philosophy, James reinforces this point. He rejects attempts to use philosophy to either dismiss religious experience or to build systems of dogmatic theology. James envisages philosophy as a way of mediating between experience and intellect, and between individuals and their social contexts. In this way, philosophy can be a sort of moderator between different forces, and perhaps give rise to a 'science of religion' interested in exploring the most common and universal features that underpin all religious experiences. James is adamant on two points: mystical states do not entail (per se) any articulated belief about the ontological

structure of reality, and mystical states do not occur in a vacuum but are affected by (and thus also interpreted on the basis of) preestablished beliefs and views. They are conceptually constructed, even if they might predominantly hinge upon non-conceptual experiences.

On the other hand, however, the mystical experience has a noetic content on its own, insofar as it reveals something about how experience itself works. If it is true, as James stresses, that it is impossible to distil full-blown philosophical insights from mystical states, this does not preclude them from fostering a certain form of understanding of one's way of experiencing reality. For instance, one might observe that in mystical experiences perceptions and feelings seem to dissociate in such a way that the feelings arise without being triggered by perceptions (unlike in ordinary experience).

This point needs expanding on. However, the reason why it is neglected (even by James) is that most of the mystical experiences reported by Christians are either 'spontaneous,' in the sense that they arise without sustained training, or they are heavily shaped by strong and systematic theological views (like in the case of the Spanish early modern mystics, such as Ignacio de Loyola or Teresa of Ávila). In both cases there is no preliminary interest in understanding the working of experience as such, but rather a religious and soteriological interest in finding some relief from the form of melancholy already mentioned. Hence, the potential noetic import of mystical states for how experience itself works is overlooked and quickly set aside, while preliminary beliefs or theological agenda guide its interpretation.

Interestingly, in this context James cites the fact that among non-Christian mystics, and especially among adepts of Yoga, Buddhism and Sufism, not only are mystical states deliberately cultivated through specific methods, but are also conceived of in terms of mental composure or concentration (Sanskrit and Pāli *samādhi*). This means that what James calls 'mystical states' can also be rephrased in terms of 'contemplations' (Pāli *jhāna*) or certain 'meditative states.' While the term 'mystical' suggests an aura of mystery and secrecy, 'meditative states' might perhaps better convey the idea that these are just specific experiences that require specific conditions (and training), but when the conditions are provided, the experience unfolds in a rather predictable way, as in any other domain of experience. The mystery that surrounds mys-

tical states is thus largely due to the insufficiency of the methods used to cultivate, develop, explore, and interpret these domains; or perhaps also to the philosophical and religious overinterpretation to which these states are subjected.

The last point listed by James, passivity, is connected with the emotional texture of mystical states. The feelings most often described are in the spectrum of joy, from sublime happiness and peace to intense and almost painful rapture. These feelings are associated with a fading of individuation, a melting of the ordinary boundaries of the self, and a sense of union and immersion. As the sense of self fades, it is natural that the experience turns more passive, as its unfolding is received without any discrete center of action being identified as its propeller. With the fading away of the ordinary self, the sense of a 'doer' that underpins ordinary experience is also progressively switched off.

Once again, it is possible to observe that the described union of the narrow ordinary self with a 'God' above it, can also be envisaged as the dissolution of the empirical self, which leave the field of consciousness without a sharply confined centre of action. The way this event is interpreted by Christian mystics (but also by all other practitioners that endorse more or less theistic views, including Indian followers of Yoga and Vedanta) is in terms of a merging with a superior entity. Since the sense of 'my-ness' usually associated with experience is dissolved, and ordinary perception is more or less significantly suspended, the resulting condition is no longer interpreted in terms of usual distinctions (myself vs. other, internal vs. external), and this results in a sense of unity and simplicity.

James mentions that mystical experience can change the way ordinary experience is interpreted. He summarizes his view in three chief points:

- (1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.
- (2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.
- (3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XVII, 422-423)

Ordinary consciousness can no longer be experienced as the only and ultimately authoritative judge on the whole field of experience. The cognitive functioning of individual life changes accordingly, and also in its practical way of acting in the world. The result of conversion is not just a change in beliefs, or a reconciliation of cognitive dissonances, but involves a powerful transformation in the way the individual lives. James discusses this point under the heading of 'saintliness,' which occupies five of his lectures. Focusing on its most general features, James lists four main practical consequences of the inner transformation that takes place through conversion:

- a. *Asceticism*.—The self-surrender may become so passionate as to turn into self-immolation. It may then so over-rule the ordinary inhibitions of the flesh that the saint finds positive pleasure in sacrifice and asceticism, measuring and expressing as they do the degree of his loyalty to the higher power.
- b. *Strength of Soul*.—The sense of enlargement of life may be so uplifting that personal motives and inhibitions, commonly omnipotent, become too insignificant for notice, and new reaches of patience and fortitude open out. Fears and anxieties go, and blissful equanimity takes their place. Come heaven, come hell, it makes no difference now!
- c. *Purity*.—The shifting of the emotional centre brings with it, first, increase of purity. The sensitiveness to spiritual discords is enhanced, and the cleansing of existence from brutal and sensual elements becomes imperative. Occasions of contact with such elements are avoided: the saintly life must deepen its spiritual consistency and keep unspotted from the world. In some temperaments this need of purity of spirit takes an ascetic turn, and weaknesses of the flesh are treated with relentless severity.
- d. *Charity*.—The shifting of the emotional centre brings, secondly, increase of charity, tenderness for fellow-creatures. The ordinary motives to antipathy, which usually set such close bounds to tenderness among human beings, are inhibited. The saint loves his enemies, and treats loathsome beggars as his brothers. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XI, 273)



Each of these aspects appears on a spectrum of manifestations, from mild to intense, from almost pathological to more healthy and functional forms. One common aspect that underpins all these practical transformations is the sense of surrender to a larger reality than one's ordinary self. As the individual is locked into a new way of accessing and experiencing a reality that lies beyond the narrower self, the ordinary way of engaging with the world based on the latter loses its grip and is increasingly regarded as inadequate. The constant seeking of pleasures and avoidance of pain appear as bondages, while ascetic practices (usually based on more or less intense forms of renunciation to sensuality) help one to relinquish this bondage. In general, James is keen to stress the pragmatic potential of these religious attitudes, both as promises for more general and widespread improvements for human life in general, and as alternative to less ideal paths. Taking the case of asceticism for instance, he writes:

The metaphysical mystery, thus recognized by common sense, that he who feeds on death that feeds on men possesses life supereminently and excellently, and meets best the secret demands of the universe, is the truth of which asceticism has been the faithful champion. The folly of the cross, so inexplicable by the intellect, has yet its indestructible vital meaning. Representatively, then, and symbolically, and apart from the vagaries into which the unenlightened intellect of former times may have let it wander, asceticism must, I believe, be acknowledged to go with the profounder way of handling the gift of existence. Naturalistic optimism is mere syllabub and flattery and sponge-cake in comparison. The practical course of action for us, as religious men, would therefore, it seems to me, not be simply to turn our backs upon the ascetic impulse, as most of us today turn them, but rather to discover some outlet for it of which the fruits in the way of privation and hardship might be objectively useful. The older monastic asceticism occupied itself with pathetic futilities, or terminated in the mere egotism of the individual, increasing his own perfection. But is it not possible for us to discard most of these older forms of mortification, and yet find saner channels for the heroism which inspired them? (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XV, 364-365)

The question is open. James stresses that asceticism might be a better way of channeling forces and strivings that, at the time he was writing (two decades before the world wars), were more often absorbed by military life. Better appreciating life with a degree of asceticism (namely, by knowing how to become able to renounce certain pleasures, how to endure certain pains, without being bound to by one's cravings) than embarking in human slaughter. Unfortunately, most of James's contemporaries thought otherwise. Moreover, as James also notices, asceticism has not always come in extreme forms, and he quotes the Buddha's own invitation to pursue a middle way between sensuality and self-mortification as the most promising path to freedom.

More generally, James argues that the value of what he calls saintliness depends on its practical fruits, not only for the individual 'saints' themselves, but also for the environments and societies in which they live. He readily grants that individuals might indeed fail to achieve their goals in terms of transforming the contingent historical conditions in which they operate, and some cases might strike as forms of more or less marked maladaptation. Nevertheless, if one takes a larger perspective into account, 'saints' appear to embody of a set of core values that are not only noble and worth pursuing, but are also essential for human progress. Regardless of how successful individual saints might be in their specific time or conditions, their commitment can be seen as a reminder for all human beings about what humans can do and what they can aim at. As James writes:

Momentarily considered, then, the saint may waste his tenderness and be the dupe and victim of his charitable fever, but the general function of his charity in social evolution is vital and essential. If things are ever to move upward, some one must be ready to take the first step, and assume the risk of it. No one who is not willing to try charity, to try nonresistance as the saint is always willing, can tell whether these methods will or will not succeed. When they do succeed, they are far more powerfully successful than force or worldly prudence. Force destroys enemies; and the best that can be said of prudence is that it keeps what we already have in safety. But non-resistance, when successful, turns enemies into friends; and charity regenerates its objects. These saintly methods are, as I said, creative ener-

gies; and genuine saints find in the elevated excitement with which their faith endows them an authority and impressiveness which makes them irresistible in situations where men of shallower nature cannot get on at all without the use of worldly prudence. This practical proof that worldly wisdom may be safely transcended is the saint's magic gift to mankind. Not only does his vision of a better world console us for the generally prevailing prose and barrenness; but even when on the whole we have to confess him ill adapted, he makes some converts, and the environment gets better for his ministry. He is an effective ferment of goodness, a slow transmuter of the earthly into a more heavenly order. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XV, 358-359)

Once again, the practice that emerges from religious conversion can be understood from two perspectives. From the point of view of the saint, this practice is about embodying in the world the sort of view and values that arises out of religious experience, by thus bridging ordinary life and that centre of energy and relief that the saint has discovered in mystical states. From the point of view of the whole field of experience, instead, the saint instantiates a new way the individual and environment interact. To use the terminology of Lecture One, the saint enacts a different world, which is no longer based on a more or less sharp divide between self and others, but instead inspired by the opposite attitude of unity, friendship, compassion, and mutual assistance. At the personal and inner level, mystical experience comes with a softening (or dropping altogether) of the boundaries of the self. This is mirrored, at the practical level, by an equal softening or dismissal of self-interest, which is replaced by unselfish attitudes of generosity, gratitude and readiness to help. In this way, not only do the individual saints work differently in the world, but the world itself becomes a different world to a degree, since it is brought forth from a different point altogether.

#### **4.4 Mystical mastery**

The religious experiences discussed by James are based on a sense of self-transcendence. This transcendence can be interpreted as the reaching out towards

a superior entity (God), or the opening of oneself up to a heavenly world. However, it can also be seen as the increased permeability of the boundaries of the self, and its integration with the broader field of experience that lies beyond the margins of ordinary consciousness. This process moves from a sense of self-constriction and uneasiness (religious melancholy) to a sense of relief and happiness in the surrender to a more encompassing whole or unity (conversion). In turn, this transformation has very concrete practical consequences not only for the individual who undergoes it, but also for the world that the individual is part of. The turning point in this process is constituted by what James calls 'mystical experiences,' which can be understood as meditative states in which feelings and perception drift apart, by thus allowing the emergence of absolutely positive feelings that are not conditioned or dependent upon any worldly or sensory perception. These states reveal that the scope of conscious experience is broader than what constitutes the field of ordinary experience, thus contributing to a relativization of the value of the latter and showing its incompleteness in mapping out the whole spectrum of experience. Mystical states do not come with a fixed theoretical view of how reality is, but are often associated with a range of beliefs that individuals have usually already absorbed and which they tend to confirm.

Nevertheless, transcendence also poses new problems, both philosophical and experiential. Transcendence is the melting of the boundaries of the self, and yet it also indirectly preserves their reality. James carefully avoids the issue of immortality in his lectures, and in his Postscript he acknowledges that he has done so deliberately, since he does not take the belief in immortality to be essential to religious experience. This belief, however, is somehow already at play in what has been described so far. If the self can be detached from the body that it inhabits, then it arguably survives the death of this body (for how long, and in what forms, it is matter of debate). In Lecture Three, we saw that shamanic experiences presuppose a weak form of embodiment, since agency is not necessarily bound up with a single individual body. In mystical experiences, though, experience is seemingly independent from sensory objects or contents, thus strongly suggesting that the experiencer is not necessarily tied up *at all* with the sensory world, hence with the body. From weak embodiment we move towards metaphysical disembodiment.

Especially in the context of theistic religions, transcendence goes hand in hand with the assertion of immortality (or the assertion of the genuine reality of the self as an eternal and self-standing substance). Christian mystics, for instance, usually do not take their mystical experiences as proofs of the non-existence of the self or of its non-immortality, quite the contrary. They do not operate in this way by chance, but guided by the logic itself of transcendence, which entails that the ontological reality of the self needs to be asserted (and aptly conceptualized) if the process of its transcendence has to be experienced as real at all. In other terms, as mystics tend to ontologize the broader reality with which they get in touch (making it into a God), they also have to ontologize the subject that undergoes this experience (making it into an eternal soul). Descartes's argument in the fifth *Meditation*, that if the soul can be conceived of apart from the body (conceptual and experiential claim) it must be such that it could also exist independently from the body (ontological claim), might be seen as a somewhat secularized rehearsal of a major trend in the interpretation of mystical experiences.<sup>47</sup> This operation can be accomplished in different ways, and with different degrees of sophistication, and yet it seems to remain a necessary move.

A common strategy for reconciling the experiential loosening of the ordinary sense of self and the ontologizing of a disembodied experiencer that witness its mystical union with the ultimate ground of reality, is to draw a distinction between two selves. There is an ordinary, embodied, 'fleshy' self, who experiences a certain crisis and undertakes a certain training or path. In this process, this empirical self is either permanently dissolved or demoted in the axiological structure of experience. In religious terms, this is a way of 'dying to the world.' Alongside this empirical self, one thus acknowledges a more profound, hidden, and yet real self, with no specific personal history, physical connotations, or other individualizing features (since they would all depend on specific sensible contents that are silenced or dropped in mystical experiences). This hidden Self is eternal, unchanging, immortal, and either has access to a

•• 47 For a more detailed investigation into Descartes's historical debt to the mystic tradition of his time, and to Teresa of Ávila in particular, see Christia Mercer, 'Descartes' debt to Teresa of Ávila, or why we should work on women in the history of philosophy' (2017).

degree of union with God (in Christian tradition), or acknowledges itself to be the ultimate ground of reality (as in some Indian traditions, as we shall discuss in Lecture Six). This latter eternal Self is the one that Augustine searched for *inward*, and which provides (in Taylor's reconstruction) the paradigm for subsequent early modern Western secularized conceptions of a disengaged rational agent, or for a 'transcendental I' (as Kant would call it).<sup>48</sup>

From the point of view of our leading theme, mysticism provides an extreme solution to the problem of uncertainty by undermining the ordinary endorsement of contents (hence the fading or dissolution of the ordinary self), and even withdrawing from the experience of any sensible content (thus making the issue of mastery idle, since there is nothing left to master). In the state of mystical union, another attenuated sense of selfhood is enacted, which can no longer be identified as the empirical person that lives embodied in the world, although that person can still be regarded as the fleshy 'vessel' of that disembodied Self or soul. *This* whole structure, by leading to an experience that is aptly interpreted as proof of some form of contact with an ultimate, eternal, unchangeable, and thus completely certain reality, is how a form of selfhood is preserved. To put it shortly, mysticism sees the self as an eternal soul capable of union with an absolute reality, and in doing so it provides the supreme remedy to uncertainty, since it shows a domain of experience in which uncertainty seems to be completely overcome. The price of access to this dimension is leaving behind one's empirical self and remaining content with the attenuated, diaphanous, almost impersonal soul or 'pure consciousness' that is left.

•• 48 It takes just one further step to recognize in the scientific ideal of the third-person detached spectator of the natural world a secularized form of the metaphysical and mystical notion of selfhood. As we shall discuss in Lecture Nine, Nietzsche was perhaps the most acute Western philosopher in spotting the continuity between metaphysics and modern science on this front.

Lecture Five:  
Seers

## 5.1 Introduction

The self is a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering, in one way or another, the uncertainty that is inherent in its own conditionality. In Lectures One and Two we investigated what it means for the self to be a constitutively relational construction, and in Lecture Two we saw how this view can lead to a naturalist account of the self. Naturalism comes in two main versions. Hard naturalism tends to reduce the self to its physical basis (the living body) and thus dismisses its first-person manifestation as an illusion. Liberal naturalism entails that the self is embedded in an individual body, but is not reducible to it. Liberal naturalism conceives of itself in opposition to both hard naturalism (and its reductionist tendencies) and supernaturalism, which encompasses any view that posits only a weak embodiment (no longer restricted to the individual living body) or denies it altogether (by assuming that the self exists regardless of its physical body). By vindicating the dependence of the self on a physical living body, naturalism tends to emphasize a major domain in which uncertainty emerge; namely, the body itself, since it is the body that gets sick, grow old, and dies. Hard naturalism offers a *sui generis* solution by dismissing the self as a cognitive illusion. This move is problematic and engenders a cognitive dissonance between first- and third-person perspectives on experience, as we discussed in Lecture One. Liberal naturalism might appeal to the power of technology in order to manage uncertainty (as hinted in the introduction of Lecture Three), but this appeal in turn requires conceiving of uncertainty as something reversible that can be managed and shaped according to one's own interests.

Following up on this latter observation, we introduced two other views, which together define a wider spectrum of potential ways of conceiving of the self. In the middle of this spectrum, we find shamanism, which we discussed in Lecture Three. Shamanic cultures are often tied to small-scale societies, although shamanic elements can survive in and inform large-scale cultures as well. At the basis of the shamanic worldview is what we called a 'communitarian model of agency,' according to which reality is inhabited by agents (usually called 'spirits'), who are living actors, although they are not necessarily identical with individual bodies. Human individual bodies can



host more than one agent, and agents can exist in all sorts of other natural bodies (animals, plants, natural places and phenomena), or just in other domains of reality (the ‘spirit worlds’). In this context, uncertainty is seen as something reversible that can be domesticated, and the thrust of shamanism is to find effective procedures for establishing a form of harmony, *within* the individual, *between* the individual and its community, and between the community and the larger natural world. The harmonious self thus constructed is a master of uncertainty.

Shamanism moves one step away from individual embodiment, by relying on what we called ‘weak embodiment.’ There is a tie between agents and bodies, but this tie is not necessarily one particular, individual body. In this sense, shamanism goes beyond even liberal naturalism. In Lecture Four we moved one more step even further, towards a paradigm of complete disembodiment. We discussed how mysticism entails the possibility of dissolving the perceived boundaries that define the empirical daily self in order to reach an experience that is often described in terms of ‘union’ with an absolute and encompassing reality. The pinnacle of mystical experience is often regarded as a form of intransitive experience, akin to deep dreamless sleep, in which sensory objects disappear and awareness is present, but no longer involves an awareness of any specific object. This experience is then interpreted as revealing a purely disembodied consciousness, whose essential activity consists in just knowing, and whose reality is ultimately strongly connected (if not equated) with the reality of an ultimate absolute being that is eternal, beyond time and change. The mystical Self achieves mastery over uncertainty by transcending the world of uncertainty and reaching the eternal. However, we observed how this solution is also *sui generis* because the mystical Self, in order to reach the eternal, must forego all its empirical and individual traits, and to some extent also all its social relationships. What remains is an eternal Self, but this Self is no longer really ‘me’ or ‘you,’ is more akin to some sort of ‘transcendental I.’ In this respect, mysticism provides the opposite extreme to hard naturalism, and, in this respect, it is apt to define the other pole of our spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self.

Between this and the next three lectures, we shall advance in our investigation by exploring a structural problem that pervades the whole spectrum

of views outlined so far. The problem can be stated as the ‘paradox of mastery’ and it results from the tension between the two axes along which the views in our spectrum are constructed. We already mentioned that the views described so far can be distinguished with respect to the degree of embodiment (or disembodiment) that they assume. On one extreme, hard naturalism defends a strong embodiment in an individual physical body, while on the opposite extreme mysticism defends a strong disembodiment, viewing the self as something that can exist in its own right without being incarnated at all. But the body, much like the self, is also a constitutively relational construction. No body exists in a vacuum and all living bodies need an environment, or better are co-originated with their environment (as we discussed in Lecture One). If we take this aspect of embodiment seriously, then social life constitutes a particularly important dimension of human embodiment. All the views we discussed do acknowledge a certain role that social involvement plays in selfhood, and liberal naturalism and shamanism are particularly vocal about this, albeit in different ways. Mysticism faces perhaps the most significant version of this problem, given its strong emphasis on *overcoming* or *leaving* the world, hence also the social world, in order to reach union with the absolute. But even mystics usually develop various forms of sociality, from communal life to philanthropic attitudes and service for the welfare of others.

However, consociation and embodiment are *not* naturally consistent with one another, despite the fact that sociability can be seen as a dimension of embodiment. Social life, sociability, living with others (and equivalent expressions) point to a communal exchange among human beings within certain more or less expanded groups and according to certain established norms or patterns. We can refer to this broad phenomenon as ‘consociation’ or the fact of joining others in a shared form of social existence. Consociation addresses both material needs (providing for essential goods such as food, shelter, protection and so on) and for specifically *social* needs, such as recognition, esteem, respect, dignity, and so on. In contemporary Western philosophy, it is often discussed how the need for recognition is irreducible to the need for fair redistribution of goods, but also how it could make the individual overly dependent on the group that has the power of bestowing or withdrawing

recognition.<sup>49</sup> For our present purposes, we can generalize this point by stressing that consociation is a way of addressing a condition of need and thus providing for certain goods (both material and social), but it is also a way of sustaining that very condition of need and dependency, because most of these goods can be successfully acquired only in and through social life.

Moreover, when it comes to needs in a condition of potential scarcity and conflict (which seems to be the most realistic scenario), it is unlikely that all members of the same society will get the same share of goods. This is already quite apparent with material goods, but it also applies to social goods like recognition. Recognition comes in a variety of forms and is attached to manifold aspects of social life. When a social good is equally shared by all members of a society in the same way, this good undergoes a sort of normalization. It is still recognized as a good, but it will be perceived as somehow less exceptional, it will become a *minimal* condition for further struggles and for obtaining forms of recognitions that are still much more exclusivist and hard to obtain. The most sought after social goods and forms of recognition tend to be exceptional, rare, or unique (think about prestige, fame, power). The increased availability of a social good does not necessarily entail a form of inflation or devaluation of those goods (although it can). However, when a social good becomes widely more available (to the point that it can be taken for granted), this will not prevent further and new struggles to focus on other social goods that are not yet so widely available. Fulfilling one need does not put an end to the condition of

•• 49 For an overview of the debate on this point, see the essays edited by Amy Gutmann, *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition* (1994), and especially the essay by Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition.’ Taylor stresses how the constitution of identity has always been relational and dialogical (thus entailing recognition from others), but in the modern West, this structure has been complexified with a new concern for subjectivity, for asserting one’s own original and unique distinctiveness. As he writes (Taylor 1994, 35): ‘What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition but the conditions in which the attempt to be recognized can fail. That is why the need is now acknowledged for the first time. In premodern times, people didn’t speak of “identity” and “recognition”—not because people didn’t have (what we call) identities, or because these didn’t depend on recognition, but rather because these were then too unproblematic to be thematized as such.’ The paradox of mastery that we shall be exploring in this lecture entails a clash between one’s reliance upon a community and one’s demand of emancipation from it. This paradox is not unique of the modern Western context, and it can be uncovered in other cultures and periods, since it does not strictly depend on specific historical and cultural coordinates, but rather on the very structural tension that animates the whole spectrum of possible ways of constructing the self.

needfulness. And in the struggle for acquiring not-yet-common social goods, most will struggle, and only a few will succeed.

For instance, an important trend in Western societies over the last few centuries has been that of attaining (at least in theory) *minimal* human rights for all human beings. Today, it would appear outrageous (although it happens) to see someone denied their basic rights to life and freedom for *any* reason. But once these minimal human rights have been normalized and, in general, are no longer regarded as something yet to achieve, there is no longer a special sense of importance and recognition that comes with their fruition. They are taken for granted and the social struggle tends then to shift towards other rights or forms of recognition that are not yet so widely established, and for which there is much more room for them to be debated or contested.

Consociation turns out to be *at odds* with the idea of actually satisfying and procuring goods for all its consociates in need of them. It seems more likely that society will create further needs, but it could not possibly satisfy them for all. The reverse of this problem is also possible: it often occurs that in the name of the common good of all, the good of the individual must be sacrificed.

Western political philosophers have long been familiar with this sort of puzzle. From our point of view, the puzzle reveals a fundamental irreconcilability between embodiment and consociation. Embodiment posits the possibility and the need of consociation. Consociation itself can satisfy certain individual needs, but it easily leads to either the creation of new needs that cannot be entirely satisfied, or the sacrifice of individual needs in the name of the common good. In this way consociation reshapes embodiment but without eliminating its needfulness.

Strong embodiment or strong disembodiment appear in this perspective as ways of escaping this predicament by withdrawing from social ties into the citadel of the individual body or moving towards 'the city of God' (Augustine). On the one hand, strong embodiment would amount to a sort of radical individualism, in which I am my own body, owner of my own body, over which society can have no claim. This view leads to a form of anarchism (an anti-consociation), as exposed, for instance, in Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* (1844). On the other hand, strong disembodiment allows only for a

universalized form of consociation, in which actual empirical society is transcended and one's commitment to others is entirely subsumed under a commitment towards the absolute. Society is thus idealized and universalized at the utmost degree (as it happens with the self), or it is left behind altogether in the more solitary and ascetic forms of mysticism. This means that the dimension of consociation tends to shrink at both extreme poles of our spectrum, and this shrinking can be regarded as an equally *sui generis* solution to the tension between consociation and embodiment that we just mentioned. This tension emerges more evidently in the rest of the spectrum, in which some degree of embodiment and consociation are both maintained, and thus need to be constantly negotiated at both communal and individual levels.

The general task for this and the upcoming lectures is to flesh out, using historical details, how this tension between embodiment and consociation arises, is experienced, and ultimately leads to instability (uncertainty) in the way in which mastery over uncertainty is attempted. Or to put it more bluntly, the structural tension between embodiment and consociation prevents the achievement of complete mastery in any region of the spectrum. A self that is genuinely and fully master of its uncertainty simply *cannot* be constructed. This project is always doomed to fail because of its own structural features (or else, the paradox of mastery is a structural problem inherent in the very idea of mastery).

One might wish to challenge this approach already, by arguing that some form of *partial* mastery must be possible, otherwise our whole spectrum of possible views of conceiving of the self would amount to just a series of possible ways the same project can fail. But the very idea of partial mastery entails an effort to overcome what cannot be mastered yet, and hence exposes a present and acknowledged *lack* of mastery. As we shall see, individuals and whole cultures can to some extent remain content with this negative result and this form of partial mastery, but only insofar as they give up the project of building a self. In this respect, our investigation into the attempts and failures to construct a self that is a complete master of its own uncertainty will also uncover various ways in which different cultures have acknowledged the inherent problems in this project and tried to live with them. From a more theoretical point of view, we shall also see how important forces in various cultures constitute genuine attempts to overcome partial forms of

mastery, and how this often led to shifts in the way the self was conceived along the spectrum we described.

In this and the next lecture, we flesh out this general scheme with respect to ancient Indian culture (roughly from the Vedic period of the first millennium BCE, to the fourth century BCE). In Lectures Seven and Eight, we shall investigate how the same problems were faced and addressed by ancient Greek culture during the same centuries.

## 5.2 Uncovering visions

North-West India, mid-second millennium BCE. These coordinates locate the flourishing of an already complex and expanding culture, we shall refer to as the *Vedic* culture. Standard historiography regards the emergence of the Vedic culture as the fusion between aboriginal local communities and incoming Indo-European tribes moving towards the Indian sub-continent from a North-West passage. Today, there are some debates about how the details of this historical fusion should be best understood. For instance, archaeological evidence shows that the Indus Valley hosted already a highly advanced urban civilization that flourished between the third and the second millennium BCE. A likely cause of the extinction of this civilization might have been a natural disaster, such as the drying up of the Sarasvati River and its connected fluvial system, around 1300 BCE. The process was arguably gradual, which led satellite groups of the Indus Valley civilization to move either West towards the Indus River, or East, where they eventually settled around the Ganges, which will become the new fulcrum of ancient Indian life after the first millennium BCE.

In recent decades, there have been debates about the exact details of these transformations. Since the mid-nineteenth century Western scholars defended the theory of a violent invasion of the Indian subcontinent by Indo-European nomad tribes. Today, the prevalent view is that the penetration of Indo-European groups could not have been so violent and abrupt as originally imagined, although the general picture of a fusion between local and incoming groups is mostly retained. This multicultural model leads to a conception of the Vedic culture as the result of the interplay between a number of different elements,

partly coming from aboriginal systems of beliefs and practices, and partly brought on by incoming new actors.<sup>50</sup> Its most direct antecedent is arguably the Indo-Iranian tradition witnessed in the *Avesta*, the founding collection of Zoroastrianism. Moreover, we should keep in mind that in dealing with Vedic culture we are probably focusing on a specific slice of the historical population living in the period and in the same area. It is possible not only that multiple groups coexisted, but also that Vedic rituals and beliefs were more distinctive of a certain elite.<sup>51</sup>

For present purposes we shall focus on the earlier surviving collection of texts that is foundational for the Vedic culture and remains canonical also for later orthodox Indian traditions, namely, the *R̥g-veda* (from the Sanskrit *ṛc* meaning ‘verse,’ and *veda* meaning ‘knowledge’). It contains 1028 hymns, divided into ten books or ‘circles’ (*maṇḍalas*). Scholars agree that dating the collection is particularly difficult, but the standard consensus would locate it roughly between 1500 and 500 BCE, although much of the poetic and liturgical practices described in the hymns arguably derive from even older traditions.

•• 50 Edwin Bryant, in his *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate* (2001) argues that the invasion theory cannot be considered as ‘disproved,’ and yet encourages a more balanced and critical listening of the arguments that might stand against it. These arguments have often been voiced by Indian scholars who contended that the Vedic culture grew from aboriginal groups most likely propelled by the collapsing of the Indus Valley civilization. Aboriginal groups in India might have included Indo-European tribes already, according to a model of slow spreading of Indo-European language from the mid-Neolithic period. Bryant shows how the clash of interpretations between Western scholars and Indian scholars on this issue is shaped by complex political, colonialist, and post-colonialist issues and agendas. In his conclusions, Bryant considers the deciphering of the Indus script the empirical test for the non-standard account. If the script can be reconstructed to an Indo-European language, that would be a crucial clue in favour of an original presence of the Indo-Europeans within the Indus Valley civilization. Various solutions have been proposed, but at present a convincing interpretation is yet to emerge, also due to the fact that all the extant instances of the script are too short for yielding definitive results, and they might even not constitute a script after all. For a shorter account of the emergence and unfolding of the colonialist and post-colonialist debate, see Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (2002), ‘Foreword’; and for a synthetic discussion of the various issues surrounding the ancient history of Indian cultures, see Id., chapter 10, especially pp. 237-261. David W. Anthony, in *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language. How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes shaped the Modern World* (2007) builds an extensive case, based on both linguistic and archaeological evidence, for the existence of a prehistoric population based in the Central Eurasia’s steppe grasslands as the original speakers of Proto-Indo-European, who then spread both West and South helped by the domestication of the horse and the use of ox wagon and warrior’s chariot.

51 For a summary of the key aspects of Vedic society that can be extracted from the *R̥g-veda* and further bibliographical references, see Jamison and Brereton, ‘Introduction’ to *The Rigveda. The Early Religious Poetry of India* (2014), 53-59.

The *R̥g-veda* is itself just the first collection of a larger group of texts, collectively called *Vēdas*. In their current shape, the *Vēdas* are composed of four main collections: the *R̥g*, the *Sāma*, the *Yajur* and the *Atharva*. The verses of the *R̥g-Veda* provide the materials for most of the *Sāma-Veda*, which preserves melodies for singing the verses.<sup>52</sup> The *Yajur-Veda* is mostly concerned with sacrificial practices and is constituted of both verses (one third comes from the *R̥g-Veda*) and prose. The *Atharva-Veda* is sometimes considered spurious or regarded as a later addition. It overlaps with the *R̥g-Veda* with only one fifth of its verses, and its content is often focused on magic and healing practices. The fact that verses from the *R̥g-Veda* are reproduced in the other collection witnesses both the authority and antiquity of the former, and the process of elaboration and evolution through which the older hymns were transmitted. Vedic literature also includes further scriptures that outline various practices associated with rituals in greater detail. They are the *Brāhmaṇas*, mostly addressed to priests performing Vedic rituals, called ‘brahmins,’ and the *Aranyakas*, devoted to ascetics and forest dwellers. This stratification in the Vedic literature suggests that brahmin priests emerged as ritual specialists (and required specialist knowledge) as a result of a progressive evolution in the ritual practices themselves. For our purposes, we shall first delve a little into the world of the *R̥g-Veda*, and then reflect on some of the implications entailed by the sophisticated form of specialized ritualization that flourished in somewhat later periods.

Reconstructing Vedic rituals and how they were performed is a daunting task, especially if one wants to distinguish between earlier periods from later more sophisticated instances. Nonetheless, it seems safe to assume that with time greater sophistication and complexity emerged, while throughout the

•• 52 One way of distinguishing the recitation of the *R̥g-Veda* from the singing of the *Sāma-Veda* is by assuming that recitation moves in a relatively narrow pitch compass, with a few accents used to modulate the basic pitch, while the proper singing entails a broader pitch compass and established melodies that can be associated with different verses. But this distinction should not be taken in an overly rigid way. More generally, already with the *R̥g-Veda* the Indian culture associates profound meanings with the uttering of *sounds*, and spoken prosaic words are just one way in which sounds manifest. This means that speaking, chanting, and singing are seen as various modulations of the same basic phenomenon, which in turn is associated with breathing, life, and cosmological elements such as air and winds. As we shall see, this complex network of interlocking elements plays a crucial role in the Vedic imaginary. For a discussion of these elements, see Lewis Rowel, *Music and Musical Thought in Early India* (1992), especially chapters 2 and 4.



Vedic period the act of sacrifice (most often an animal) and the use of ritual fire (from one to three) for offerings remained central. The ritual sacrifice can be seen as an offering of goods (food) to the gods, who are invited to partake of it, and through this action to establish a potentially harmonious, supportive, and auspicious relation with the community. Ritual acts most often lacked a fixed place (like a temple), but always entailed the utterance (including the singing) of sacred words, frequently derived from the poetic hymns of the *R̥g-Veda*. The more elaborate rituals usually involved several people: a patron for whom the sacrifice is administered (who usually receives merit from the sacrifice, and bestows a gift upon the officiants), and then four ritual specialists, one for each division of the *Vedas*. Notably, in this scheme the brahmin specialist performs the role of a silent overseer of the whole ritual and intervenes only to correct a misdeed or mistake made by the other officiants.<sup>53</sup>

In general, the hymns of the *R̥g-Veda* are presented as the heritage of a past age of seers (*rishis*), who established a direct contact with the deities. The gods themselves might be conceived as the ancestral forerunners of the seers and their models, those who first made the discoveries about how to correctly understand the nature of reality. For this reason, they are invoked by the seers as their guides. Hence, the one who recites the hymnodies (the ritual specialist), often stands in a relation of third-order (if not even more remote) with the original experience that is at stake in the hymns: the present reciter looks upon the past experience of the ancestors, who were the original seers, who in turn were guided by the gods. The content of the hymns themselves is presented as stretching back to unfathomable and legendary antiquity.

What are these hymns about? The language of the *R̥g-Veda* is often seemingly straightforward: they talk about animal sacrifices, horses, cows, cattle, wars, long-life, wealth, birth, death, fire, sun, dawn, clouds, rain, winds, and all sorts of other material and tangible objects. Nineteenth-century Western scholars tended to favor a rather literal interpretation and thus regarded the *Vedas* as a witness of a primitive and even materialistic religion, aimed at gaining

•• 53 For a more detailed account of the historical and philological dimensions of the study of the Vedic period, see S. W. Jamison and M. Witzel, *Vedic Hinduism* (2003 [1992]), and Jamison and Breerton, 'Introduction' (2014).

some sort of benefit from the invocation of the divine. However, in all forms of ancient and archaic cultures the distinction between material and metaphorical meanings is hardly established. As Giambattista Vico already noticed in his *Scienza Nuova* (1744), language, especially in its beginning, develops through metaphorical expansions, which add a number of overlayers of meaning over seemingly concrete and material referents. Ethnographic evidence shows that this happens commonly in shamanic cultures (e.g. DuBois 2009, 202-217). For the archaic mind, nature and symbol, concrete thing and metaphor could not be set apart. The alternative to the literalist interpretation of archaic poetic language is not an allegorical interpretation (in which concrete symbols are just replaced with spiritualized meanings, like in deciphering a coded message), but rather the attitude of accepting that language is originally metaphoric, which entails that one single expression tends to convey multiple meanings at the same time, none of which is necessarily more important or less necessary than the others. Archaic poetic language is semantically polyphonic. This observation, though, surely makes the reading of many hymns of the *R̥g-Veda* particularly difficult for us today.

A general guiding principle can be extracted from the way many hymns function: if X and Y are analogous to F in some respect, then X and Y can be treated as if they were the same. Analogy entails a form of identity, which could be better defined as *homology*. This principle of homology allows one to see the sun, for instance, as both the material body in the sky that produces heat and light, *and* as a living agent who produces knowledge and life (because knowledge and life can be understood in terms of ‘light’ and ‘heat’). The same principle can also be used in a heuristic way, by assuming that if X is homologous to Y, and X shows some property Q, then Y might have a property homologous to Q as well. For instance, if the sun arises every morning from darkness, then also knowledge might have the homologous property of arising from ignorance (darkness). Homology thus establishes relations between apparently different items, by allowing the seer to play with their underpinning identity depending on his inspiration (masculine pronoun because seers are always males in the *R̥g-Veda*).

We shall delve into some of the hymns with the purpose of clarifying one recurrent and central source of inspiration for many of them, namely, the

experience of *vision*, which empowers the seer (and more indirectly the later ritual specialists who rely on his authority) with a sense of utter certainty and insight. In this experience, it is not just the content of what is seen that matters (the hymns are not dogmatic texts composed to systematize or transmit a well-defined worldview), but rather the quality of the visionary experience, which makes it particularly powerful, profound, transforming, and epistemically irresistible. By achieving this state of vision, the seer can communicate with the agents who shape the life of his community, negotiate with them, and perform other actions that will be beneficial for (re)establishing harmony or securing it.<sup>54</sup>

Jeanine Miller, in her *The Vedas. Harmony, Meditation, and Fulfilment* (1974) provides what remains one of the more open-minded and thorough examinations of the sort of visionary experience encoded in the *Vedas*. She writes:

The R̥g-Veda is the monument of ancient man's longing for illumination and the eternal bliss conferred thereby. Its message may be hidden for us beneath obscure references and imagery, a mythological language out of touch with our modern outlook, but a little digging will bring it out in all its pristine purity. We can no longer afford to pass it by or disdainfully brush it away as has been done in the past, but should pause and consider the antiquity of man's aspiration for something beyond himself, for a state of ecstasy in which the bounds of everyday life recede and the heart and mind expand beyond expectation, a communion with the *numinous* which he discovered he could reach through certain practices, indeed a desire to surpass his ordinary self to touch his greater self. (Miller 1974, 123)

•• 54 For reasons of space, we shall limit our analysis to just a few hymns, which are perhaps among the most famous. In doing so, we are not aiming for a generalized picture of what could be found in *any* hymn. There is no claim in this choice that the hymns discussed below are the most representatives of the whole collection. Advancing such a claim would be misleading, as if the whole collection could be reduced to just a few basic patterns or ideas. But it is also misleading to think that an individual instance must be representative of a larger whole in order to be relevant in its own right. One can be an exception and still witness an underlying potentiality that is usually not fully actualized in the average population. When one tries to understand what is *possible* for a certain population (here in terms of what it is possible to conceive, to think, to see), it is not the case that only a complete statistical survey of the whole will do. Relatively idiosyncratic cases, exceptions, and outstanding exemplars can be more telling than average cases. This intuition underpinned William James's discussion of mysticism (Lecture Four), which might also be adapted, with due changes, to the present task.

Miller's take is important because it emphasizes the soteriological experience at the root of the *R̥g-Veda*. More detached and seemingly neutral or objective scholars might rather prefer to downplay this element. After all, the preponderance of hymns in the collection seems to have a marked ritualist component, little can be gathered about personal experiences, and most of the references to individuals are stereotypical at best.<sup>55</sup> However, the scarcity of explicit and self-conscious reflections on personal experience do not necessarily indicate a *lack* of such an experience. More plausibly, the seers were not primarily concerned with offering theoretical speculations about what it means (or what it takes) to undergo their visions, they simply reported them in their hymns. Absence of reflection can thus be better understood as symptomatic of immediacy and evidence, which would make any further speculation pointless if not misguided. Surely, a Vedic seer would not conceptualize their own individuality and selfhood in the same way as, say, a Western nineteenth-century Protestant. But this can hardly be taken to imply that the Vedic seer is unaware of the experience of selfhood or lacks a sense of self. Differences in how the self is constructed do not entail that *no* sense of self is constructed. Trying to reduce the *R̥g-Veda* to just a ritualist repertoire, largely unconcerned with any more direct experience, eventually undermines the whole plausibility that the *R̥g-Veda* might have had for all those who regarded it as sacred lore. The problem is analogous to that faced by archeologists trying to explain the most

- 55 Patrick Olivelle, in the introduction to his edition *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (1992) states: 'A significant aspect of this [the early Vedic] world is that the human individual is not given any conceptual reality within it. This is one of the major premises of the seminal work of Louis Dumont (1960, 42), who states rather bluntly that in the Vedic world 'the individual *is* not.' The Brahmanical system of ethics works almost exclusively at the level of social groups, and individuals become real only as members of such groups. An individual's rights and obligations, roles and aspirations, are all determined by the group to which that individual belongs' (Olivelle 1992, 28). However, much depends on what is meant by 'individual.' It is obvious that the modern Western ideal of an autonomous individuality (like the one discussed by Taylor in Lecture Zero) would be hard to find in the archaic hymns of the *R̥g-Veda*. However, even the stronger form of consociation and communitarianism require that a community is made of discrete agents who take up roles and duties, and in doing so might alter, challenge, or develop the received norms about how they ought to enact those roles. What can be noticed is that the *R̥g-Veda* surely takes this communitarian dimension as its default standpoint, but then, in some cases, it resorts to the device of an explicit first-person perspective as a sort of 'special effect' to achieve poetic cogency and enhance the visionary power of the seer. For a discussion of this aspect, see Elena Mucciarelli, 'Non-realistic images of animals in the *R̥gvedasamhitā*' (2009).

archaic evolution of human culture by taking material aspects as more fundamental than cultural and symbolic dimensions, while in fact the latter must have been the leading ones (as discussed in Lecture Three). And as we shall see, it would be too simplistic to fit Vedic culture and rituals into some more or less general ‘shamanic’ model, although this does not entail that, nor should prevent us from seeing how, distinctive shamanic elements are interwoven into the hymns of the *R̥g-Veda*.

To put it bluntly, a tacit assumption that seems to underpin scholarly attempts to reduce much what is witnessed in the *R̥g-Veda* to social, material, or cultural elements is based on the idea that the *R̥g-Veda* cannot be taken at face value. In the real world, the claim might go, there is no actual Indra, and Soma is just the juice of a psychotropic mushroom. But this assumption must be displaced in any serious effort of understanding the *R̥g-Veda*. What is needed is not running into the opposite extreme of simply taking on faith all that the *R̥g-Veda* says, but rather trying to understand the cognitive and hermeneutic dynamics from which the hymns arose. What sort of practices and insights might have led ancient seers to interpret and express their own experiences in the way they did? What made these visions meaningful *for them*?

To fully understand what is at stake here, we must begin by acknowledging that the *R̥g-Veda* is a collection of hymns, are uttered as a sort of prayer. In today’s world, the notion of prayer is perhaps associated with some sort of petition or request, even in religious contexts. However, we can quickly come back to William James again to outline a broader and more meaningful role of prayer. As James argues:

The religious phenomenon, studied as an inner fact, and apart from ecclesiastical or theological complications, has shown itself to consist everywhere, and at all its stages, in the consciousness which individuals have of an intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel themselves to be related. This intercourse is realized at the time as being both active and mutual. If it be not effective; if it be not a give and take relation; if nothing be really transacted while it lasts; if the world is in no whit different for its having taken place; then prayer, taken in this wide meaning of a sense that *something is transacting*, is of course a feeling of what is illusory, and

religion must on the whole be classed, not simply as containing elements of delusion—these undoubtedly everywhere exist—but as being rooted in delusion altogether, just as materialists and atheists have always said it was. At most there might remain, when the direct experiences of prayer were ruled out as false witnesses, some inferential belief that the whole order of existence must have a divine cause. But this way of contemplating nature, pleasing as it would doubtless be to persons of a pious taste, would leave to them but the spectators' part at a play, whereas in experimental religion and the prayerful life, we seem ourselves to be actors, and not in a play, but in a very serious reality. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XIX, 465-466 original emphasis)

Prayer can take multiple forms (verbalized or not, entailing visualizations or not, repetitive or not, and so forth). Regardless of its form, prayer is best understood as a way of establishing a connection between the individual who engages in prayer, and a domain of reality that goes beyond ordinary worldly experience. Recall James's account of this phenomenon from Lecture Four: ordinary consciousness has fuzzy boundaries beyond which lies a whole unfathomable domain that is still part of the field of experience, albeit usually hidden behind a veil. Prayer is a method through which a communication (a 'transaction' to use James's term) between these two regions can be achieved. As James notices in the quote above, the crux of the legitimacy of prayer is entirely dependent on whether there is a genuine transaction that takes place or not. But from the point of view of a field model of consciousness, this does not mean that prayer is real only if any ontological statements about the entities included in prayer are (possibly scientifically) verified; rather, a prayer is real if the transaction between ordinary bounded consciousness and the unbounded space beyond it takes place to some degree and has an appreciable impact on the direct experience of the performer of prayer. In other words, prayer works if, and to the extent that, ordinary consciousness is relieved from its ordinary boundaries. James continues:

The genuineness of religion is thus indissolubly bound up with the question whether the prayerful consciousness be or be not deceitful. The conviction

that something is genuinely transacted in this consciousness is the very core of living religion. As to what is transacted, great differences of opinion have prevailed. The unseen powers have been supposed, and are yet supposed, to do things which no enlightened man can nowadays believe in. It may well prove that the sphere of influence in prayer is subjective exclusively, and that what is immediately changed is only the mind of the praying person. But however our opinion of prayer's effects may come to be limited by criticism, religion, in the vital sense in which these lectures study it, must stand or fall by the persuasion that effects of some sort genuinely do occur. Through prayer, religion insists, things which cannot be realized in any other manner come about: energy which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free and operates in some part, be it objective or subjective, of the world of facts. (James 1902 [2011], Lecture XIX, 466)

James is open to two scenarios: the effects of prayer are materially tangible in the world, or they remain wholly psychological. However, this alternative is more apparent than real, especially when it is applied to an archaic culture in which no sharp boundary between mind and world is traced. More importantly, while prayer might be fully internalized by an individual and practiced in solitude, it usually emerges from a communitarian and socialized root, in which the officiant prays for (and with) the whole community. This latter point is surely crucial in the Vedic context and suggests that the performative role of Vedic hymns as prayers should always be understood from a communitarian point of view, in which the seers act as a mediator between his social kin and the forces that shape the world around it. James rightly insists that prayer must have *some real effect* in order to be considered to have really worked, and this effect is usually considered to be unique to prayer. This provides us with a good research question: What is the unique effect that Vedic hymns aim to achieve?

Here is a short outline of the underpinning view that emerges from Miller's reconstruction of the *Vedas*. Ordinarily, human beings live in a condition of darkness and ignorance, but they have the potential to reach a condition of knowledge or enlightenment (to be understood literally, as an experience of inner light or illumination). This defines the basic soteriologi-

cal path, articulated through various metaphors that involve a movement towards the luminous (the sun, the sky, the light, and similar). Enlightenment is presented as a condition of union or communion with the deities, in which humans know and enact the universal order of the cosmos. However, enlightenment also seems to be a particular *emotional* state of enhanced sensitivity and openness, in which ordinary boundaries are left behind and the individual reaches a higher state of experience. This state is achieved through a specific practice, often spelled out in terms of prayer (*brahman*). Prayer begins by bringing the mind towards some aspect of a deity, which will operate as a sort of guide towards the enlightened state. Prayer can originate from repetition of sounds (*mantra*) or visualizations, although the two aspects are most likely merged and connected. Sounds evoke images, and the merging of the mind into these images creates visions (the Sanskrit term *nāma-rūpa*, literally ‘name and form,’ captures this point). Dwelling in these visions brings one to a further state of absorption, in which sensory aspects likely fade away, leading to a sense of boundlessness.

Although the seer (and those followers who re-enact the hymns) is presented as knowing the ‘truth’ and being in harmony with the cosmic order, this does not necessarily entail the acquisition of a specific form of propositional knowledge. The seer does not seek to know this or that particular fact about a specific aspect of reality. That is, the sort of knowledge at stake in ritual is not encyclopedic. The very notion of truth might be considered from its emotional and psychological point of view, as a sense of utmost certainty and reality, a complete confidence and reliance that pervades one’s experience: ‘that is such.’ Today, we tend to discuss truth in relation to what makes a certain content of experience true, namely, in terms of the conditions that allow us to experience that sense of confidence. However, the seer seems to bypass this process and, through meditation, enacts that very confidence itself, and calls it an experience of ‘truth.’ In other words, the experience of Vedic enlightenment itself (the transition from darkness to sunlight) is the truth that the seer aims to ‘see’ and to experience directly. Hymns (prayers) are the means for achieving that purpose. The knowledge of the *Vedas*, in this respect, is a sort of practical knowledge (‘know-how’ rather than ‘know-that’), namely, the knowledge of how to bring about a certain shift in experience.



The soteriological path that moves from darkness to light, from ignorance to truth, can thus also be seen as a path from uncertainty to certainty, from anxiety to confidence. Knowing how to bring about this transformation is the sort of mastery practiced by the seer and extolled in the hymns. Vedic sacrifice is a way of formalizing and codifying a series of actions (physical, verbal, and mental), which are meant to preserve and enact the same original experience, based on the ability to access the same sort of insight.

### 5.3 Expansiveness

In its broader sense, *brahman* is a sort of prayer, a way of establishing a form of communication between a human being and other agents. In this communication, *brahman* is articulated in speech and language, but this language is a poietic one, is a visionary language, a word that evokes images and forms. Name is also visual shape (*nāmarūpa*). Achieving this state of vision is a soteriological turning point, since it is through vision that humans can not only eventually keep at bay the uncertainties of life, but also reach the same condition as the gods.

Some of the elements we have discussed so far show a clear connection with the shamanism we encountered in Lecture Three. A general communitarian model of agency seems to be assumed at the basis of the world described in the hymns, and the seer is a master in the poietic practice that is also common to the shaman of other cultures. And like shamans, Vedic seers are concerned with seemingly worldly issues that are relevant for their own communities: ensuring health (or fighting disease), propitiating good birth and abundance of children, accompanying the deceased kin to the otherworld, and negotiating with the gods (for instance).

For present purposes, we shall focus on three specific domains in which the connection between the Vedic seer and other shamanic cultures emerges quite clearly: (i) possession and the use of psychotropic substances; (ii) visions about birth and death; and (iii) visions about the afterlife. In discussing these elements, we shall illustrate how the paradox of mastery sketched in the introduction of this lecture emerges among the Vedic seers and expresses itself as a longing for ‘liberation’ that is often framed in terms of ‘becoming immortal’ (like the gods).

Perhaps the most obvious and apparent shamanic feature of the Vedic world is the use of a specific psychotropic vegetal substance, called *Soma*. According to one relatively widespread hypothesis, this could have been derived from a common mushroom, *amanita muscaria* (DuBois 2009, 163), which was ritually pressed with stones, filtered through wool, and mixed with milk. The Sanskrit root *mad* of the word *Soma* refers to intoxication, exhilaration, expansiveness, an effect that seems pervasive in many hymns, although it does not necessarily entail hallucinations. However, the way *Soma* is presented in the hymns defies reductionist interpretations of the seer's vision as simply a drug-induced effect. On the one hand, the Vedic *Soma* is not only the juice distilled from the actual vegetable, but it is also a powerful god (an agent), and it is variously associated with the element of water in general. These overlayers of meaning cannot simply be dismissed as contingent upon the more material nature of a particular substance, since they are interwoven in the experience of the *Soma* ritual as pervasively described in the *R̥g-Vēda* and profoundly shape its meaning.

One of the most vocal hymns that extols the effects of drinking *Soma* goes as follows:

I have tasted the sweet drink of life, knowing that it inspires good thoughts and joyous expansiveness to the extreme, that all the gods and mortals seek it together, calling it honey.

When you penetrate inside, you will know no limits, and you will avert the wrath of the gods. Enjoying Indra's friendship, O drop of *Soma*, bring riches as a docile cow brings the yoke.

We have drunk the *Soma*; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods. What can hatred and the malice of a mortal do to us now, O immortal one?

When we have drunk you, O drop of *Soma*, be good to our heart, kind as a father to his son, thoughtful as a friend to a friend. Far-famed *Soma*, stretch out our life-span so that we may live.

The glorious drops that I have drunk set me free in wide space. You have bound me together in my limbs as thongs bind a chariot. Let the drops protect me from the foot that stumbles and keep lameness away from me.

Inflame me like a fire kindled by friction; make us see far; make us richer, better. For when I am intoxicated with you, Soma, I think myself rich. Draw near and make us thrive.

We would enjoy you, pressed with a fervent heart, like riches from a father. King Soma, stretch out our life-spans as the sun stretches the spring days.

King Soma, have mercy on us for our well-being. Know that we are devoted to your laws. Passion and fury are stirred up. O drop of Soma, do not hand us over to the pleasure of the enemy.

For you, Soma, are the guardian of our body; watching over men, you have settled down in every limb. If we break your laws, O god, have mercy on us like a good friend, to make us better.

Let me join closely with my compassionate friend so that he will not injure me when I have drunk him. O lord of bay horses, for the Soma that is lodged in us I approach Indra to stretch out our life-span.

Weaknesses and diseases have gone; the forces of darkness have fled in terror. Soma has climbed up in us, expanding. We have come to the place where they stretch out life-spans.

The drop that we have drunk has entered our hearts, an immortal inside mortals. O fathers, let us serve that Soma with the oblations and abide in his mercy and kindness.

Uniting in agreement with the fathers, O drop of Soma, you have extended yourself through sky and earth. Let us serve him with an oblation; let us be masters of riches.

You protecting gods, speak out for us. Do not let sleep or harmful speech seize us. Let us, always dear to Soma, speak as men of power in the sacrificial gathering.

Soma, you give us the force of life on every side. Enter into us, finding the sunlight, watching over men. O drop of Soma, summon your helpers and protect us before and after. (*The Rig Veda*, VIII.48, transl. Doniger 1981, 134-135)

Several features stand out in this hymn. First, as it often happens, the hymn is associated with a specific individual (in this case, Pragātha Kaṇva), who speaks

here in first person about his experience of drinking Soma (and this use of the first person might also be regarded as one of the ‘special effects’ used by the seer’s poetic art). The hymn describes some of the effects of Soma on the seer’s perception: a sense of expansiveness, even boundlessness. When the poet says ‘you will know no limits,’ there is a pun in the fact that ‘no limits’ is expressed by the word *aditi*, who is also a goddess (also associated with right social behavior, as *aditi* can mean both ‘boundlessness’ and ‘offencelessness’). Perhaps the most enthusiastic verse is the exclamation: ‘we have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods.’ Notice that this exclamation entails a number of equations: light, gods, immortality, Soma, they all converge towards the same sort of experience, thus entailing that achieving one means achieving them all (homology). The seer also acknowledges that Soma has a power that could potentially entail dangers and thus seeks to propitiate Soma in order to receive only desirable fruits, most notably strength and long-life. God Soma is thus invoked and requested to behave as a good friend, a compassionate protector, who will shelter the seer and his community from enemies and support their thriving. There is no perceived contradiction between immortality and the seemingly worldly ideal of a long and happy lifespan. Immortality is to some extent conceived as an enhanced, perfected, and prolonged life. Moreover, death is often conceived in the Vedic and subsequent Indian thought as a *bond*, thus immortality is associated with a sense of boundlessness (i.e., freedom from the supreme bond represented by death), which ties in with the picture of a powerful affirmation of a perfect and divine life.

The seer sings: ‘weaknesses and diseases have gone; the forces of darkness have fled in terror.’ Very bodily emblems of physical discomfort and trouble (weakness and disease) are associated with the broad and potentially more encompassing ‘forces of darkness.’ The reverse is also true, the forces of light can be associated with great health and power, both physical and spiritual. This is just an instance of how the metaphorical and homological construction of the hymn allows for a merging of multiple semantic plans and meanings. And by the end of the hymn this multiplicity of levels takes on a cosmological value: ‘uniting in agreement with the fathers, O drop of Soma, you have extended yourself through sky and earth.’ Soma expands and makes

one boundless, by enhancing the forces of life (health, power, long-life) over darkness. This creates agreement with ‘the fathers’ (both the otherworld where the deceased live and more generally the whole community that lives on and keeps the fathers’ tradition), and quickly extends to ‘sky and earth,’ which are also two gods that represent the fundamental duality of the living space in which humans operate.

Throughout the hymn, the seer refers to Soma as both a substance that can be drunk and as a supreme god, bestower of this extraordinary experience of boundlessness and expansion. The physical act of drinking Soma is a way of being pervaded not only by a physical substance but also by a genuine and most powerful agent. Drinking Soma can be associated in all likelihood to an experience of possession, in which part of the meaning, significance and euphoria that result from drinking the juice are also due to the symbolic and hermeneutic framework in which the ritual is carried out. To put it negatively, if today a layperson who knows nothing of the Vedic world picked up an *amanita muscaria*, extract a juice out of it, drink it, and perhaps have some visions as a result, this would count as a completely different form of experience from the one described here by the seer, because the broad hermeneutic coordinates that contribute to the meaning of the experience in the two cases (the Vedic and the non-Vedic) are entirely different.

This point can be made even more apparent by considering how the effects of drinking Soma are epitomized in the myths of the god Indra.<sup>56</sup> Indra is sometimes presented as the first who discovered and drank Soma, and thanks to Soma acquired superhuman powers and became a god. While associated with the thunderbolt, Indra is also often represented as the one who slaughtered Vṛtra, the dragon (making perhaps Indra an Indian analogue of the Greek Kadmos). Vṛtra literally means ‘Obstacle’ and it is represented as a cobra, who protects a mountain in which waters are kept from flowing outside. The flowing of waters has obvious physical connotations, as the flowing of the several rivers upon which the Vedic culture depends (the poet here below mentions the ‘seven streams,’ which can be considered as a reference to the seven rivers associated with the now extinguished Sarasvati River, perhaps the early cradle of the Vedic culture).

•• 56 For an overview of the Vedic pantheon, see Jamison and Brereton, ‘Introduction’ (2014), 35-53.

But the flowing of waters quickly takes on a broader meaning, entailing the flowing of life and its thriving, but also the flowing of knowledge and vision. Waters are often associated with cows, and cows in turn are a metaphor for both riches and knowledge. The myth of Indra killing Vṛtra is thus at the same time a foundational myth that shows how the conditions for the survival of the Vedic civilization were secured, and a blueprint for thinking about the very experience of removing the cognitive obstacles that keep one confined and imprisoned (like the waters imprisoned by Vṛtra in the cave in the mountain). The success of Indra is again an assertion of expansiveness and boundlessness, absence of obstacles. In this whole narrative, Soma has a crucial role, since it is under the guidance of Soma (both as a substance and a god) that Indra can achieve his enterprise (in a previous myth, Soma has been given to Indra by the eagle, who took it from the gods, but following Soma's own will).

In one powerful hymn, the seer Hiraṇyastūpa Āṅgīrasa sings:

Let me now sing the heroic deeds of Indra, the first that the thunderbolt-wielder performed. He killed the dragon and pierced an opening for the waters; he split open the bellies of mountains.

He killed the dragon who lay upon the mountain; Tvaṣṭṛ fashioned the roaring thunderbolt for him. Like lowing cows, the flowing waters rushed straight down to the sea.

Wildly excited like a bull, he took the Soma for himself and drank the extract from the three bowls in the three-day Soma ceremony. Indra the Generous seized his thunderbolt to hurl it as a weapon; he killed the first-born of dragons.

Indra, when you killed the first-born of dragons and overcame by your own magic the magic of the magicians, at that very moment you brought forth the sun, the sky, and dawn. Since then you have found no enemy to conquer you.

With his great weapon, the thunderbolt, Indra killed the shoulderless Vṛtra, his greatest enemy. Like the trunk of a tree whose branches have been lopped off by an axe, the dragon lies flat upon the ground.

For, muddled by drunkenness like one who is no soldier, Vṛtra challenged the great hero who had overcome the mighty and who drank Soma

to the dregs. Unable to withstand the onslaught of his weapons, he found Indra an enemy to conquer him and was shattered, his nose crushed.

Without feet or hands he fought against Indra, who struck him on the nape of the neck with his thunderbolt. The steer who wished to become the equal of the bull bursting with seed, Vṛtra lay broken in many places.

Over him as he lay there like a broken reed the swelling waters flowed for man. Those waters that Vṛtra had enclosed with his power—the dragon now lay at their feet.

The vital energy of Vṛtra's mother ebbed away, for Indra had hurled his deadly weapon at her. Above was the mother, below was the son; Dānu lay down like a cow with her calf.

In the midst of the channels of the waters which never stood still or rested, the body was hidden. The waters flow over Vṛtra's secret place; he who found Indra an enemy to conquer him sank into long darkness.

The waters who had the Dāsa for their husband, the dragon for their protector, were imprisoned like the cows imprisoned by the Paṇis. When he killed Vṛtra he split open the outlet of the waters that had been closed.

Indra, you became a hair of a horse's tail when Vṛtra struck you on the corner of the mouth. You, the one god, the brave one, you won the cows; you won the Soma; you released the seven streams so that they could flow.

No use was the lightning and thunder, fog and hail that he had scattered about, when the dragon and Indra fought. Indra the Generous remained victorious for all time to come.

What avenger of the dragon did you see, Indra, that fear entered your heart when you had killed him? Then you crossed the ninety-nine streams like the frightened eagle crossing the realms of earth and air.

Indra, who wields the thunderbolt in his hand, is the king of that which moves and that which rests, of the tame and of the horned. He rules the people as their king, encircling all this as a rim encircles spokes. (*The Rig Veda*, I.32, transl. Doniger 1981, 149-151)

Some mystery surrounds the ending of this hymn since it is not clear what made Indra afraid after having succeeded in killing Vṛtra. Perhaps, this might

be a resurgence of the latently double nature of Soma itself, which can be empowering, but also potentially threatening. Be that as it may, the hymn provides a vivid illustration of the transformative power of Soma and its potential to overcome the forces of darkness.

Soma is also strongly associated with another god, who is pervasively present in the hymns and in Vedic ritual, namely, Agni, the god of fire. As we shall see, the Vedic ritual turns around the use of fire to purify offerings and transfer them to the gods. But fire is also a symbol of life, activity, and knowledge. In this respect, Agni is a natural counterpart of Soma, not only because of the obvious duality between dry (fire, Agni) and wet (watery, Soma), but also because Agni's agency can be seen as the fulfilment of the sort of power bestowed by Soma. Simplifying perhaps the complex interplay of interlocked metaphors and connections that run through the hymns, one might say that Soma triggers a process of transformation through a form of possession. This process results in the removal of obstacles (as shown by Indra's myth), and eventually in reaching full light, the light of fire, the light of vision and inspiration.

Another hymn sings:

The dark day and the bright day, the two realms of space, turn by their own wisdom. As Agni Of-all-men was born, like a king he drove back the darkness with light.

I do not know how to stretch the thread, nor weave the cloth, nor what they weave as they enter the contest. Whose son could speak here such words that he would be above and his father below?

He is the one who knows how to stretch the thread and weave the cloth; he will speak the right words. He who understands this is the guardian of immortality; though he moves below another, he sees above him.

This is the first priest of the oblation; look at him. This is the immortal light among mortals. This is the one who was born and firmly fixed, the immortal growing great in his body.

He is light firmly fixed for everyone to see, the thought swiftest among all who fly. All the gods, with one mind and one will, rightly come to the one source of thought.



My ears fly open, my eye opens, as does this light that is fixed in my heart. My mind flies up, straining into the distance. What shall I say? What shall I think?

All the gods bowed to you in fear, Agni, when you hid yourself in darkness. May Agni Of-all-men save us with his help; may the immortal save us with his help. (*The Rig Veda*, VI.9, transl. Doniger 1981, 116)

In this dense hymn, Bharadvāja Bārhaspatya presents Agni as both the ritual fire (kindled from darkness and hence a symbol of the transition from ignorance to knowledge) and the source of poetic inspiration and vision. In the second verse, the poet alludes to the struggle to compete with his own father and doubts his ability to find poetic inspiration. Being son of a seer is no guarantee of being able to see or to see better. This worry is resolved by the poet's giving up of his own concern and instead opening himself to Agni's revelation (indirectly alluded to in the third verse, using the third person masculine, 'he is the one who knows,' namely, Agni). Agni is also presented as a unifying element since all gods come to it as to their source. But notice how this allusion to a form of encompassing and embracing unity symbolized by Agni-fire does *not* entail an ontological or metaphysical view of some hidden and ineffable unity in which all differences are dissolved. Agni can be a unified source of knowledge while also remaining the source for multifarious and diverse visions and experiences. Unity, here, is not conceived as entailing simplicity or indeterminacy. And in a striking verse, the seer that has now kindled his own visionary power, can capture the moment in which this takes off and start flying: 'My ears fly open, my eye opens, as does this light that is fixed in my heart. My mind flies up, straining into the distance. What shall I say? What shall I think?' Agni takes the poet beyond the condition of darkness (night, bondage, the waters in the cave, the obstacle, the dragon), into light (health, power, vision, freedom, immortality), and perhaps even farther than the poet's own father.

Before moving on, it might be interesting to compare these elements with current research on psychedelic states. Preller and Vollenweider provide a review of current studies and show how the use of hallucinogens (especially psilocybin, a naturally occurring hallucinogen) is correlated with recurrent

altered states of consciousness, which include experiences of ‘oceanic boundlessness’ and ‘ego-dissolution.’ While the sense of self might be dissolved in both states, different subjects can have different reactions to it, ranging from bliss to anxiety and dread, depending on various factors and circumstances. They also observe that the use of psychedelics can ‘be linked to reductions in arousal and attentional functions [...], deficit of response inhibition and difficulties in disengaging attention from previously attended locations [...], [and] a failure to use contextual information’ (Katrin H. Preller and Franz X. Vollenweider, ‘Phenomenology, Structure, and Dynamic of Psychedelic States,’ 2018, 237–238). These cognitive impairments might help explain one core difference between psychedelics-induced altered states of consciousness, and meditation-induced states (in which cognitive functions and attention are usually sharpened). The authors also summarize a sequential model in which various altered states unfold progressively:

*Perceptual changes* appear with the onset of the reaction to psilocybin or LSD and are the most frequent and robust features of the psychedelic experience. Although perceptual changes can occur in all sensory modalities, the perceptual effects are dominated by visual phenomena, ranging from vividly colored, rapidly moving, and evolving elementary geometric figures to complex images and scenes involving persons, animals, architecture, or landscapes. Neither type has much meaning or function for subjects. In parallel, transformations of the environment and alterations of the body image are frequently reported.

*Recollective–psychodynamic level:* With increasing arousal toward and during the peak experience, visual images become more personalized, and boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness dissolve, causing recall and re-enacting of past experiences and memories and releasing emotions into the process. Many of the phenomena and processes occurring at this level can be understood according to concepts of psychoanalytic theory.

*Symbolic existential level:* In the subsequent level, approaching the peak effects, ideas, eidetic images, or even the entire environment can become symbolized. Subjects become more personally involved and emotionally

engaged as a participant in the ongoing psychedelic scenario, also referred to as a symbolic drama. The themes often have mythological and ritualistic overtones, and subjects may identify features of their own existence in legendary historical figures, fairy tales, and archetypal themes or other symbols and play out their personal drama on these allegoric terms. When the subjects encounter and struggle with these dramas, they can achieve a “solution,” e.g., by imagination, ideation, sensations, and affective or kinesthetic involvement. This can result in a quiet but powerful emotional response and tension release that appears to be transformative and beneficial to the person. Although ego-boundaries are often transiently markedly reduced or may even disappear for seconds or minutes during these states, subjects are still aware of the situation and its ambiguity.

*Deep integral level of self-transcendence:* Along with the increasing dissolution of the ego, the psychedelic experience can peak in a state where subjects can become immersed for seconds or minutes in a profound awareness of oneness in which all boundaries disappear and objects are unified into a totality. When subjects have their eyes open, they retrospectively describe this state as an intense emotionally charged new and unfamiliar perspective, almost like a direct encounter with the “ultimate” reality, which can inspire feelings of awe, sacredness, and eternity. This novel experience is also characterized by a pervasive sense of deep insight into the nature and structure of the universe that is far beyond the person’s usual mode of thinking. [...] However, when subjects have their eyes closed and turn their attention inward, a state of internal absorption may unfold, with subjects witnessing a vast internal space of objectless infinity that lacks not only the sense of the self, but also all sensory experiences and distracting thoughts. This very rare and transient state of extraordinary absorption is also an essential quality of advanced states in various forms of concentrative mediation. (Preller and Vollenweider, 2018, 230–231)

In shamanic experience, it seems that it is especially the ‘symbolic existential level’ that receives prominence during the séance, while different elements in the Vedic hymns might be connected with both this level and the ‘deep integral level of self-transcendence.’ However, as Preller and Vollenweider remark, the

unfolding of these states is not uniform and purely mechanic, but depends on age, personality, mood, expectations, environment and previous experience of the subjects themselves.

### 5.4 Cosmological birth

The Vedic seer is a seeker of visions. Possessed by god Soma and its expansive power, the seer's inspiration dictates words and speeches that disclose images, bringing the light of knowledge and insight. In this experience, the uncertainty and dangers of darkness are dispelled by the tone of the experience itself. The arising of visions imposes itself on the seer and transforms him, by making him like a god, an immortal, one who is no longer bounded. Vedic mythology articulates this conception through various narratives and characters, among which Soma, Indra, Agni are pivotal and pervasively present in the whole *Ṛg-Veda*. Alongside these figures, we also encounter hymns devoted to crucial moments of life, birth and death, considered both at the individual and at the cosmic level. Birth in particular can, on the one hand, be conceived as the birth of a new human individual, but is often taken in a far broader meaning as the birth of humans in general, the birth of the gods, or the birth of the whole of reality. For present purposes, we can survey some of the most emblematic instances to appreciate how a confrontation with these situations is a powerful tool for exercising the poetic practice of the seer.

One strategy consists in directly confronting a situation of uncertainty, in which it is apparently impossible to fathom what one might be confronting. The seer (and his audience) is brought amidst darkness, lacking images and visions, where nothing seems discernible. But as we already encountered, this potentially helpless condition has also the potential to turn into its opposite. This same darkness is also the background upon which visions can arise, spontaneously, on their own accord, like Agni kindled at night. The most emblematic example of this pattern is found in a famous, enigmatic, and widely commented upon hymn of the *Ṛg-Veda*, which runs as follows:

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.

Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.

Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know. (*The Rig Veda*, X.129, transl. Doniger 1981, 25-26)

Instead of attempting to dogmatically interpret the sort of view or cosmogony that the seer wants to defend (does he?), we can look at the rhetorical structure of the hymn. Clearly enough, this hymn is presented as a sort of exercise in visionary imagination. By deliberately attempting at picturing what was *before* anything else (before the world as we know it, before the beginning of all times), the seer forces himself and his audience to withdraw from any familiar scenario and somehow sink into the darkness of the unknowable.

The first two verses require us to move beyond some of the most fundamental distinctions we use to interpret and carve up experience: nonexistence and existence, death and immortality, night and day. Having abandoned these dichotomies, imagination is faced with a residue, something that is left from the

imaginary exercise of withdrawal. This something is not really a *thing*: it cannot be said to exist, or even not to exist, because that something precedes the very split between existence and nonexistence. The seer calls it ‘that one,’ although this should be understood more as a performative way of naming something that defies language, rather than an ontological statement about its nature (oneness). ‘That one’ is a way of pointing at what is left when one strips experience of all its familiar dualistic structures. And something of this sort must be left, because the alternative would be that of asserting that ‘there is nothing’ but this assertion necessarily requires accepting the validity of the notions of existence and nonexistence, and their mutual difference, which cannot occur once one has moved beyond them altogether.

In this sort of visionary thought experiment, the absolute beginning is darkness, which in the metaphorical Vedic code means ignorance, uncertainty, and imprisonment (the waters or the cows imprisoned in the cave or in the mountain). Attempting to imagine the absolute birth of everything, the birth of all births, is a way of facing one of the most obscure and uncertain corners of experience, something almost impossible to visualize. And yet, ‘that one’ at least was present in that condition, unknowable because surrounded by darkness. Facing the vision of this inscrutable original abyss, the seer then identifies the element that brings about change: *heat (tapasas)*, which the verse immediately after identifies as *sensual desire (kāmas)*, which in turns becomes the first seed of *thought (manaso)*.

Heat is often associated with ascetic effort. On a physical level, for instance, the yogi can produce bodily heat through a disciplined control of breathing. But the notion can quickly be generalized to include any attempt to bring about results and effects. Sacrifice also requires heat, and the metaphor can easily be extended further to include the kindling of Agni, the beginning of the fire of action and insight. Heat is equated with desire, which here seems to have a very concrete flavor, since *kāma* is desire for the objects of the senses, the longing to enjoy what can be experienced in the world and what can bring pleasure. An image builds up from these connections: ‘that one’ is striving and struggling (*tapas*), longing and craving *for something*, although for what exactly is still undetermined. To fill this void, *thought* (which might also be rendered as *mind*) arises. But if we take thought to entail some form of duality (since thought always involves thinking *about* something, hence it always has an

object), then with thought we are back with the more familiar objects. The world is born. The seer comments: ‘poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.’ Through the visionary experiment of imagining the unimaginable (the birth of the world), seers (in the plural, since here the hymn seems to avail a generalization) discovered that what we ordinarily take to exist originally arises from nonexistence. But given the progression traced above, ‘nonexistence’ here means the very structure of desire, the longing for something that is experienced as currently missing or lacking. The struggle (heat) to attain what is not currently present, is what brings about being and existence.<sup>57</sup>

However, having reached this crucial conclusion, the remaining part of the hymn takes away any dogmatic certainty that could be attributed to it. By piling up a number of questions, and by suggesting that perhaps nobody (not even a supreme deity) could answer them, the seer blocks any possibility of transmuting the vision of thought arising in ‘that one’ from heat into an actual cosmogonical doctrine (into a well-defined object of dogmatic knowledge). This might not be a sign of skepticism, but rather a sort of respect for the ineffability of vision itself. Like the truth disclosed in a dream, which cannot be straightforwardly transplanted into waking life, so the insight disclosed by visionary imagination needs to be addressed within its own framework and respected as a visionary imagination, and not something to be transmuted into dogma. The very certainty that it arose is the certainty of inspiration, something that cannot be possessed and mastered. Acknowledging the need for respecting this ungraspable nature of the visionary exercise, both the seer and his audience remain open to the possibility of repeating the exercise itself, delving into it, rather than converting it into rigid beliefs.

Other hymns offer perhaps more concrete and tangible pictures of the origins of the world, although behind the surface they might share a similar attitude to

•• 57 This reading runs in contrast with another interpretation defended by Brereton, according to which it is instead desire that arises from thought. See discussion in Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (2007), 57-64. For further discussion see Siarhei Sańko, ‘Composition and meaning: To the exegesis of ṚV X.129’ (2019). Yet, another alternative is to read *kāma* as ‘love,’ understood as infinite receptivity and overabundance of ‘that one,’ which eventually expresses itself in the world of thoughts and differences.

the one in the hymn just presented. For instance, at one point (*The Rig Veda*, X.72, transl. Doniger 1981, 38-39), Aditi is presented as the goddess who gave birth to all the gods. The seer here again makes a direct reference to the fact that ‘in the earliest age of the gods, existence was born from nonexistence’ and then suggests that Aditi was the mother of what exists. However, as Aditi gives birth to Dakṣa, Dakṣa also gives birth to Aditi. How is that possible? We already encountered Aditi as the boundlessness that is associated with Soma, the one that Soma reveals. Dakṣa is literally ‘Skillfulness’ and this is most directly associated with skillfulness in ritual and sacrifice. The co-generation of Aditi and Dakṣa can thus be interpreted as a co-implication between an original boundlessness and the *heat* of sacrifice, the paradigmatic form of striving and practice, hinted at in X.129. Positing Aditi as the original mother of reality and the gods is akin to positing ‘that one’ (the unfathomable principle) as the mother of all.

The connection between sacrifice and (cosmological) birth is developed in another famous hymn (*The Rig Veda*, X.90, transl. Doniger 1981, 30-31), in which the origin of the world is compared with the gods’ sacrifice of the original man: ‘The Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers. It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.’ The seer thus continues showing how the sacrifice dismembers the original man, from the parts of which various elements of the world arise in their individuality. Perhaps the most famous passage comes in the closing of the hymn, where the four social classes of Vedic society (priests, warriors, commoners, and servants) are also presented as originating from the various parts of the original man’s body.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike X.129, here the origin is not conceived as empty or undifferentiated, since the original man already possessed the whole variety of reality

•• 58 Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002), chapter 2, introduces several parallel elements in the cosmologies of ancient India, Greece and Near East, in which the image of the ‘cosmic person’ (macranthrop) as the unitarian principle that gives birth to the world by parthenogenesis emerges frequently. McEvelley also advances an interesting hypothesis about a possible source for this imaginary: ‘By the Late Bronze Age, mythology was straining at the limits of its expressiveness; the composers of myth seem to have been increasingly seeking abstract propositions and generalizations, and this urge had cost cogency, bursting the seams of imagery and narrative. What would emerge from the dissolution of myth was the birth of philosophy—and its first great topic was Oneness’ (McEvelley 2002, 24).



within itself, and gods are already existing in their own right (since they administrate the sacrifice). This can be interpreted as showing that this particular hymn is not concerned with the absolute birth of everything but more with the birth of diversity and differentiation in the experienced human world. However, taking the hymn as a reflection on the nature of the perfect and most paradigmatic sacrifice itself (Dakṣa), the seer suggests that differentiation in the world can appear only as the spreading apart of elements that were already somehow entailed in a former unity, while this unity can reveal its internal complexity and its multiplicity only when it is spread apart in sacrifice. Dakṣa (the ritual sacrifice, hence the assertion of diversity) can be born only from Aditi (the original unity), and yet Aditi can bear a multiplicity in itself and entail the whole universe only because Dakṣa reveals her internal complexity (hence Dakṣa also gives birth to Aditi). In this way, Aditi (with her children, including Varuṇa, the god of commandment and justice) comes to be the mother of the social order itself and embodies the respect for that order. Here, the seer hints at the fact that poetic vision does not reveal an order of priority, but rather the co-implication and co-origination of the two different and yet complementary principles of boundlessness and differentiation, unity and division, static fusion and dynamic striving, communitarian unity and individual emancipation.

### 5.5 Death, re-death, and immortality

If birth, taken in its cosmological dimension, provides a core domain for exercising the visionary imagination, death complements it in doing so. A key archeological feature associated with the emerging and spreading of *Homo Sapiens* is the concern for the deceased and the practice of ritual burial. Of course, death is a particularly charged emotional event for both individuals and their community, and multiple layers of meaning surround death rituals and practices. Perhaps it is not theoretically impossible to conceive of a small-scale community that believes in annihilation after death, but in order to conceive of death as the annihilation of the living agent, one needs first to conceptualize the living agent as necessarily dependent on a living individual body. However, the majority of archeological and textual evidence shows that

most of known ancient cultures and civilizations, including the Vedic one, did believe in some form of afterlife and subscribed to the broad communitarian model of agency we described in Lecture Three. Starting from this premise, the dissolution of an individual body does not necessarily entail the dissolution of the agent(s) that inhabit that body.

A standard belief that surfaces in a variety of different small-scale societies around the world is the idea that, after death, the deceased have to travel to the otherworld, often conceived of as the world of their (fore)fathers. This afterlife destination is often described as a magnified version of the worldly shape and structure of the ordinary community life. The world of the fathers might be more or less geographically remote from the world of the livings, but once there the deceased enjoy a form of existence similar in structure to the one enjoyed during life. Here, a crucial concern is the path that the newly deceased must travel in order to reach this otherworldly destination. The path is dangerous and proper shamanic or ritual guidance is considered to be essential. But once the task is accomplished, the deceased will enjoy their new dwelling place. At this level, the world of the fathers is not conceived in terms of ethical rewards or punishment but maintains a generally positive tone.

Prima facie evidence suggests that this sort of view is at play also in the *R̥g-Veda*. For instance, in one hymn, the god Yama, the king of the dead, is invoked in order to ensure that the deceased will travel safely to the world of the fathers (*The R̥g Veda*, X.14, transl. Doniger 1981, 43-45). The idea of joining the fathers after death is a powerful image through which the community asserts the strong embedment of the individual within their kinship. As I am born from my parents, after death I shall join them again. Origin or separation, and reunion or death are thus the two complementary halves of the process of becoming. Here we find, applied to the case of death, the principle we already noticed in more general terms with respect to cosmological birth. In the case of birth, a preceding union is split apart; in the case of death, a preceding division is recomposed in unity. If one observes this process from the point of view of the whole community as such, then birth and death are just the rhythmic movements of separation and reunion of the same original pool of agents.

However, this communitarian view can lead one to take a further step: if I am born from my parents and, after death, I will rejoin my forefathers, then shall I remain there with the forefathers forever? When I was born, I did not arise from nothing, since my birth was the labor (heat) that led to the separation from a more original kinship (Aditi, ‘that one’). In some way, I must already be there in the world of the forefathers before coming to this life, in that same place where I shall travel back after death. But then, perhaps I shall also come back again from that otherworld to this world. Reflection on the complementary duality between union and separation *can* lead to a conception of the community itself as weakly embodied in any set of currently existing individuals. The actual community stretches to both past and future generations, and encompasses both the worlds of those who are actually living and the world of the forefathers. In this respect, there seems to be a fixed cycle between these two domains: birth is rebirth, is coming to the world of the living from the world of the forefathers, and death is re-death, is moving back from the world of the living to the world of the forefathers.

Unlike later sources, the *R̥g-veda* does not seem to explicitly discuss rebirth. Nonetheless, there are hints that suggest both a ‘coming back’ of the deceased and the idea that moving to the otherworld is not a permanent state.<sup>59</sup> Rebirth

•• 59 Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma* (2002) provides a detailed cross-cultural examination of rebirth beliefs in various small-scale societies and ancient cultures. Comparing these data with the extant information from the Vedic culture, it is possible to envisage that rebirth was endorsed at that stage, either within the Vedic culture itself, or perhaps as a result of its interplay with other groups that were integrated or under its influence (keeping in mind that ancient India was already a highly multicultural aggregate). However, Obeyesekere invites us to distinguish between various steps that can be taken in articulating a rebirth eschatology. Shamanic cultures might not entail beliefs in rebirth; those who endorse beliefs in rebirth, might not further accept the idea of ethical rewards or punishments after death; and those who accept the latter, might not take the even further step of regarding the whole rebirth process as ruled by ethical principles (*karma*). Based on available evidence, it is possible that the early Vedic culture accepted rebirth just as a cyclical transfer between the world of the living and that of the forefathers. This view is further discussed and defended by Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (2009), chapter 3. For a detailed discussion of relevant texts from the *R̥g-veda*, see Miller 1974, sect. 3, part 3. Herman Tull, *The Vedic Origins of Karma* (1989) provides a detailed examination of brahmin sources to show that the doctrine of karma and rebirth that surfaces in the *Upaniṣads* (cf. Lecture Six) should not be regarded as a radical break with respect to the previous tradition. For present purposes, it is worth noticing that if rebirth views do not necessarily entail the idea of ethical reward, any view of an *escape* from rebirth necessarily requires taking for granted the rebirth cycle. The idea of ‘immortality’ in the *R̥g-veda* is difficult to account for in terms of default survival among the forefathers (since this is no special achievement, but something available to all members of the community). It is more likely that it points to a way of escaping the

(or re-death) is closely associated and dependent upon a communitarian model of agency, and through this view, the community empowers itself and is embodied throughout time (past and future) and domains of reality (the world of the living and the world of the dead). Following the cycle of rebirth and re-death, any individual remains fully encompassed within their own community, reasserting (and re-empowering) their own kinship. The newborn is never a stranger, but a forefather coming back to life, and the deceased one is not exiled forever, they will come back to their community at some point. While individual bodily life arises and passes, the community as a whole remains. Notice how this model applies to the domain of birth and death an otherwise common observation that encompasses all sorts of natural phenomena, from the cycling of the seasons, to the reproduction of the same animal and vegetal species.

The seer's vision enables him to know this cycle, and eventually help other members of his community to travel through it. In this respect, the seer performs a function akin to that of the shaman in small-scale societies. However, the seer does *not* (at least always) wish for himself to travel through this same cycle. Consider again the exalted exclamation 'we became immortals.' Against the backdrop of a cyclical (and non-ethicized) view of birth and death, this exclamation can be understood as the claim of having escaped from this cycle altogether. One might think about immortality in antithesis to annihilation at death, and thus to become immortal is to be spared from such annihilation. But this sort of interpretation is hardly applicable in the case of the seer (and in Vedic culture more generally), in which death is not conceived of as annihilation in the first place (since agency is not conceived in such a way that death could be easily interpreted as annihilation). But if death is conceived as a transfer from one world to another, in the broader context of a cyclical view of birth and death within the same community, then immortality must involve escaping from this sort of cycle.

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cyclical transfer back and forth between the world of the living and that of the dead. Hence, the very ambition or experience of 'becoming immortal' witnessed by several seers can be taken as implying an already established background in which the rebirth cycle in its non-ethical form was taken for granted.

The first who discovered immortality were the gods, and the gods instructed the seers, who now make other human beings aware of this possibility. Those who became immortals stop cycling within the same community, they are *separated* from it forever to some extent, since they are no longer subject to be born again among the livings. Hence, immortality is also a way of expressing one's departure from the life of the community. Immortality is a way of expressing, using a communitarian shared pool of meanings and images, a form of emancipation from the community itself. Death is a bond in the sense that one must return to support the renewal of one's own community. Immortality, breaking apart this bondage, entails no longer having to contribute in this way to the community's life, being freed from this burden, emancipated. This is an exceptional achievement, surely not the standard goal of most community fellows. And yet, its rarity does not count against its feasibility in the seer's view. To better understand this point, we need to clarify (i) what immortality does *not* entail, and (ii) why the seer might seek this form of immortality.

In the *R̥g-veda*, immortality does not (and cannot) mean some form of ultimate or 'mystical' (in the sense discussed in Lecture Four) reunion with a transcendent principle, in which one's perceived individuality would be entirely dissolved forever. As we shall discuss in Lecture Six, this latter view was indeed how the escape from the cycle of rebirth was conceived by subsequent trends in the Indian culture. Continuity with an older tradition is often a way of justifying the acceptance of otherwise newly introduced views. This urged the proponents of more recent views to forcefully project them back onto the *R̥g-veda* itself, which was then taken both as a polemical target *and* as a source of legitimation. Attempts have always been made to retrospectively interpret the *R̥g-veda* such that it hints at the later view of immortality as mystical reunion with the absolute principle.<sup>60</sup>

This understanding of immortality is not tenable from the point of view of the seers of the *R̥g-veda* because their model of poetic vision does not allow for this sort of complete fading away into an undifferentiated principle. Indra, one of the paradigmatic examples of a being who became immortal, is not someone who disappeared in an ineffable eternal unity with the All, but rather

•• 60 For instance, Miller 1974, 196-199 articulates this sort of interpretation.

a warrior, actively engaged in the world, and yet freed forever from the need to be reborn and die again. Aditi is the mother of all creates, and the first Man had in itself the whole cosmos, and yet, this primordial unity is never conceived of independently from a principle of separation, division, articulation, determination. Aditi is also the *daughter* of Dakṣa, the first Man is the first sacrificial victim that spreads out the world.

The immortality of the early Vedic seers is something different from the immortality of the later mystics. One way of acknowledging this difference is by exploring a potential failure in the seer's attempt at securing mastery over uncertainty. As mentioned, the seer gains certainty through vision, not necessarily or primarily through *what* is seen, but rather through the sort of experience that leads to vision, which is accompanied by a sense of euphoric enthusiasm, assurance, confidence, self-affirming power (the victorious Indra). And yet, this vision is likely to arise in ways that detach the seer from the way life is ordinarily experienced. The most emblematic case is perhaps offered by the exercises of imagining birth, which entail both the ability of penetrating the mystery of existence and nonexistence, but also the need to detach oneself and withdraw (even if only temporary) from the ordinary way of conceiving and perceiving. Moreover, the very poietic nature of these exercises prevents the seer from transmuting their vision into dogmatic positions. Visions are evoked through riddles; akin to dream-like images, they cannot be pinned down and solidified in ways that would allow for a complete dominion over them. The experience of the boundless is antithetical to the boundaries imposed by exact views and analytical knowledge. As a result, the sort of certainty that arises for the seer is hard to communicate to the other members of the community and somehow puts the seer at odds with them. Vision separates.

The paradox of visionary experience can thus be stated as follows. On the one hand, the seer is fully embedded in his community and its worldview. Building on it, the seer develops his poietic practice (akin to shamanic practice) which leads to vision. The quality of this visionary experience produces an effect of utmost certainty and thus of mastery over the uncertainty (darkness) that ordinarily haunts human beings. On the other hand, to develop and cultivate this poietic practice, the seer must separate himself somehow from his community, he must forego the ordinary way of experiencing reality,

and cannot pretend to convert his visions into something that could be readily shared by others. Visions are not commodities that can be easily split apart, re-packaged, and sold. The greater and profounder the seer's mastery, the greater the distance between the seers and the rest of his community. Seeking light, the seer ends up surrounding himself behind a veil of obscurity.

We can thus rephrase the paradox of mastery introduced at the beginning of this lecture in terms that would fit more directly the context of ancient Vedic culture. Consociation not only address basic needs, but it creates new needs. The stronger the consociation, the smaller the individual emancipation from these needs. However, in order to emancipate itself, the individual needs to conceptualize that emancipation, but that can only be done within a domain of meanings that is socially shared. Meaning is yet another social good. Emancipation needs to be intelligible as such, but the individual cannot but understand their own emancipation through a set of meanings that the individual has previously inherited from their own society. This does not mean that the individual has no room for manoeuvre in terms of creating new meanings, but it does entail certain constraints. A complete leap outside of any shared horizon of meaning would actually be a leap into meaninglessness. Hence, even emancipation from consociation is not a complete break with society. In terms of the practice of self-mastery, this entails that self-mastery remains itself inherently uncertain, because at any point in the spectrum of possible views it settles, it is threatened by either submission to consociation and its demands, or meaninglessness due to the alienation of the individual, in their struggle for emancipation, from their own social background of meaning. The Vedic seer struggles with this issue by addressing it directly from the side of meaning. He inherits and develops communitarian meanings, which he alters and refashions through his poetic visionary practice. The stronger and more autonomous this practice becomes, the more certain and empowering it will feel for the seer, but also the more remote it will be from the communitarian background, hence also more obscure, more impenetrable. The trade-off for emancipation is undermining the meaningfulness of meaning, its social rooting, and hence turning light into darkness.

Immortality is the epitome of this divide. It expresses the fact that a consumed seer will never come back to his community; at some point, he will remain in the world of his visions. This does not hint at a mystical union with an underlying absolute ontological principle, but rather indicates that the seer will have to leave his community and become a god, an immortal one, one who does not come back to his own kin. In a sense, this form of immortality is also very much a form of complete death, understood as complete emancipation from the community (in a model in which one primarily is the social persona enacted within the community). And yet, emancipation could not possibly be complete without also undermining the sort of certainty that vision produced. Complete emancipation would entail a complete disavowal of the whole hermeneutic background to one's experiences and the whole horizon of meanings provided by the community, which also constitute the ground for all visionary experience. In emancipating himself from his community, the seer is on the verge of undercutting his own visionary power. An isolated seer is a barren cow.

Gods are not indifferent to what happens in human communities, they are involved with human affairs, they try to deal with their distance and separation by recovering some degree of interaction. The paradox consists in the fact that by moving towards greater certainty, one has to move towards greater separation, but in doing so, one eventually recedes from that same ground that allowed vision to develop, and this undermines any attempt to gain certainty through vision. Wanting to avoid this result, one will have to move backward somehow, becoming an immortal who still cares for his own community. Yet, this would require taming vision, making it more sharable, and hence less powerful, and as a consequence less capable of bestowing certainty. Either way one takes, certainty can be sought but never fully achieved.<sup>61</sup>

•• 61 Taylor (1989, 423) makes the following comment about the Romantic and post-Romantic view of the artist and its vocation: 'a view has come down to us from the Romantics which portrays the artist as one who offers epiphanies where something of great moral or spiritual significance becomes manifest—and what is conveyed by this last disjunction is just the possibility that what is revealed lies beyond and against what we normally understand as morality. The artist is an exceptional being, open to a rare vision; the poet is a person of exceptional sensibility. This was a commonplace among the Romantics. But this also opens the artist to exceptional suffering. In part this was thought to lie in the very fact of a rare sensibility, which must open one to great suffering as well as great joy. But in part it comes from the idea that the artist's vocation forces him or her to forgo the ordinary satisfactions of life in the world,



This paradox is already hinted at in the liminal role that shamans occupy in many cultures, being both feared and revered, taking leading roles within their community, but also playing on their margins. The Vedic seer expresses this sort of complexity and tension within its own vocation. From a historical perspective, this paradox can also explain some of the later developments that occur in the Vedic culture. So far, we have focused on the seers themselves, but the *R̥g-veda* is just the bedrock of a more complex edifice of Brahminic ritual practices. The brahmin is not necessarily a seer himself, but someone who is skilled in the hymns, and knows how they should be performed in the appropriate contexts and circumstances. The brahmin is more akin to a ritual specialist than to a shaman. In a sense, the brahmin's task is to bridge the gap between the original vision of the ancestral *rishis* (now shifted back into a more or less legendary past) and the concrete needs of the community living in the present. However, this offers only an apparent resolution to the paradox we just sketched. Insofar as the brahmin's ritual actions are not based on a form of direct vision, they quickly reduce to a sort of orthopraxis, in which certainty is based primarily on knowing and following the traditional rules preserved within the community. Memory substitutes living vision (although it might occasionally re-enact that vision) but doing so the brahmin can no longer claim to be he himself the one who sees and thus be ensured and empowered by what he sees. The brahmin is not someone who can proclaim 'I became immortal.' And for this reason, as we shall see in the next lecture, Brahmanical ritual came to be regarded by some groups as ultimately inadequate for bringing about genuine salvation and liberation. While salvation could still be conceived in terms of full mastery over uncer-

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to forgo successful action and fulfilled relationships. This is the predicament which D. H. Lawrence in a comment on Beethoven's letters called 'the crucifixion into isolate individuality.' Being cut off from ordinary fulfilments can also mean being cut off from other people, on the margins of society, misunderstood, despised.' Now, let us duly acknowledge all the obvious and immense differences that separate nineteenth-century Western visions of art and the first-millennium BCE Indian Vedic culture. Having done so, *mutatis mutandis*, it is far from impossible to see that what Taylor uncovers with respect to Western nineteenth-century Romanticism is in fact not an absolutely unique phenomenon, and perhaps the ancient Vedic seer already knew something about that (which does not mean that the seer was a sort of Romantic artist, but rather that both characters might encounter the same sort of challenges, albeit proceeding from very different backgrounds). The pivot of this experience of separation consists in the way in which one's imaginary power of accessing an epiphany of meaning is inevitably linked with one's own community, while also create a gulf with that and which is seemingly impossible to bridge.

tainty, engaging with the problems that this mastery entails prompted important changes in how immortality ought to be conceived.<sup>62</sup>

- 62 From a historical point of view, one might notice a sort of cycle between communitarian embeddedness and individual emancipation, which might well be at work since the very beginning of human sociability. Discussing the evolution and survival of shamanic aspects in more complex ancient cultures, McEvelley comments (*The Shape of Ancient Thought*, 2002, 262): ‘The shaman was an independent and isolated worker by definition. His power dreams were his alone; his relationships with the spirit allies were his alone. Powers that rise in part from inner sources are hard to share with colleagues, each of whom is a shaman, too, with his own relationship system in the power realms, and no two systems quite alike. For the transition to the state this power relationship was externalized to lessen its uncontrollability and generalized to a caste of people to eliminate what Eliade calls the individual shamanic ‘vocation.’ This is the moment when shamanic individualism began to give way to the priestly profession. In a priestly college there is a hierarchy, and each individual is not free to assert his or her own model of the whole. A society’s transition from shaman to priest involves, therefore, the abandonment of the individual power vision in favor of a doctrine codified by the leaders of the priesthood.’ Building on what was discussed in Lecture Three, we can thus see that shamanism originally emerges out of a strong form of communitarian experience, which leads to a more individualizing form of practice, and in turn calls (when society itself evolves towards larger structures) for a new re-socialization (in the form of ritualization and orthopraxis). The cycle might then likely continue in its subsequent iterations (explored, in part, in Lecture Six).

Lecture Six:  
Witnesses

## 6.1 Introduction

If the self is a hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering uncertainty, then it becomes possible to assess which conditions are more likely to make this construction more or less successful in achieving its purpose. In Lecture Five we introduced a paradox that might jeopardize the possibility of successfully gaining full mastery. The self is constructed along two axes, embodiment and consociation. There is a tension between the two. Embodiment is exposed to uncertainty, and thus creates the need for mastering it. Mastery of uncertainty seems to require a degree of consociation to address the needs of the embodied individual. But consociation establishes a form of dependence, creates new needs, likely excludes that all these needs can be equally satisfied, and eventually might require a sacrifice of the individual itself for the common good of the community. This means that consociation is not just a way of addressing uncertainty, but is also a way of introducing and sustaining specific forms of uncertainty. Since consociation is integral to the construction of the self, we might say that the very process of constructing the self to master uncertainty also creates *new* uncertainty. Seeking mastery inevitably exacerbates the tension between the needs of embodiment and the constraints of consociation.

In Lecture Five we focused on one particular historical case in which this paradox surfaces. We investigated the ancient Vedic culture and the role that the seer plays in it. The seer is the one who is able, through his poetic practice, to move from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from uncertainty to confidence. Cultivating his visionary skills, the seer acts as a bridge between his human community and the larger community of agents (the gods), ensuring the support and assistance of the latter. The power of words, hymns, and singing is regarded as capable of both disclosing the nature of reality and positively steering it in an advantageous direction through appropriate ritual actions.

However, the seer is a liminal figure. By travelling away from his community, the seer stretches the background of meaningfulness that underpins his own visionary power. The seer's visions are entirely informed and predicated upon a shared hermeneutic landscape, which the seer did not invent from scratch but inherited from the community. And yet, as visions strive to become more and more powerful and unique, accessible only to extraordinary individ-

uals, they sever the link with that common inherited background of shared views and meaning. What is unique is also exceptional, and what is exceptional falls outside of the norm, outside of what is common. It becomes something strange, something alien, and eventually something meaningless. This can be understood in terms of directionality: insofar as the seer moves towards greater originality, his visions acquire also greater idiosyncrasy, which undermines their intelligibility; but insofar as the seer remains closer to a shared and well-known communal background, then his visions lose power and cogency, become common, trivial, redundant. Seeking mastery through vision is a path that does not seem to achieve complete success, whatever direction it takes.

In the *Rg-veda*, seers are identified as the authors of the hymns, but they are also regarded by the tradition as belonging to a legendary past. In due time, the Vedic ritual changed from the actual performance of visionary insight, into the re-enactment of carefully fixed acts and recitations. The inspired poet is replaced by the ritual specialist, the *brahmin*, who ensures that the ritual takes place in the appropriate way, but who does not himself *see* or produce new visions. This ossification of the ritual and its sophisticated orthopraxis also introduces a separation, a distance between the original inspiration and the actual practice. In this case, the distance separates the source of inspired utterances, and the visionary experience that underpins them, from their repetition in the ritual setting. Since words are assumed to have value and meaning in themselves, in virtue of their authority and antiquity, actually *understanding* them and their meaning might be dispensable. But words whose meaning is no longer understood are no longer words, they are just sounds. Hence, the ritualization of the visionary experience also entails a progressive corrosion of its experiential significance. In order to avoid the alienation of the visionary experience from the community, that experience is embedded in a well-defined protocol. Yet, this protocol, by fostering ritualization, also creates a gulf between the ritual performance and the original experience that inspired its creators, and this in turn empties the ritual of its vital fire. Poietic practice (the ability of creating something new) becomes orthopraxis (the ability of acting in a fixed and prescribed way).

In this lecture, we look at one way this puzzle is addressed in later Vedic and Indian thought. For the seer, mastery is achieved through vision, and visionary

insight makes the seer a god, an immortal one. However, visions are semantically dependent on the common and shared background of accepted meanings provided by the seer's community. An overly unique or idiosyncratic vision (a vision that moves too far from that common background) runs the risk of becoming meaningless. One way of circumventing this problem is by separating the *experience* of vision from the *content* of vision. We already noticed that visions are particularly powerful because of their emotional tone, their cognitive quality (expansiveness, boundlessness, euphoria, enthusiasm, and so on), more than for their actual contents. If there is a way of producing the same experience without having to depend on any content, then the uniqueness of the experience will no longer be an issue. In other words, one might start thinking that what makes the ancient seer immortal is not *what* he sees, but the fact *that* he sees. If it is possible to move from the content (*what*) to the metacognitive aspect of the experience (*that*), then it will be possible to achieve absolute certainty (as in visionary experience) without separation, because there will be no particular content upon which this separation will be built. If separation is conceived of in terms of difference, the idea is thus that of pursuing a sort of pure identity that would entail no difference. Moreover, if such an identity can be experienced, then this experience will be necessarily an experience of eternity and thus of absolute certainty. Uncertainty can be experienced only in a context in which there is some possibility of becoming, and becoming is possible only if difference is possible. If one transcends the world of difference, then one transcends the world of becoming; one becomes immortal, or better, eternal.

As we shall see, this is the leading inspiration that emerges among some of the relatively late (with respect to the *R̥g-veda*) segments of the Vedic corpus, known as *Upaniṣads*. However, this solution has its own costs, since it demands a strict form of ascetism, which revives the opposition and separation between the sage and the rest of the community. This separation can be reconciled, but once again only at the price of foregoing the direct experience of mystical union with the eternal in the name of devotion and orthopraxis. Trying to move away from the paradox of mastery ultimately brings us back to it.

## 6.2 Intransitive experience

The *Upaniṣads* are collection of texts, sometimes in verse but often in prose, closely associated with the *Vedas*, and often referred to as *Vedānta* ('the end of *Vedas*,’ indicating that they close the *Vedas*, or that they indicate their intended goal). Although dating these works is difficult, and their compilation extends over many centuries, Western scholars usually accept that some of the oldest *Upaniṣads* (like the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*) are likely to have been composed in the seventh or sixth century BCE. Nonetheless, the composition of the *Upaniṣads* continued for a much longer period. Scholars singled out a narrow group of twelve ‘classical’ *Upaniṣads* that were composed until the third or second centuries BCE. But various sects and groups produced new *Upaniṣads* almost up to the modern period, and this extended group consists of 108 texts. For present purposes, we shall focus on the older classical texts.

The classical *Upaniṣads* are included among the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Āraṇyakas* collections preserved by different schools of reciters of the *Vedas*. The *Brāhmaṇas* are collections aimed at elucidating the meanings and performances of rituals, often including speculations about their interpretation. *Āraṇyakas* offer similar materials, although more closely addressed to forest-dwellers intent at cultivating a more ascetic life. The *Upaniṣads* arise out of these reflections and are often conceived as a way of developing a more internalized and spiritualized interpretation of Vedic rituals, in which physical acts and performances are interpreted in an increasingly subtle way and potentially replaced by appropriate cognitive performances.

There is clearly both a large degree of continuity and discontinuity between the *Upaniṣads* and the earlier Vedic scriptures. The very term *upaniṣad* means ‘connection’ and mostly indicates a secret or hidden connection between apparently different elements, which the author or authors of the text aim to disclose. In taking this approach, the *Upaniṣads* build upon and develop the principle of homology that is already at play in the older hymns of the *Ṛg-veda*, while also steering it towards a broader and more abstract cosmological and ontological view.<sup>63</sup>

•• 63 For an overview of several paradigms in which this idea is spelled out, see Joel Brereton, ‘The Upanishads’ (1990). Brereton focuses on five paradigms in particular: ‘(1) the correlation of different

From the point of view of our current discussion, we could account for both continuity and discontinuity by saying that the *Upaniṣads* include an attempt to provide a different solution to the paradox of mastery, based on a shift from the content of visionary experience to the cognitive quality of that experience, which is identified in a discovery of the fundamental unity that underpins all experience in general. My experience is different from your experience or from the experience of another animal because of *what* we experience. At a more basic level, though, the fact *that* we all experience something is the same for all those who are open to experience. If we thus put anything that pertains to content aside, we shall also put aside all possible ways of discerning between ‘me’ and ‘you’ and ‘others.’ What remains is absolute unity, which is necessarily eternal, unchanging, and completely free from uncertainty.

The *Upaniṣads* often repeats that *brahman* is *ātman*. Older seers conceived of *brahman* as the vital breath, which is both sound and word, both meaning and vision, through which they both received and articulated their visionary insight. *Brahman* is thus reality in its disclosure, the very fact that there is an experience of reality. The term does not occur frequently in the older hymns, but in the *Upaniṣads* it indicates the essence of an individual, which might be identified in physical terms. This essence is in turn regarded as the same in all beings. Everything is one in *brahman*, and because of this universal unity, the notion also takes on a cosmological dimension. The meaning of *ātman* is not fixed, and in different texts it seems to come closer to either bodily or cognitive elements. Sometimes bodily and cognitive dimensions merge in identifying *ātman* with the vital breath, which is considered both a bodily energetic aspect that keeps the individual alive, and the source of intelligence and cognition (see e.g. *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*, III, transl. Olivelle 1996, 215-220). From a grammatical point of view, *ātman* can also function as a first-person reflective pronoun, meaning ‘self.’ Searching for *ātman*, I search for myself. The equation between

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aspects of reality to one another; (2) the emergence of the world from a single reality and its resolution back into it; (3) a hierarchy which leads ultimately to the foundation of all things; (4) a paradoxical coincidence of things which are ordinarily understood to exclude or oppose one another; and (5) a cycle which encompasses the processes of life and the world.’ For a perhaps more philosophical treatment of the same topic, see also Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of the Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology* (2006), chapter 1.



*brahman* and *ātman* might be translated as follows: the fact *that* there is experience (*brahman*), *this* is what I am (*ātman*). However, the *Upaniṣads* do not proclaim this equation in a dogmatic way, but rather present it as a topic for investigation, and its actual meaning as something to be discovered through disciplined reflections and practices.

One way of establishing the equation between *brahman* and *ātman* consists in searching for an ultimate principle that underpins all experience and eventually finding that one always reaches the same point. Let us begin from the side of *brahman*.

In *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II.1-3 we encounter a dialogue between Ajātaśatru, king of Kāśi,<sup>64</sup> and a brahmin, named Dṛpta-Bālāki. Ajātaśatru quickly takes the lead in showing what the real nature of *brahman* is. His interlocutor begins by pointing out several cosmic elements (the sun, the moon, the lightning and so forth) that he takes to be *brahman*. In each case, Ajātaśatru replies that he does not venerate that entity as *brahman*. The interlocutor then shifts to personal elements (a reflection in the mirror, sound, hearing, shadow, the body), and again Ajātaśatru states that *brahman* cannot truly be identified with any of these aspects.

At this point, Ajātaśatru introduces his own view by discussing the case of sleep and dreamless sleep, which is also based on a certain physiological account of what happens to vital functions in these states. The upshot is that during dreamless sleep, the conscious principle within a person is no longer aware of any object (neither external sensory inputs, nor internally produced dreamlike images). In that state, the person is still alive, but their life is detached from any sort of positive characteristic, action, or quality. This is interpreted as pointing towards a completely non-differentiated principle, which cannot be removed without destroying life altogether, and yet which is not identical with any phenomenal feature of life. This inner non-differentiated core is the true

•• 64 The kingdom of Kāśi (or Kashi) is one of the ancient kingdoms of India, located in the North-East of the subcontinent. Its capital is Varanasi, on the Ganges. Even today, the city remains one of the most important religious centers of India. In ancient times, Kashi was renowned for the production of precious goods, including cotton and silks fabrics. For instance, to express his sophistication and taste for luxury when he was young, the Buddha mentions that he used only wood, cloths, and garments from Kashi (AN 3.39). Varanasi (also known as Benares) is the place where the Buddha is traditionally recorded having delivered his first public speech (SN 56.11)

*brahman*. In the end of their conversation, Ajātaśatru reiterates this point with the formula *néti néti* (literally ‘not ..., not ...’), meaning that *brahman* can be known only indirectly by progressively moving beyond any degree of differentiation and diversity.

Let us now take the side of *ātman*. Just after this dialogue (II.4), the *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad* introduces a different exchange, this time between the brahmin sage Yājñavalkya and his wife, Maitreyī. Yājñavalkya invites Maitreyī to concentrate on the self (*ātman*) as the means to gain ultimate knowledge. All phenomenal realities in their diversity (here mentioned as priestly power, royal power, worlds, gods, beings, and the Whole itself) are nothing but this same self. To illustrate this point, Yājñavalkya offers a series of similes, in which the self is introduced as the point of convergence for the diversity of phenomenal reality. The result is that the self plays a function analogous to that of *brahman* in the previous dialogue.

One might be tempted to interpret *brahman* as an ontological principle, and *ātman* as something more akin to a sentient principle (like a soul, or a consciousness). However, the *Upaniṣads* do not support this dichotomy. On the one hand, any ultimate ontological principle is conceived as endowed with a certain form of sentience and consciousness, hence it cannot be interpreted or even experienced as purely inert and unaware universal ‘stuff.’ On the other hand, the true nature of sentiency is not to perceive this or that object, but simply to be percipient in an intransitive way. Intransitive consciousness is thus the point where *brahman* and *ātman* meet because it is a reality that entails a conscious presence (and not sheer ontological presence), but this consciousness is not shaped or qualified through any further differentiation nor aims at knowing anything (hence it cannot be individualized as my personal consciousness nor belonging to someone else in particular).

Continuing with his explanation to Maitreyī, Yājñavalkya outlines the seemingly non-sentient nature of the self (which is also a point made by Ajātaśatru by comparing the experience of *brahman* with the state of dreamless sleep):

‘In the same way this Immense Being has no limit or boundary and is a single mass of perception. It arises out of and together with these beings and disappears after them—so I say, after death there is no awareness.’

After Yājñavalkya said this, Maitreyī exclaimed: ‘Now, sir, you have totally confused me by saying ‘after death there is no awareness.’ He replied:

‘Look, I haven’t said anything confusing; this body, you see, has the capacity to perceive. For when there is a duality of some kind, then the one can smell the other, the one can see the other, the one can hear the other, the one can greet the other, the one can think of the other, and the one can perceive the other. When, however, the Whole has become one’s very self (*ātman*), then who is there for one to smell and by what means? Who is there for one to see and by what means? Who is there for one to hear and by what means? Who is there for one to greet and by what means? Who is there for one to think of and by what means? Who is there for one to perceive and by what means?’

By what means can one perceive him by means of whom one perceives this whole world? Look—by what means can one perceive the perceiver?’ (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* II.4, transl. Olivelle 1996, 30)

The self is a perceiving principle, but this principle is intransitive in its essence, it does not have an object, nor should it have one. In this respect, the self is akin to dreamless consciousness. However, Yājñavalkya also suggests that after the breaking up of the body (and assuming that there is no further rebirth), this consciousness is not percipient of any particular object. Perception of various sensory objects depends on the bodily framework and its diversity. When this framework no longer exists, the perception of diversity ends. Maitreyī’s puzzlement arguably arises from the fact that she interprets this point as entailing that awareness ceases with death, *because* perception of diversity ceases. But Yājñavalkya’s clarification shows that what ceases with death is this perception of diversity or (as the later *Advaita* school would say) *duality* between cognizing and cognized. The self is what allows for the cognition of objects but does not depend on any specific object. Hence, when objects are no longer reachable through the senses (because of death, but also as happens during dreamless sleep), the self somehow returns to its original intransitive condition. This sheds light on the sort of consciousness that is identified as *brahman*: a non-dual or intransitive consciousness, which cognizes nothing because in it there is no distinction between consciousness and object, and hence no ‘thing’ or ‘object’ to be cognized.

Intransitive non-dual consciousness is one way *brahman* and *ātman* are identified, equated, and singled out as the ultimate non-differentiated reality. This view is also spelled out in several cosmogonic accounts, in which the phenomenal world and its diversity are derived from a principle that in the beginning there was no differentiation. For instance, the same *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.1.2 states:

‘In the beginning there was nothing here at all. Death alone covered this completely, as did hunger; for what is hunger but death? Then death made up his mind: ‘Let me equip myself with a body (*ātman*).’ (transl. Olivelle 1996, 7)

A little later (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4), an alternative account is also offered:

‘In the beginning this world was just a single body (*ātman*) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was, ‘Here I am!’ and from that the name ‘I’ came into being.’ (transl. Olivelle 1996, 13)

The chapter continues in a similar pattern that states that in the beginning this world was only *brahman* (I.4.10) and only *ātman* (I.4.17). In each case, differentiation arises out of a non-differentiated original reality, and often due to conative attitudes based on some form of need or desire (roughly in accordance with the Vedic hymn X.129 discussed in Lecture Five).

In a longer episode, the same Yājñavalkya engages in a debate with several other brahmins in front of Janaka, king of Videha.<sup>65</sup> During this debate, Yājñavalkya presents the self as the cognitive agent behind all cognitive faculties, which at the same time is distinct from these faculties: the seer is not seen in the act of seeing, and yet the seer is the real self who does the seeing (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.4). He also goes through a similar negative enumeration

•• 65 Another ancient Indian kingdom, Videha was located in the North-East of the subcontinent (easter than Kashi), partially overlapping with toady’s Bihar and eastern Nepal.

like the one used by Ajātaśatru (III.7) and in a later episode (still presenting Yājñavalkya and king Janaka) he expounds the *néti néti* formula (IV.2.4). On yet another occasion, Yājñavalkya instructs Janaka on the fact that *ātman* is the inner source of ‘light’ or consciousness within a person, which is experienced during waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep. With regard to this last state, Yājñavalkya further clarifies:

‘Now, he does not see anything here; but although he does not see, he is quite capable of seeing, for it is impossible for the seer to lose his capacity to see, for it is indestructible. But there isn’t a second reality here that he could see as something distinct and separate from himself.’ (*Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad* IV.3, transl. Olivelle 1996, 61)

The same idea is iterated for the other sensory faculties, showing that the lack of awareness in dreamless sleep is due to a state of non-duality in which the fundamental cognitive principle (*ātman*) rests in its pristine state of non-differentiation. While remaining capable of perception and cognition, it does not have anything to perceive or cognize, mirroring in this respect the state of the primordial principle before the generation of the phenomenal world.

Yājñavalkya’s teaching might be the source of the view attributed to Ajātaśatru.<sup>66</sup> This teaching seems to be based on a negative mode of abstraction: by progressively removing markers of differentiation from the experience of reality, it is possible to arrive at the intuitive knowledge of some more fundamental and non-differentiated underpinning principle. This principle is then the ground of all differentiated reality, because it lies behind it and cannot be taken away without destroying that whole reality. This latter point is made explicit in *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad* VI with the example of the breath as the most crucial among vital functions (taking into account that breath, *prāṇa*, is also equated with the self).

•• 66 There is a complex social game going on behind these attributions, which has to do with the potential rivalry between the warrior caste of Kings and that of brahmins. One might want to stress that that warrior-Kings derived their superior knowledge from the most instructed brahmins, although not all brahmins are necessarily the wisest; in turn, this might just be a witness of some sort of competition among brahmins to gain the favor of the various kings, or to signal that a doctrine is not strictly orthodox from a brahmin point of view (hence it is attributed to a representative of another caste). For present purposes, we can leave aside this historical controversy.

This view seems to have caused two worries. The first concerns our destiny after death. Dreamless sleep is already close enough to death and, as already pointed out, non-duality does resemble death in a way. What happens to the self after death? The *Upaniṣads* offer two options: either rebirth in the world of the forefathers, or ultimate liberation (e.g. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* VI.2). This twofold scheme is analogous in structure to the view that could plausibly enough be ascribed to the older Vedic hymns, in which one might differentiate between re-death that leads to the world of the forefathers, followed by re-birth among humans, *versus* the path of the seer (anticipated by the gods), who can become *immortal*.

However, we noticed in Lecture Five that the seer's immortality is far from dreamless sleep. The seer's experience is that of vision, and vision entails difference and action. The *Upaniṣads* seem to introduce a different account here, by equating immortality or freedom from rebirth with a *contentless* state; i.e., one that consists of only pure intransitive consciousness. Consider for instance the following statement (*Kena Upaniṣad*, I.2-4):

That which is the hearing behind hearing,  
The thinking behind thinking,  
The speech behind speech,  
The sight behind sight—  
It is also the breathing behind breathing—  
Freed completely from these,  
The wise becomes immortal,  
When they depart from this world.  
Sight does not reach there;  
Neither does thinking or speech.  
We don't know, we can't perceive,  
How one would point it out.  
[...]  
Which one cannot express by speech,  
by which speech itself is expressed—  
Learn that that alone is *brahman*,  
and not what they here venerate. (transl. Olivelle 1996, 227)

These verses show the impossibility of objectifying *brahman*, which is not a content of cognition (a visible object, a thought, and so forth) but *that in virtue of which* cognition can take place. This entails that to know and understand *brahman* one needs to forego any dualist form of cognition, and reach a point of complete intransitiveness, in which awareness is non-dual and no longer turned to any object. In this condition there is no *vision*; and yet, this experience, because of its intransitiveness, is the actual tasting of the true nature of *brahman*. Reaching this experience ensures that one will become immortal after death. But it is also made clear that this form of immortality has little to do with the sort of heroic agency enjoyed by the older Vedic gods and seers. The immortality of *brahman* is empty of any specific content or action, and thus cannot be imagined at all, nor expressed in language. Given these properties, it is also likely that it can be fully experienced only *after* death, since for as long as the self remains connected with the body, some degree of differentiation and duality will be a part of experience.

The impossibility of expressing the real nature of *brahman* through language is perhaps the most striking departure of the *Upaniṣad* from the earlier Vedic view, in which the seer was empowered precisely by his ability to say, to sing, to tell the truth (even if only through riddles). Now words have to fade away completely, and truth can emerge through silence only. Notice that this departure is deliberate and critically emphasized in the last verse quoted above, which entails an explicit denigration of those who content themselves with simply reciting the hymns. This polemic against outward rituals and orthopraxis is recurrent throughout the *Upaniṣads*, and at some point (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, I.1-2, transl. Olivelle 1996, 268-270) it is explicitly framed in terms of a contrast between the sage devoted to a life of renunciation and withdrawal *versus* those devoted to ritual and sacrifice. In this scheme, even the knowledge of the *Vedas* is presented as inferior to the knowledge of *brahman*.

However, despite appearances, the intransitive state of immortality is also repeatedly equated with supreme bliss (cf. e.g. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II.8, transl. Olivelle 1996, 188-189). The cosmological views discussed in this context reinforce the suggestion that it is *desire* that is responsible for bringing forth the world and generating differentiation. Hence, rebirth is dependent upon a desire for being reborn in one's own community, and this desire is what makes one's

condition in the world of the forefathers ultimately temporary. At some point, the deceased one will desire to be reborn again in their community, and will then take a new human body. But the sage, who has tasted in this life the bliss of *brahman*, has extinguished the desire for taking human form and after death will simply go back to *brahman* forever (which lacks any form). The *Upaniṣads* reinterpret the older scheme of rebirth and the possibility of immortality, by now presenting rebirth as a somewhat inferior option available for those who do not really know *brahman*, and rather defending a view of immortality as a mystical union with *brahman* in a perpetual experience of bliss, which is an intransitive experience devoid of any experiential content.

There is also another concern that surfaces at least once: is this state of non-duality actually *desirable*? Can it really be said to be blissful? At the end of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, we encounter the (going to be) god Indra as a student of the creator god Prajāpati, who instructs Indra and others about the true nature of self and *brahman*. Prajāpati's instructions are gradual and very slow. He lets his students ruminate on a certain view until they realize that that view is not entirely tenable, and so are urged to move to something deeper and more accurate. For instance, at some point Indra has a doubt: if the self becomes what the body is, it should also die when the body dies. Prajāpati then further instructs him that the self should be seen as the one who dreams and is not really affected by what happens in dreams. And yet, after some pondering, Indra sees another problem: from the point of view of the self, dreams look real, and the self takes them at face value. Prajāpati takes then Indra one step further, showing that the real self is found in dreamless sleep:

‘When one is fast asleep, totally collected and serene, and sees no dreams—that is the self; that is the immortal; that is the one free from fear; that is *brahman*.’

Indra then left, his heart content. But even before he had reached the gods, he saw this danger: ‘But this self as just explained, you see, does not perceive itself fully as, ‘I am this’; it does not even know any of these beings here. It has become completely annihilated. I see nothing worthwhile in this.’ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.11, transl. Olivelle 1996, 174)



In his reply to this worry, Prajāpati's seems to be bluffing:

‘One who has a body is in the grip of joy and sorrow, and there is no freedom from joy and sorrow for one who has a body. Joy and sorrow, however, do not affect one who has no body. [...] This deeply serene one, after he rises up from this body and reaches the highest light, emerges in his own true appearance. He is the highest person. He roams about there, laughing, playing, and enjoying himself with women, carriages, or relatives, without remembering the appendage that is this body. The lifebreath is yoked to this body, as a draught animal to a cart.’ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.12, transl. Olivelle 1996, 175)

Taking Prajāpati's answer at face value, it means that for as long as the self is yoked to a body, it cannot be truly free from sorrow. Only after death, when the lifebreath is released from the body and merges into its primal element or source, does it become free. At that point, the self realizes its happiness and (surprisingly) becomes again capable of enjoying various heavenly objects.

It is unclear whether Prajāpati's answer *should* be taken at face value. Perhaps it provides only the best possible answer addressed to someone like Indra, who is still not able to understand how non-duality would differ from a sheer annihilation of experience. From this point of view, Prajāpati simply states that there is nothing to fear in that condition, and that it will be supremely enjoyable *as if* one would enjoy heavenly objects.

In summary, it can be said that the view that emerges from several of the older *Upaniṣads* is that beyond all phenomenal differences it is possible to identify one unique ontological principle, not differentiated in itself, and yet equally present and common to all reality. This is also the very same principle that underpins all cognitive processes, although it does not have any specific object of cognition. Being non-dual in itself, when bodily cognitive structures are removed, this principle remains non-cognizant, like a person in deep dreamless sleep. Despite appearances, this condition should be regarded as blissful. Several sages in the *Upaniṣads* back up this view with the analogy of the stages of consciousness during waking and dreaming states, and tend to connect it with physiological considerations. However, it would be problematic to claim that

this view is somehow derived as a generalization from these considerations alone. More likely, the sages based their teaching on a specific method of contemplation. After all, since Vedic time, *brahman* is closely associated with a form of mental discipline that yields insight into reality, and the *Upaniṣads* seem to assert that this insight has to do with the fundamentally unitarian principle behind all reality. It is time to look more closely at the sort of practice that might have formed the experiential background of these claims.

### 6.3 The yoga of contemplation

A core teaching of several classical *Upaniṣads* points towards a form of intransitive experience as the manifestation of an all-encompassing and absolutely unitary ultimate reality. This sort of experience can be compared with states of dreamless sleep, but it can also be deliberately cultivated through methodic practice (*yoga*).

The *Kāṭha Upaniṣad* starts with a moving dialogue between a young brahmin, Naciketas and Death itself (the Vedic Yama).<sup>67</sup> Death grants Naciketas three wishes, and as the third one, he asks Death to explain what happens to a human being after the body dies. Death is reluctant to answer and tries to offer Naciketas all sorts of other alternative prizes and riches. But the young brahmin is steadfast in his request and eventually Death has to teach him the truth:

Satisfying desires is the foundation of the world;  
Uninterrupted rites bring ultimate security;  
Great and widespread praise is the foundation—  
These you have seen, wise Naciketas,  
and having seen, firmly rejected.  
The primeval one who is hard to perceive,  
wrapped in mystery, hidden in the cave,  
residing within th'imperishable depth—

•• 67 A Vedic precedent for this dialogue might be found in *The Rig Veda*, X.135, transl. Doniger 1981, 55-56.

Regarding him as god, an insight  
 gained by inner contemplation,  
 both sorrow and joy the wise abandon.  
 (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.11-12, transl. Olivelle 1996, 236)

Satisfying desires, holding on to rituals, and seeking fame are commonly sought goods, but they do not lead to the imperishable. The now familiar trope of *brahman* as the one who cannot be found among the contents of experience is thus restated, and Death stresses that this insight leads to an overcoming of both joy and sorrow, *and* it is gained through ‘inner contemplation.’<sup>68</sup> What does this sort of contemplation entail?

The answer comes a bit later in the same *Upaniṣad*. The general idea has to do with a deliberate and methodical control of the senses aimed at withdrawing attention from sensory stimulations. Using the metaphor of the chariot, the wise is compared with the one who holds firmly onto the reins (the mind) and controls the horses (the senses):

A wise man should curb his speech and mind,  
 control them within th’intelligent self;  
 he should control intelligence within the immense self,  
 and the latter, within the tranquil self.  
 (*Kaṭha Upaniṣads*, III.13, transl. Olivelle 1996, 239-240)

Putting the senses at rest (inducing an-aesthesia, non-perceiving) is a way of drawing attention inward. The true self is the one who cognizes, but in the ordinary process of cognition, the object is situated at the foreground. In order to know the true self, this ordinary scheme must be reverted, the object dismissed, so that the pure knowing could shine. Anaesthesia is thus necessary in order to fully turn the gaze of one’s attention inward (*Kaṭha Upaniṣads* IV.1, transl. Olivelle 1996, 240). And this is the sort of *yoga* that leads to discover *brahman*:

•• 68 The Sanskrit reads *adhyātma-yogādhiḡamena*, literally: ‘be means of (instrumental case) mastering (*adhigā*) the practice (*yoga*) about the (*adhy-*) self (*ātma*).’

When the five perceptions are stilled,  
together with the mind,  
And not even reason bestirs itself;  
they call it the highest state.  
When senses are firmly reined in,  
that is Yoga, so people think.  
From distractions a man is then free,  
for Yoga is the coming-into-being,  
as well as the ceasing-to-be.

(*Kaṭha Upaniṣads*, VI.10-11, transl. Olivelle 1996, 246)

These passages refer to a precise practice (*yoga*) of disciplining cognitive activities, through which sensible stimulations and thoughts are completely stilled and the meditator somehow withdraws from the external world. In fact, this is not dissimilar to what happens in the process of falling asleep, when the cognitive process becomes increasingly more introvert and insensitive to external stimulations, until (in dreamless sleep) any dual cognition ceases altogether.

Sometimes this withdrawal is achieved by a sustained (most likely inner) repetition of the sacred syllable *Om*. A substantial portion of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is devoted to extolling and reflecting on the deeper meaning of this sacred syllable. In the *Praśna Upaniṣad* (VI.7), it is stated that: ‘by OM alone as the support / Does a man who knows it attain / that which is serene, beyond old age and death, free from fear, the supreme’ (transl. Olivelle 1996, 286). And the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (I.14) iterates: ‘when one makes one’s own body the bottom slab and the syllable OM the upper drill, by twirling it constantly through meditation one would see God, just as one would the hidden thing’ (transl. Olivelle 1996, 254). In the same *Upaniṣad*, this practice is also connected with the calming of the breathing process:

When he keeps his body straight, with the three sections erect, and draws the senses together with the mind into his heart, a wise man shall cross all the frightful rivers with the boat consisting of that formulation (*brahman*).

Compressing his breaths in here and curbing his movements, a man should exhale through one nostril when his breath is exhausted. A wise man

should keep his mind vigilantly under control, just as he would that wagon yoked to unruly horses.

Level and clean; free of gravel, fire, and sand; near noiseless running waters and the like; pleasing to the mind but not offensive to the eye; provided with a cave or a nook sheltered from the wind—in such a spot should one engage in yogic practice.

Mist, smoke, sun, wind, fire, fireflies, lightning, crystal, moon—these are the apparitions that, within yogic practice, precede and pave the way to the full manifestation in brahman. (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, II.8-11, transl. Olivelle 1996, 255-256)

Notice that breathing is usually regarded as a vital function deeply connected with speech and visualization. Originating in Vedic times, *brahman* is the act of uttering sacred hymns that through their sound visualize and craft reality. Hence, the practice described here is more than simply ‘breath meditation’ conceived as a purely physical discipline, although manipulation of the coarser and physical manifestation of the breath is part of the practice. By disciplining and controlling the breath, one actively takes control of any cognitive activity as well, directing it towards its ultimate ground. The passage just quoted also mentions that after having found a suitable secluded spot and established a proper bodily posture, concentration on *brahman* (including a form of breath control) leads first to a number of seemingly scattered visions (‘mist, smoke, sun, wind, fire, fireflies, lightning, crystal, moon’), which in later traditions (including the Buddhist commentarial tradition) are sometimes mentioned in meditation manuals as the ‘sign’ (Pāli *nimitta*) that concentration is deepening. They seem analogous to the sort of scattered images that characterize the hypnagogic state. This phase is then followed by what might be called ‘absorption,’ in which external sensory stimulations are discarded and cognition is unified by ‘the full manifestation in brahman.’

The opening of the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* names these practices ‘*dhyāna yoga*,’ which can be translated as the ‘method of contemplation’ or ‘discipline of meditation:’ ‘those who follow the discipline of meditation have seen God, the self, and the power, all hidden by their own qualities’ (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, I.3, transl. Olivelle 1996, 253). However, one might also interpret *yoga* more

literally as the act of yoking something to something else, and *dhyana* as the activity of clearly knowing a certain reality. Hence, *dhyāna yoga* is the action of yoking oneself to the activity of knowing as such, which can be understood as a refinement and stabilization of attention on the nature and quality of conscious experience as such. Instead of looking at this or that particular object, one begins to observe the very activity of knowing objects, and eventually let go of any particular object and remain with the knowing itself.

The text quoted so far might have been composed later than the *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad* or the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. However, we already saw that *brahman* can be connected with meditation practice since the composition of the Vedic hymns themselves, and the core focuses of practice mentioned so far (the sacred syllable or the vital breath) are pervasive elements throughout the *Vedas*. In this sense, later *Upaniṣads* seems to make slightly more explicit the sort of meditative training that likely underpinned earlier teachings as well. What does change, however, is that in earlier times, the seer sought these methods as devices to excite *vision*, which by its very nature is manifold and diverse, and unfolding in a narrative. On the contrary, the sage in the *Upaniṣads* exploits the potentially *anesthetic* function of these methods of concentration in order to withdraw from sensory perception and eventually reach a state of intransitive awareness. This is adumbrated in the remark mentioned above: visions might arise at some point as a result of practice, but they are now interpreted as just preliminary signs of a deepening of concentration; one should not get distracted by visions. Instead, one should focus on practice, so that concentration can deepen even further and visions can ultimately fade away. We can thus spell out the divide on this issue between older *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads* in terms of a shift from a poietic practice in which trance is used to excite vision, to a stilling practice in which trance is used for the sake of anaesthetizing the perception of diversity and thus uncovering the more fundamental absolute unity that underpins it.

It might be interesting to stress the connection already emerged between this sort of anaesthetic trance and a death-like state. The idea of engaging in this practice (aimed at a rather extreme form of concentration, akin to dreamless sleep) might have well arisen out of the idea of finding out what death really is, or how it feels like. This concern resurfaces throughout the *Vedas*,

older and newer (cf. for instance *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*). Anticipating the process of dying in meditation is a practice that is still part of various traditions.<sup>69</sup> While some ordinary people might be horrified at even the thought of deliberately playing with death in this way, this might not have been the case for experienced *yogi*. We also saw that in shamanic cultures (Lecture Three), death is often presented as a key turning point in the process of initiation to shamanic or possession rituals, and adepts are somehow resuscitated from death. In extreme forms of meditation, the state of composure reached by the practitioner makes the body look like as if it was dead. The ability to enter and exit this state at will might thus have been regarded as a significant achievement of extremely proficient *yogis*, who could then use it to claim their superior knowledge about the nature of death, life, and consciousness.

The *Upaniṣads* are esoteric teachings, which are not aimed at publicly divulging their secret methods. Nevertheless, we can recover some further indirect information about the sort of meditative practice that underpinned the *Upaniṣads* from the early discourses of the Buddha, which date back to the fifth or fourth century BCE and are thus close in composition to the classical *Upaniṣads*. Although we shall discuss the Buddha's own views only in lectures Twelve and Thirteen, we can (even at this point) anticipate that the Buddha not only grew in close contact with the Vedic culture of his time, but he also spent some time with teachers that can be connected with the *Upaniṣads*. In one account of his own path to awakening (MN 26), the Buddha describes the meditation methods practiced under these teachers as aimed at the 'domain of no-thing' and the 'domain of neither perception nor non-perception.' Leaving details aside, both these meditative attainments are classified as belonging to the 'formless' realms of experience, in which all empirical and sensory objects have been left behind and cognition first relinquishes any positive object (domain of no-thing) and then goes even further, to the point that it becomes impossible to establish whether one is cognizant or not (neither perception nor non-perception). Regardless of the Buddha's interpretation of these meditative states, their description matches with the sort of states that are pointed to in the *Upaniṣads* and that seem likely to underpin their overall worldview. Both these states can be compared with dreamless

•• 69 See for further details Thompson's *Dream, Waking, Dreaming, Being* (2015), chapter 9.

sleep, and in both of them experience is completely emptied of sensible contents, so that there is nothing there to be cognized.

Alexander Wynne, in his *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (2007) (especially chapters 3 and 4) has carefully analyzed the relevant textual sources on this point. He shows that early Brahminic meditation is very much connected with the sort of views defended in the *Upaniṣads* and matches the cosmology that arises from them. In this cosmology, an original non-dualist principle (*brahman*) is posited at the beginning of any phenomenal differentiation. Liberation can be achieved by yogis that manage to reverse the process of creation by re-ascending towards the original principle. This is done through sustained concentration on progressively more refined objects. One common list consists of six objects: earth, water, fire, wind, space, consciousness. These objects are taken in their macrocosmic meaning and experienced as boundless realities. Moving from one to the next, the content of experience becomes increasingly more refined and emptier, until one leaps into a sort of intransitive or non-dual consciousness, where there is no more any differentiation between the cognizing subject and the object cognized. This state is akin to deep dreamless sleep, and it is interpreted as the expression of the original condition of *brahman*, hence, the landmark of liberation. Interestingly, brahmin sources show debate and disagreement about the exact interpretation of this ultimate state: whether it is an utter cessation of any cognitive process, or rather the absence of any objectification. This might be reflected in the different names given to this state by the two teachers encountered by the Buddha, who taught ‘no-thing-ness’ (absence of any positive object), or ‘neither perception nor non perception’ (acquiescence of cognitive functions) as the nature of the ultimate goal.

#### 6.4 Socializing ascetism

In the classical *Upaniṣads* we see the emergence of a new model of the sage. Unlike the older (almost archaic) seer of the *R̥g-veda*, this sage does not seek to master uncertainty through a visionary power and its accompanying sense of certainty and trust. Rather, the sage now aims at uncovering the principle in virtue of which all experience is possible. This principle is itself undetermined, free from any specific content, and consequently cannot be objectified or iden-



tified in any specific way. The true Self (*ātman*) is neither me, nor you, nor they, it is a universal, eternal, unchanging witness of all that happens. This true Self is the same across the whole of reality, it exists in all beings, it cannot be differentiated because it comes before any difference. It is pure unity, non-dual or intransitive awareness. Being free from difference, it is free from becoming, and hence also beyond action and time. The true Self is eternal, and thus it is beyond any possible form of uncertainty. The path to discovering this true Self is a disciplined process of withdrawal from the senses (the main provider of experiential differentiation) and the deliberate induction of a state akin to dreamless sleep, or perhaps even death. The true Self can be found only by turning inward. In contrast with the poetic practice of the seer based on visionary trance, the sage in the *Upaniṣads* resorts to anesthetic trance.

The true Self is beyond individuality, embodiment, and consociation. It is universal and unaffected by differences, including social differences. But since the true Self can be accessed, experienced and enjoyed only insofar as the ordinary, empirical self is discarded, the sort of solution provided by the true Self brings its own paradox, since full mastery of uncertainty (the purpose of the empirical self) can now be achieved only by foregoing the empirical self. One can become a real master of uncertainty only by ceasing to be an individual, specific, personal self, and merging into the non-dual, all-embracing ultimate reality. If uncertainty can be mastered by the empirical self only by forfeiting on its own empirical nature, then this solution is *sui generis*, since it might also be interpreted as entailing that the empirical self, insofar as it remains such, *cannot* achieve full mastery. Seeking the true Self is a way of admitting that uncertainty cannot be escaped by those who remain in the world of becoming (which includes the worlds through which the cycle of rebirth connects present, past, and future generations). Certainty is found only by going *beyond* the world. The soteriological ideal of the *Upaniṣads* has radical and potentially disruptive implications for ordinary consociation.

By the end of Lecture Five we noticed how the older Vedic seer had to face a potential conflict between his own visionary power and the communal background from which that power both arose and escaped. One way the seer can resolve this tension is by ‘becoming immortal,’ which entails putting himself at a distance from the rest of the community, like a god. However, gods are still

actively involved with the life of the community. The sage of the *Upaniṣads*, by seeking and realizing the true Self, becomes independent from the community, but his practice also inevitably devalues the foundations of social bonds, potentially challenging the meaningfulness of social life itself and of its order.

To appreciate this point, we can observe how the problems of ascetism and renunciation of ordinary life have been treated between the period of the older *Upaniṣads* up to the beginning of the common era. Patrick Olivelle, in his *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution* (1993), charted in detail some key aspects of this issue.

In the early Brāhmaṇical literature, the term *śramaṇa* (Pāli *samaṇa*, literally ‘one who strives’)

is used predominantly in an adjectival sense to describe a special way of life of certain seers, although the literature does not provide details of that life. It is reasonable to assume, however, that this mode of life was considered in some way extraordinary and that it incorporated the ritual exertions. [...] The term in its use in the Brahmanical documents, however, implies no opposition to either Brahmins or householders; in all likelihood it did not refer to an identifiable class of people, much less to ascetic groups as it does in later literature. (Olivelle 1993, 15-16)

The idea of ritual exertion and striving (*tapas*) is pervasive in the *Ṛg-veda*, and rituals often require preparation, which can include various practices meant to predispose or purify the officiant. Devoting oneself to ritual exertions does not entail taking up an ascetic life because the former are somewhat temporary commitments while the latter is a life-long resolution. In the world of the *Ṛg-veda*, the householder (the chief of an extended family group, equivalent to the Latin *paterfamilias*) is the main actor. The life of the householder is based on performing rituals, procreating, and providing for the family (understood as an extended kin). Innumerable hymns praise this ideal and invoke the support of the gods for ensuring its thriving. Household life naturally entails ownership of material goods and people. Moreover, being a householder and being able to perform rituals requires being officially married and sexually active. This state is often preceded by a period of training, in which the boy leaves his fam-

ily, and lives as a celibate student with a teacher, who instructs him in the *Vēdas* and in how to become a good householder himself upon his return at home.

The ideal sage of the *Upaniṣads*, however, breaks with this model.<sup>70</sup> Anesthetic trance detaches him from sensual pleasures (including sex) and attachments (family, sons, wife, house, cattle, possessions, pleasures), since he knows another way of achieving supreme bliss.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, anesthetic trance is at odds with active engagement, not only in the world, but also with rituals, which are thus devalued. Celibacy and anti-ritualism go together, and they both stand in sharp contrast with the traditional model of the householder.<sup>72</sup> If in early times the *śramaṇa* might have been just a seer particularly devoted to cultivating visionary power through ritual exertion, around the sixth century BCE, the terms come to refer to a diverse range of individuals and groups who start to renounce the household life and live at the borders of society. Many of them lived as hermits or as homeless wanderers. These groups are sometimes openly critical of the brahmin way of life (like the Buddhist and the Jains), but Olivelle's discussion shows that they are not a purely exogenous phenomenon. The *śramaṇa* movement is rooted in the internal and multifarious development of brahmin thought and practices.<sup>73</sup>

•• 70 With an important qualification. The *Upaniṣads* are composite and heavily edited texts, often assembled by joining various components, which might come from different sources and periods. In their heterogeneity, thus, it is not surprising to see even the oldest *Upaniṣads*, like in the last chapters of the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, illustrate the duty of a householder of having sex with his wife and various rituals to affect conception.

71 And yet it is interesting to note that, on one occasion, supreme bliss is compared with orgasmic pleasure: 'He rests there oblivious to everything, just as a young man, a great king, or an eminent Brahmin remains oblivious to everything at the height of sexual bliss' (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* II.1, transl. Olivelle 1996, 26).

72 In later developments, some Indian schools (especially the Advaita, around the ninth century CE) developed this tendency by presenting the liberated sage as someone utterly above and beyond all social and legal rules, hence licensing a number of apparently odd behaviors. See discussion in Olivelle 1993, 222-232. Something analogous is also a trope discussed in Hellenistic philosophy, especially stoicism, cf. Michael Foucault, *On the Government of the Living* (2012), lecture 8, especially pp. 176-187.

73 A clash between theory and practice in these views on soteriological liberation concerns the universalist model conceived in theory, and a number of exclusivist social restrictions that apply in practice to those who can actually pursue and embody that model. There is evidence of both male and female ascetics coming from all of the Arya classes (brahmins, warriors, commoners), barring the fourth (the servants). Since in pursuing the true Self one transcends all individuality, even this exclusion is already a bit suspicious. However, as time went by, theologians reached almost unanimous consensus on the norm that the only acceptable way of life for a woman was that of wife-mother, and in even later times, discussions hints at the idea that only Brahmin males are qualified to pursue an ascetic life. See discussion in Olivelle 1993, 183-201.

This development required negotiation. Already within the *Brāhmaṇas* (the commentarial texts devoted to explaining the performance and meaning of the sacrificial rituals), it is possible to observe a strong emphasis on the importance of marriage and procreation. Only a married male with his legitimate wife can be a legitimate officer of a Vedic ritual. This central social aspect receives eschatological overtones. As Olivelle notices:

The vedic conceptions of immortality as freedom from death and of the family as the true and complete person are reflected in the belief that a man's immortality is found in his son. The family line continues in the son despite the death of the father; the son inherits the paternal estate and replaces the father as the ritual and economic head of the family. As the son survives after the father's death, so the father in his son survives his own death. This appears to be the meaning of the statement that a father is born again in his son. This new birth frees him from the death that must eventually end the life begun at his first birth. In a very significant way, therefore, the family is what guarantees human immortality. (Olivelle 1993, 43)

It would be quite puzzling to assume (as Olivelle seems to suggest) that this sort of immortality through procreation is all that was literally at stake for the older Vedic seers. As discussed in Lecture Five, the seer's own immortality was connected to their becoming a god and hence dropping outside the cycle of rebirth and re-death. Begetting children does exactly the opposite. Immortality through rebirth is also inconsistent with rebirth conceived through procreation, given that in this case father and son exist simultaneously. Moreover, if the father could be reborn in the living son, then there would be no world of the forefathers, since they would have all been reborn in their descendants as well. Even if the Vedic texts might not be crystal clear on their views on rebirth, reducing immortality and (or) rebirth to physical procreation seems to entail a number of obvious puzzles that would jeopardize the whole system. More likely, then, we can assume that this sort of immortality achieved through procreation is meant in a looser, perhaps more metaphorical sense, although this does not diminish its importance. On the contrary, the very idea of elevating procreation to a way of achieving immortality seems a strong rhetorical

weapon to defend the need of marriage and sexual activity as essential for achieving a soteriological goal in a period when competing and opposed soteriological views were emerging.

This new soteriological view boils down to a contrast between household life and celibate life. To reinforce this contrast, theologians developed the idea that all men come to life with debts, which are often spelled out as debts towards the ancient seers, their forefathers, and the gods. Debts are repaid by fulfilling the duties of studentship, household life, and sacrifice, respectively (Olivelle 1993, 46-53). In this scheme, it becomes clear that the pillars of the traditional community (traditional knowledge, ancestors, and ritual practices) are seen as something that possesses valid claims over new-born individuals, and it is accepted that the individual ought to comply with them before being entitled to taking any other decision, including choosing to live a celibate life. Renunciation is seen as a threat to the stability and survival of the community since it emancipates the individual to the point that he will no longer contribute to the biological and symbolic continuity of the social infrastructure. One strategy for facing this challenge is to subordinate the freedom to renounce to the condition of having first absolved one's debts towards the community, which means having first passed through household life.

Olivelle discusses a number of socio-economical changes that take place around the sixth century BCE in north India and that might have supported this clash of views. The emergence of new larger political bodies (kingdoms) was germane to a 'second urbanization' (the first one occurred during the period of the Indus Valley civilization, in the third millennium BCE), established a wide network of communication roads, and was accompanied by a sufficient surplus to allow some members of the community to survive on alms food without working. However, the connection between these socio-economic transformations and the actual symbolic and conceptual contents of the new ascetic ideal do not seem to match well.<sup>74</sup> The ascetic ideal is provided by the adult male who *renounces* his wealth and comfort to live in the forest or become

•• 74 Explaining symbolic transformations by appealing to changes in material conditions betrays a materialist interpretation analogous to that already exposed by Cauvin and discussed in Lecture Three.

a homeless wanderer, the very opposite of what urban brahmins or emerging merchants usually do.

Be that as it may, Olivelle convincingly argues that the new soteriological ascetic ideal was not something extraneous, but was supported by certain groups of brahmins who were also the authors of the *Upaniṣads*, in which it first surfaces. The problem, though, is that the ascetic ideal seems to be directly opposite to the traditional one of the householder, and thus challenges the established orthodoxy. To avoid this clash, Olivelle suggests that, around the fifth century BCE, more ‘liberal’ (Olivelle 1996, 96) brahmins introduced what is known as the *āśrama* system.

In its earlier form, the system encompasses four lifestyles: householder, life-long student, hermit, and ascetic wanderer. This scheme should be regarded primarily as a normative model rather than as an actual descriptive account of the historical social reality, although it eventually had an impact on how social life was shaped. In this scheme, once the young boy has accomplished his studies and has returned to his parents’ home, he is given the option of choosing freely one among the four ways of life. Except for the householder, the other three options entail celibacy: the life-long student would live with a teacher, the hermit typically alone in the forest (although this was no longer clear in later times), while the ascetic would be a homeless wanderer.

This scheme can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it seeks to establish an equal dignity and value for conflicting ways of life, asserting that they all lead to the same ultimate goal. On the other hand, it invites comparisons and hierarchies. Olivelle shows that the earliest sources that discuss this system tend to keep the household life as the best among the four and as the most traditional and conservative solution. At the same time, the progressive acceptance of this fourfold scheme contributed to the normalization of the idea of ascetic life as one option within the traditional Brahminical world. But the issue was not settled and the tension between the conflicting ideals that the *āśrama* system tries to harmonize kept evolving.

While there is a tendency to accept the ideal of renunciation, this comes at the cost of assimilating it with the institutions of old age. The custom that old parents could retire before death, allowing their sons to inherit and partition the father’s estate, was progressively merged with the idea that retirement in

old age was the ideal stage for devoting oneself to hermitage and renunciation. But making renunciation an old age practice is a way of stressing that the necessary condition for accessing it is first to become a householder and establish a family. Only one who acquired wealth and goods could abandon them. Nevertheless, associating renunciation with old age entails a sort of obligation to undertake the life of a renunciant at some point, by thus making it compulsory for all and no longer a matter of free choice for some.

The historical details of the evolution of the *āśrama* system are complex and we shall skip over them.<sup>75</sup> For present purposes, we can simply note how, by the beginning of the common era, the *āśrama* system enters what Olivelle calls its ‘classical’ formulation, in which the four life-styles are conceived of in a chronological sequence: in young age, one lives as a celibate student, then one gets married and lives the family life of a householder, then, in old age, one becomes a hermit devoted to seclusion and austerity, and eventually one becomes a renunciant. Everyone (or at least Brahmin males—the inclusion of warriors and commoners is less automatic) now has to go through the whole cycle in one life. Actual implementation was significantly more flexible. Just to mention two points: the stage of hermit became progressively obsolete and difficult to discern from the stage of renunciant, and several sources continued to defend the idea that one could remain a household for the entire life, or even become a renunciant at a very early age if the appropriate knowledge and attitude of detachment was robust enough (Olivelle 1993, 173-182).

•• 75 A relatively late group of twenty *Upaniṣads* (called by Western scholars *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*), composed roughly between the third and the twelfth century CE, provide further insights into the development of renunciation and ascetic practices in traditional Indian culture (although mostly associated with the Advaita school). See Patrick Olivelle’s translation: *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (1992). For an interesting comparison between some aspects of Indian asceticism and the Christian Desert Fathers, see Oliver Freiberger, ‘Locating the Ascetic’s Habitat: Towards a Micro-Comparison of Religious Discourses’ (2010), who notices: ‘that the spectrum of an ascetic practice can extend into the nonascetic sphere shows that asceticism is a cultural technique that is located on a continuum in relation to the surrounding cultural context.’ Brian Besong, ‘Virtue and Asceticism’ (2019) elaborates on the philosophical argument that might underpin the undertaking of ascetic practices, not necessarily in religious contexts. He argues that ‘asceticism is reasonable as a means to acquire virtue because it simulates, and allows one to habituate, one of the most difficult aspects of acting rightly: judging and then acting in accord with one’s judgment against internal countervailing pressures’ (Besong 2019, 125).

The *āśrama* system (either in its early, or in its classical form) is not a solution to the paradox of mastery, but rather a way in which this paradox becomes manifest, and is historically acknowledged and managed. Consider the classical formulation of the system with its progression. A progression suggests a sense of teleology, in which earlier stages somehow prepare and lead towards later stages. But it is unclear how household life could *lead*, in a teleological sense, towards renunciation, given that the two conditions are diametrically opposed in terms of the core values they embody, and they were also explicitly perceived to be so. However, if there is no teleological progression, then the idea of including all stages loses its normative justification. One might just remain a householder or become a renunciant (as in the early version of the system). And yet, in this case the problem of the relative value or superiority of one way of life over the other will inevitably resurface in the form of a dilemma, which asks the individual to choose between prioritizing consociation (household life) or (dis)embodiment (the need for individual salvation through ascetism).

### 6.5 A deontological turn

The *āśrama* system shows one way that the conflict between a new soteriological ideal of liberation based on a transcendent mystical union was handled by ancient Indian culture in its attempt at reconciling it with both older models and the broader demands of defending consociation and social life. However, there is at least another important witness of how the paradox of mastery arises and is offered a different solution: the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* is part of one of India's greatest epic poems, the *Mahābhārata*, whose importance is perhaps comparable to that of the Iliad for ancient Greek and Western culture. The text is difficult to date, but it can be located somewhere in the fourth century BCE (while the *Bhārata* war might have happened somewhere around 1500 BCE, and the composition of the whole epic of the *Mahābhārata* may have stretched from the fourth century BCE up to the fourth century CE). In the context of this epic poem, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is an interlude in which prince Arjuna is about to enter the great battle, but he stops because he realizes that in engaging in this war he will be



bound to fight against his own family and people. Kṛṣṇa enters the scene as Arjuna's teacher and counsellor, explaining to him why it is worth engaging in battle. In doing so, Kṛṣṇa shares with Arjuna a profound knowledge about the nature of reality and reveals himself to be the supreme entity behind all phenomena.

Kṛṣṇa's teaching is not just a rehashing of earlier Brahminical thought, although it shares much with it, but seeks to establish a relatively original syncretic view. Part of this synthesis consists in presenting a number of meditation methods (which may have already been established by that time), but also introducing the idea that devotion itself (*bhakti*) might lead to a direct encounter with ultimate reality. This reality is conceived in increasingly more transcendent terms and its complete disclosure to Arjuna leads to an unbearable experience. Building on this view, Kṛṣṇa manages to convince Arjuna to fight, given that his empirical and determinate personality is something secondary with respect to its truer, inner, and universal Self.

Olivelle, in his discussion, advances the following hypothesis:

the *Gīta* never makes clear what sort of a life its ideal human who participates in devotional and ritual activities (*bhaktiyoga* and *karmayoga*) leads. It is never said that he is in fact a householder. The argument of the *Gīta* takes place at a more abstract level. It seeks to show that true renunciation does not consist in the physical abstention from activity but in the proper mental attitude toward action. Abandonment of desire for the results of one's actions is true renunciation, which the *Gīta* sees as an inner virtue rather than an external life style. In other words, the *Gīta* is proposing a more radical solution to the dilemma—the very elimination of the dilemma by a new interpretation of the two horns—than that offered by either formulation of the *āśrama* system. (Olivelle 1993, 105)

To conclude our discussion of how the paradox of mastery surfaces and it is handled by ancient Indian sources, we can take Olivelle's hypothesis a few steps further. In a nutshell, reading the *Bhagavad-Gītā* from the research standpoint of our current discussion, we can detect in it the emergence of a specific strategy to deal with the paradox of mastery, which could be described as 'deonto-

logical' (to use a Western category) and has striking affinities with Western modern views, although it predates them by roughly two millennia.

On the point of going to war, Prince Arjuna looks at the battlefield and discovers that he cannot go further. His doubt is encapsulated in the question: 'how could we be happy, [...] if we slay our own people?' (*Bhagavad-Gītā* I.37, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 89). The narrative setting entails that this question has a literal meaning since Arjuna's enemies are relatives and belong to his (extended) family group. As usual in Indian thought, however, this point can be quickly extended through analogy and metaphor. Taking into account doctrines of rebirth, all other people might have been our relatives in other lives. Arjuna's doubt can thus be universalized as a worry against any form of war and killing, which are crimes against life, and all living beings are bound in kinship. This doubt puts Arjuna, a warrior prince, in a difficult position. Foregoing battle would lead him to betray his social role and duties and embrace some form of renunciation to act. And this choice is very untimely, since Arjuna at this point is already in the battlefield when the fight is about to begin.

In the ensuing dialogue, which is a sort of bracketing parenthesis running alongside the main epic narration, Kṛṣṇa attempts to convince Arjuna that he must go and fight and not be worried by the consequences of this decision. A pacifist spirit might be troubled by this plea for fight, and hence the dialogue has been often interpreted metaphorically, treating Arjuna's fight as a fight against inner drives, forces, obstacles, and so on. This metaphorical reading might be granted, but it should not be taken to the point of dismissing the more literal dimension entailed by Arjuna's dilemma (an actual fight against other living beings, ending with the death of many), under pain of emptying it from its existential cogency.

Kṛṣṇa begins his case by evoking a view that we have encountered already:

Of the nonexistent (*asat*) there is no coming-into-being; of the existent (*sat*) there is no disappearance. Moreover, the end of both is seen by the seers-of-Reality.

Yet, know as indestructible that by which this entire [world] is spread out. No one is able to accomplish the destruction of this immutable (*avyaya*) [Reality].

Finite are said [to be] these bodies of the eternal embodied [Self, *ātman*], the Indestructible, the Incommensurable. Hence fight, o descendant-of-Bharata!

He who thinks of this [Self] as slayer and he who thinks [of this Self] as slain—they both do not know. This [Self] does not slay nor is it slain.

This [Self] is not born nor [does it] ever die, nor having-come-to- be shall it again cease-to-be. This unborn, eternal, everlasting, primordial [Self] is not slain when the body is slain.

The man (*purusha*) who knows this Indestructible, Eternal, Unborn, Immutable [One]—how and whom can he cause-to-be slain [or] slay, o son-of-Prithā?

As a man, [after] discarding worn-out garments, seizes other, new ones, so does the embodied [Self], [after] discarding worn-out bodies, enter other, new ones. (*Bhagavad-Gītā* II.16-22, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 99)

Mutability and diversity are just the appearances of beings. Bodies, emotions, perceptions are all fleeting. Behind and beyond this level of becoming, lies a permanent and unchangeable reality, the real Self. This Self is both eternal and absolutely one, not determined and not diverse. Hence, the Self is the same for all beings, or rather the receptacle in which they all converge. The first verse evokes the dichotomy between existence and nonexistence that emerged in the *R̥g-veda* X.129 (Lecture Five) and surfaced again in the cosmogonies of the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. It is not entirely clear whether Kṛṣṇa is just echoing and paraphrasing the first line of that hymn as a source of authority for his view of a hidden reality beyond *both* existence and nonexistence, or whether he is reshaping that verse into a sort of argument that would make it more akin to Parmenides’s view (which we shall introduce in Lecture Seven).

Be that as it may, Kṛṣṇa’s main point is as follows: Arjuna is afraid of harming particular beings, but this is a misperception; particular beings are just fleeting manifestations of the hidden, eternal Self, which cannot be harmed by any action. Foregoing action (in this case, fighting and killing as entailed by Arjuna’s duty) for the sake of not harming others is based on the *ignorance* of the fact that what is real in all beings is just this eternal, unchanging Self, and

that Self cannot be harmed since it is entirely beyond the reach of action. In pushing this point, Kṛṣṇa also introduces a subtle twist to the view which we already encountered (and which was not altogether explicit (if present at all) in previous sources): the world of multiplicity and becoming has a dream-like character. Even if it cannot be said to be an illusion, it is surely less real than its ultimate, eternal ground.

Kṛṣṇa also evokes another trope that we encountered in the older *Upaniṣads*: traditional Vedic rituals are actions aimed at ensuring a good rebirth, but this is an inferior path. The truly noble ones seek a higher path, in which they realize the ultimate union with the true Self. Again, Kṛṣṇa gives his own twist to this trope, by stressing how ritual action is concerned with fruits and results, and hence is bound and attached to reaching a given state, and *this* is what constitutes bondage. But if one is able to act without any attachment to fruits or results of the actions, if one acts out of duty, and by considering only the action itself, remaining equanimous regardless of how it will unfold, then action constitutes no bondage. One can act *and* remain free.

Hence, Kṛṣṇa's injunction to Arjuna:

In action alone is your rightful-interest (*adhikāra*), never in [its] fruit. Let not your motive be the fruit of action; nor let your attachment be to inaction (*akarman*).

Steadfast in Yoga, perform actions abandoning attachment, o Dhanam-jaya, [always] remaining the same in success and failure. Yoga is called equanimity. (*Bhagavad-Gītā* II.47-48, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 107-109)

In the rest of dialogue, Kṛṣṇa will introduce several elements that further corroborate this thesis that action can be performed without remaining bounded to it, insofar as it is performed with no attachment to its actual results. The question is: *how* can one manage to relinquish all attachment towards the fruits of one's actions? Several paths are available.

In its syncretism, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is also an interesting witness of meditation practices that are briefly hinted at in the older *Upaniṣads*. They broadly converge on the sort of anesthetic trance we encountered already, which is centered on the progressive switching off of sensory perception. Kṛṣṇa first

presents to Arjuna how the sage devoted to the practice of contemplation (*dhyāna yoga*) would proceed:

When [a man] relinquishes all desires [that] enter the mind, o son-of-Pritha, and is content with the Self in the Self, then is he called steadied in gnosis.

[A man whose] mind is unagitated in sorrow (*duhkha*), [who is] devoid of longing in [his contact with] pleasure (*sukha*), and free from passion (*rāga*), fear (*bhaya*), and anger (*krodha*)-he is called a sage steadied in vision. [...]

And when he withdraws from every side his senses from the objects of the senses as a tortoise [draws in its] limbs, his gnosis is well established.

For the non-eating embodied (*dehin*) [Self] the objects disappear, except for the relish. [Upon] seeing the Supreme, the relish also disappears for him.

Yet, even of the striving, discerning man, the agitated senses forcibly carry away the mind, o son-of-Kunti.

Controlling all these [senses], yoked [and] intent on Me, let him sit [in an easeful posture]. For he whose senses are under control, his gnosis is well established. [...]

That man (*pumān*) who, forsaking all desires, moves about devoid of longing, devoid of [the thought of] ‘mine;’ without ego-sense—he approaches peace.

This is the brahmic state, o son-of-Pritha. Attaining this, [a person] is no [longer] deluded. Abiding therein also at the end-time [i.e., at death], he attains extinction in the worldground (*brahma-nirvāna*). (*Bhagavad-Gītā* II.55-72, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 107-117)

The goal of this practice is to reach emotional detachment and internal withdrawal. Curiously, the metaphor of the tortoise used here by Kṛṣṇa appears also in the arguably slightly older discourses of the Buddha (SN 1.17 and 35.240) as a metaphor for sense restraint, and it will reappear much later in Teresa of Ávila’s description of a very similar form of training.<sup>76</sup> The meta-

•• 76 Cf. Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle* (1979), the Fourth Dwelling Places, chapter 3 (pp. 78-79): ‘But one noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward, as anyone who goes through this will observe,

phor of non-eating can be understood as the attitude of not grasping at any sensory content, which thus establishes the contemplator in the purely intransitive experience of the inner Self. In reaching towards this experience, the yogin foregoes any ordinary sense of ‘me’ or ‘mine’ because these belong to the empirical self, which is dissipated through contemplation. Kṛṣṇa thus indicates that reaching this state constitutes true liberation, which he frames as extinction (*nirvāna*) in *brahman*. Notice yet another twist Kṛṣṇa imparts on this progression: the meditator focuses on *him*, Kṛṣṇa himself. As will become progressively clear (through a powerful literary climax), Kṛṣṇa slowly reveals to Arjuna that he is not just a human teacher, but his true nature is even beyond that of *brahman*.

In Kṛṣṇa’s teaching (unlike what might be inferred from older sources), the practice that leads to a merging with ultimate reality does *not* lead to inaction, but rather to a new way of embracing action. Kṛṣṇa advances here a rather elaborate argument, one pivotal point of which goes as follows:

For, not even for a moment [can] anyone ever remain without performing action. Every [being] is indeed unwittingly (*avasha*) made to perform action by the primary-qualities born of the cosmos.

The confounded self, who, [while] restraining the action senses, sits remembering the sense objects with the mind—he is called a hypocrite.

But [more] excellent is he, o Arjuna, who, controlling the [cognitive] senses with the mind, embarks unattached on Karma-Yoga with the action senses.

You must do the necessary action, for action is superior to inaction; not even your body’s processes can be accomplished by inaction. (*Bhagavad-Gītā* III.5-8, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 121)

.....  
for I don’t know how to make it clearer. It seems to me that I have read where it was compared to a hedgehog curling up or a turtle drawing into its shell. (The one who wrote this example must have understood the experience well.)’ Ávila is arguably referring to Francisco De Osuna (1492-1541), *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, VI, chapter 4 (Engl. transl. 1981, 173): ‘compare the recollected person with the hedgehog who contracts his body and retreats into himself without concern for anything outside. Like a very heavy stone concealing the hedgehog, this devotion, according to the psalm, is refuge for the recollected person who has everything he needs within and does not think ill of those without who may inflict harm on him.’ But notice that Osuna does not mention a turtle in his example.

The choice between action and inaction is a false dichotomy. Given one's own physical and mental makeup, absolute inaction is incompatible with simply remaining alive, since even the sheer physical survival of the body requires a good deal of activity. In this sense, inaction is never a viable choice. It may happen that one decides to abstain from action by restraining the body (the 'action senses' refer to the bodily parts that enable action) and yet keeps remembering and fantasizing in one's thought about objects of action. This is hypocrisy, not freedom from action. The recommended attitude is to keep engaging in activity, while remaining completely detached from the results of that activity. While restraining any craving for a certain result, one can do what is simply required by one's own nature, out of a sense of duty.

This is the deontological turn in Kṛṣṇa's teaching, encapsulated in the following verse: 'better is [one's] own-law [*svadharmo*] imperfectly [carried out] than another's law [*paradharmo*] well performed. [It is] better [to find] death in [the performance of one's] own-law, for another's law is fear instilling' (*Bhagavad-Gītā* III.35, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 129). The notion of 'one's own law' (*sva-dharma*) refers to the duties that are inherent in one's own condition. This law does not target the uniqueness of a specific individual, but rather the individual as the embodied representative of a certain class. In Indian thought, *svadharmo* is thus usually associated with one's own class (brahmin, warrior, commoner, servant). In Arjuna's case, his *svadharmo* is that of a warrior prince, who has accompanying duties and responsibilities. Kṛṣṇa's injunction clearly entails that it is practically possible for one individual to act on the basis of the law of another (*paradharmo*), for instance a prince like Arjuna might choose to act like a brahmin renunciant. But there are at least two reasons why this choice is best avoided. First, if the individual is primarily defined by his own law, then acting on the basis of the law of another amounts to a sort of betrayal of one's own nature (what Heidegger would call 'inauthenticity'). Second, an individual who acts on the basis of the law of another is somehow an impostor, and this engenders fear of being exposed as such (what today we might call 'impostor syndrome'). Kṛṣṇa contends that it is better to achieve only partially, or even fail in the attempt at fulfilling one's own duty, than in pretending to lead a life that does not belong to one's own nature. Since duty is assigned by birth and regardless of the individual's own current choice, the individual's task

is that of fulfilling that duty (whatever it is), not struggling to change it. And since fulfilling one's own duty is done *for its own sake*, one can act without any attachment to the actual consequences or results that may or may not come from one's action, by thus becoming free from craving and desire.

Kṛṣṇa offers this account as a re-interpretation of the very notion of *sacrifice* (*yajna*): 'this world is bound by action save when this action is intended as sacrifice. With that purpose [in mind], o son-of-Kunti [Arjuna], engage in action devoid of attachment' (*Bhagavad-Gītā* III.9, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 121). In Vedic culture, *karma* is primarily the sacrificial action, and we already discussed how crucial sacrifice is for the whole Vedic worldview. Kṛṣṇa plays with a broader notion of action, which now encompasses no longer *just* ritual action and sacrifice, but all sorts of actions (he mentioned the action needed to support the life of the body, arguably referring to nutrition and so forth). Within this broader notion, he then recovers the narrower sense of action as sacrifice and interprets it as an action devoid of attachment towards results. Sacrifice is thus understood as a free gift, which somehow matches our ordinary and loose sense of the term. It is problematic to see ancient Vedic sacrifice as a free gift of this sort, given that sacrifice was a way of establishing a bridge and negotiate with gods and other forces. Seers and brahmin officiants are explicit about the goals they wish to achieve through sacrifice. But having introduced a broader notion of action, Kṛṣṇa can now also provide a more abstract account of sacrifice as one's free gift, based entirely on duty, which allows him to preserve the traditional and formal importance attached to sacrifice in general.

This hermeneutic strategy is emblematic of the way new currents in Indian thought manage to reshape older notions by infusing them with new meanings. Remember that the clash between ascetism and household life turned around sacrifice: becoming an ascetic, one enters a non-ritual state in which rituals and sacrifices are no longer possible nor even valued, which in turn is at odds with the pillars of the Vedic tradition. Kṛṣṇa offers a hermeneutic way out of this impasse by allowing sacrifice to be interpreted as any action performed uniquely out of duty towards one's own law, which makes it possible for the performer to fulfil one's law, perform sacrificial actions, *and* be free from desire and attachment. While the latter is the goal of ascetism, the former are the goals of traditional practice, and the two poles are now perfectly reconciled. Voilà.



## 6.6 Devotion and dispassion

Kṛṣṇa's point is further expanded and refined in the remainder of his discussion (chapters 4 and 5). He then returns to the sort of meditative practice that is required to fully uphold his teaching. As mentioned, dispassion towards the results of action demands mind-restraint, and this in turn leads to anaesthetic trance. Kṛṣṇa thus expands (chapter 6) on a number of techniques that can be used by the yogin for this purpose. But faced with this task, Arjuna acknowledges its difficulty:

This Yoga which has been proclaimed by You [to be achieved] through sameness, Madhusūdana [Kṛṣṇa]—I cannot see a steady state [by which it could be realized], because of [the mind's] fickleness.

The mind is indeed fickle, o Krishna, impetuous, strong, and obstinate. Its control, I think, is very-difficult-to-achieve, like [that of] of the wind. (*Bhagavad-Gītā* VI.33-34, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 165)

In his reply, Kṛṣṇa reassures and encourages Arjuna. On the one hand, Kṛṣṇa confirms that the path of ascetism (the one that Arjuna seems willing to take by giving up his duty to fight) is very difficult to travel, although not impossible. On the other hand, Kṛṣṇa introduces something different: *faith in him*. He exclaims:

The *yogin* is greater than ascetics. [He is] thought even greater than knowers, and the *yogin* is greater than the performers-of-ritual-actions. Therefore, be a *yogin*, o Arjuna!

Of all the *yogins*, moreover, he who worships Me [endowed] with faith, [and whose] inner self is absorbed in Me, is deemed [to be] most yoked to Me. (*Bhagavad-Gītā* VI.46-47, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 169)

Kṛṣṇa subordinates traditional ascetism and ritual performances to the specific form of discipline (*yoga*) prescribed by him, the *discipline of action*. In doing so, Kṛṣṇa is clearly proselyting towards Arjuna. Kṛṣṇa already hinted at the possibility of steadying the mind by keeping it fixed *on him* (Kṛṣṇa

himself). This may have seemed odd in the moment, but now Kṛṣṇa begins to reveal who he really is. From this point onwards, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* runs as the progressive epiphany of the true nature of Kṛṣṇa, his revelation to Arjuna in an increasingly subtler, deeper and increasingly unbearable form. The human form that Arjuna recognises as Kṛṣṇa is nothing but a sheer appearance of what is described as the absolute ground of the whole reality, something which is explicitly presented as lying beyond *brahman* itself. The climax of this revelation comes when Arjuna, after having heard a teaching about Kṛṣṇa's true nature, asks for a direct vision of that nature and is satisfied (chapter 11).

Here, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* resorts to a trope that emerges powerfully in the *Rg-veda*, in creation hymns like X.81 and X.90, which envision the original creator-man as endowed with many eyes, mouths, and limbs. This trope resurfaces in some of the classical *Upaniṣads*, especially when they bend to monistic and theistic forms. The relatively late *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* is perhaps the most explicit in taking up this convention and arguably closer in view to the doctrine exposed in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.<sup>77</sup> Doris Meth Srinivasan, in her *Many Heads, Arms, and Eyes. Origin, Meaning, and Form of Multiplicity in Indian Art* (1997) provided a fascinating study in how this theological trope shaped and was articulated in ancient Indian arts. For our purposes, we can simply mention that the underpinning idea is that of expressing how the multiplicity of the world is embedded in a unified creator principle, who brings that multiplicity forth and spreads it out in the created world through a primeval action akin to parturition (although often accomplished by a *male* creator).

•• 77 Cf. *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, III.3-5, transl. Olivelle 1992, 257: 'Eyes everywhere and face everywhere, arms everywhere and feet everywhere, he forges with his two hands, he forges with the wings, producing the heaven and earth, the one God. Who, as the source and origin of the gods and the ruler over them all, as the god Rudra, and as the great seer, in the beginning created Hiraṇyagarbha—may he furnish us with lucid intelligence. That form of yours, O Rudra, which is benign and not terrifying, which is not sinister-looking—with that most auspicious form of yours, O Mountain-dweller, look upon us.' Notice here how the trope is associated with Rudra, a relatively minor god in the *Rg-veda*, the embodiment of wilderness, hence potentially dangerous or disruptive, which later gained wider prominence as *Śiva* (who can be compared with the Greek *Dionysos*).

In the passage that follows, Kṛṣṇa reveals himself to Arjuna (the epiphany is described in third person by a narrator, since Arjuna is absorbed in it, speechless):

[His form has] many mouths and eyes, many wondrous appearances (*darshana*), many divine adornments, many divine upraised weapons, wearing divine garlands and garments, anointed with divine fragrances, all-wonderful. [Behold] God, infinite [and] omnipresent.

If the splendor of a thousand suns were to arise at once in the sky (*div*), that would be like the splendor of that Great Self.

Then the son-of-Pandu saw the whole universe, divided manifold, abiding in the One, there in the body of the God of gods. (*Bhagavad-Gītā* XI.10-13, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 223).

Arjuna now realizes that Kṛṣṇa is the unitarian principle beyond the whole world of multiplicity, and that all the various and diverse manifestations of various gods and phenomena are nothing but Kṛṣṇa's cloths. And yet, this vision is also profoundly scarring. Arjuna thus exclaims:

Beholding [that] great form of Yours, [with its] many mouths and eyes, o mighty-armed [Krishna], [its] many arms, thighs, feet, many bellies, many formidable fangs—the worlds shudder; so [do] I.

Touching the world-sky, flaming many-colored, [with] gaping mouths and flaming vast eyes—beholding You [thus], [my] inmost self quakes, and I [can] find no fortitude or tranquility, O Vishnu.

And seeing Your [many] mouths [studded with] formidable fangs resembling the fire [at the end] of time, I know not where-to-turn, and I find no shelter. Be gracious [unto me], o Lord of the gods, o Horne of the universe! [...]

As many rivers and water torrents flow headlong into the ocean, so do these heroes of the world of men enter Your flaming mouths.

As moths in profuse streams enter a blazing flame to [their own] destruction, so do the worlds in profuse streams enter Your mouths for [their utter] destruction.

With flaming mouths, You lick up, devouring, all the worlds entirely. Filling the entire universe with [Your] brilliance, Your dreadful rays scorch [all], o Vishnu.

Tell me who You are of dreadful form. May salutation be to You! o Best of gods, have mercy! I wish to know You [as You were in] the beginning. For I [do] not comprehend Your [divine] creativity. (*Bhagavad-Gītā* XI.23-31, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 229-233).

Kṛṣṇa's epiphany is not just the revelation of the unitarian principle beyond all phenomenal diversity. This is only half of Kṛṣṇa's nature. In being the creator of the whole universe, Kṛṣṇa is also the *destroyer* of all. Things emerge and return to the same ground, hence Kṛṣṇa gives birth and devours his creatures at the same time. Creation and destruction, birth and death, are inextricably interwoven. This is the great mystery that Arjuna can no longer withstand; he thus prays Kṛṣṇa to take on, once again, his more bearable human semblance.

This epiphany is not only a spectacular literary climax in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, but it also serves Kṛṣṇa's argumentative strategy. The ascetic's aim is to achieve a unification with the ultimate ground of reality by knowing the true Self. Well, there are two difficulties with this path. The first has been mentioned already: the sort of disciplined practice required for anaesthetic trance is extremely demanding, and Arjuna easily admits that he seems unable to carry it through. He wants to play by the law of another (he wants to be an ascetic rather than a warrior) but he is confronted with the utter difficulty of this task. But there is a second, further difficulty. Even if one were able to have a direct *vision* of the absolute reality, that vision would be difficult to bear. The absolute is not just the ground of the whole of reality, but it is also the domain in which the whole of reality is devoured and destroyed, like the offering in the sacrificial fire. Notice the play of metaphors: ultimate reality is an intransitive experience devoid of any specific content, *hence* it can be understood as the ground in which all phenomenal diversity is destroyed, burned down, and dissolved. The epistemic description (intransitive experience) gives rise to vision (a thousand-fold cosmic mouth devouring all beings), and vice versa.

The play with metaphors and homologies is extremely powerful and pervasive at this point, and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* proceeds in a cloud of traditional

overtones that both enact and reshape received meaning in a true new masterpiece of thinking art. How does one come to *see* the real absolute ground of reality, the true Self? Through anaesthetic practice, by progressively switching off sensory perception. The closer one gets to the true Self, the more the world recedes from experience, as if it were swallowed up by *brahman*. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* gives visionary power to this idea, by recasting the traditional trope of the many-limbed creator god as also a destructor god. In a sense, this is a way of picturing how the ascetic path must inevitably burn the world, consume it, destroy it, in order to transcend it. Arjuna initially envisages to move towards ascetism, for the sake of avoiding any harm to all living beings. But now he realizes that really fulfilling the ascetic ideal is also a way of fully experiencing how the whole world is destroyed in the same principle from which it originates. By seeking another's law from his own, Arjuna is doomed to fear what the path of ascetism is going to reveal. Earlier, we mentioned the issues of inauthenticity and the impostor syndrome that seem associated with the choice of following the law of another. Kṛṣṇa's epiphany adds a new layer of meaning to that discussion by revealing how ascetism cannot be chosen at all as a way of avoiding the duty of action and confronting the fact that all creation also entails destruction. Arjuna cannot flee his dilemma by becoming an ascetic, he must fight as his duty requires.

Kṛṣṇa's teaching has shown that the ascetic path is difficult, perhaps too difficult for Arjuna, and not even necessary, since in the end it will entail coming face to face with the process of cosmic destruction that Arjuna wanted to escape. Arjuna is thus cornered, and now Kṛṣṇa introduces a conciliatory solution: devotion (*bhakti*). If the deontological account presented earlier relies on some form of knowledge, but this knowledge is difficult to attain (through meditation) and ultimately unbearable and terrifying (as revealed by Kṛṣṇa's epiphany), the middle path would consist in gaining what William James (Lecture Four) named a 'faith-state.' Kṛṣṇa has repeatedly hinted at this state already as the state in which the mind is fully focused on Kṛṣṇa *itself*, on the very idea of acting and serving what is known and acknowledged to be the ultimate ground, God.

In virtue of remaining fully focused on Kṛṣṇa (God), one foregoes one's own individuality and recognizes how one's own birth comes with duties. Instead of

seeking ways of steering one's nature towards some other goal (and thus acting according to a law that is not one's own), one will rather acknowledge how the action in conformity with one's own law is the supreme goal for one's current life. Concentration on Kṛṣṇa ensures that individualist deviations will not subvert this resolve, and thus will allow one to act *for the sake of duty*, by remaining free from attachment and dispassionate with respect to all results that may ensue.

In the closing of his discussion, Kṛṣṇa gives an explicit social declension to this doctrine, by referring to the traditional four classes (*varṇa*) in which Indian society is divided:

The actions of priests, warriors, merchants, and serfs are apportioned, o Paramtapa, [according] to the primary qualities arising [in their] own-being.

Calm, restraint, austerity, purity, patience, and uprightness, [real] knowledge [and] worldly-knowledge, piety—[these are] the behavior (*karman*) of a priest, born of [his] own-being.

Courage, vigor, steadfastness, resourcefulness, and also an unwillingness-to-flee in battle, generosity, and a regal disposition—[these are] the behavior of a warrior, born of [his] own-being.

Agriculture, cattle-tending, [and] trade—[these are] the behavior of a merchant, born of [his] own-being. Moreover, behavior of the nature of service is born of the own-being of a serf.

Content each in his own action, a man gains [spiritual] consummation. Hear [next] how he finds success [by being] content in [his] own [appropriate] action. (*Bhagavad-Gītā* XVIII.41-45, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 311).

Here, we return, full circle, to the departing tenet of Kṛṣṇa's teaching: acting out of duty towards one's own nature or law (*dharma*) is the true and surest path for full realization. One's own law is defined in terms of the proper function of the class of people within which one is born. Although the *varṇa* system is based on distinct social functions of large groups and should not be conflated with the *caste* (*jāti*) system (which divides individuals based on the tribe and clan in which they are born), the two tended to be systematically related, both con-

ceptually and historically. What Kṛṣṇa adds here is the linkage between the social structure and its onto-theological justification, now based on devotion rather than direct experience of the divine. As he states: ‘Me-minded, you will transcend all difficulties by My grace. But if out of ego-sense you will not listen [to Me], you will Perish’ (*Bhagavad-Gītā* XVIII.58, transl. Feuerstein 2014, 317).

Compare this solution to the paradox of mastery with that offered by the *āśrama* system, considered in its normative and ideal dimension. As mentioned, the main issue is the conflict between household life and ascetic life. Household life upholds the value of consociation for addressing the needs of embodiment, while ascetic life is based on the realization that consociated life cannot address these needs, and the only way of mastering uncertainty is by actually transcending embodiment and consociation altogether. While this clash is potentially threatening for the whole social order, the *āśrama* system tries to recompose it, either by presenting different ways of life in terms of an option, or by including them all in one single ideal progression through which all individuals (of certain groups at least) should pass through. In this latter case, free choice is replaced by an obligation, which has a twofold nature: all are obliged to act in accordance with, for some time, *both* conflicting principles: household life and ascetism.

In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* we are confronted again with the same clash between traditional social values (Arjuna and his duty as a royal warrior) and the choice of an ascetic life, seemingly free from action. Kṛṣṇa then shows that a proper and profound knowledge of the ultimate goal of ascetic life demonstrates that the best way of living is by upholding one’s own (social) nature and law (*svadharma*) and fulfilling it out of duty, for its own sake, whichever that is. What was supposed to disrupt the social order (the ideal of ascetism, and the practice anaesthetic trance) ends up providing an onto-theological justification for it. Moreover, through devotional practice, any deviant individual tendencies that could lead one astray from the tenets of one’s own social function can be subdued and neutralized. Once again, choice is no longer possible, but this is not due to the fact that (like in the classical *āśrama* scheme) one will try out all the ways of life temporarily, but rather because the dichotomy has been fully re-adsorbed within a superior unity. The true ascetic, paradoxically, is the one who performs their (socially defined) function for the sake of fulfilling their

duty. Freedom is no longer freedom to choose, but rather freedom of acting on the basis of one's own law. Kṛṣṇa's deontological turn is very much a plea for *autonomy*, since one's law is not invented by the individual considered in its uniqueness or particularity, but rather derived from the way in which the individual is embedded in the social structure from (and through) birth, and this structure is presented as having a universal validity.

However, in providing a justification for the social order, Kṛṣṇa also posits himself beyond and above it, in compliance with how the true Self or *brahman* was conceived by the sages of the classical *Upaniṣads*. He shows that accepting this ultimate principle poses no threat to society, and thus can be recognized as its true and genuine ruler and ultimate sovereign. After all, one can fully endorse one's own social function *because* one knows (either directly, or more likely because of one's devotional faith) that all social roles are nothing but different cloths of the same ultimate reality. Hence, it does not really matter what specific social function one is called on to perform, since they are all rooted in the same principle, which transcends them all. Ultimately, one is neither a priest, nor a warrior, nor a commoner, nor a servant. Ultimately, one is only the true Self, immutable, eternal, beyond all diversity. In this respect, Kṛṣṇa's teaching preserves a core element of the doctrine of the *Upaniṣads*, while also presenting it as fully compatible with social life. This is a hermeneutic tour de force, which ends up shifting the way the *Bhagavad-Gītā* addresses the paradox of mastery. Instead of keeping the opposing ways of life relatively apart and preserve their own independence within a broader scheme (like in the *āśrama* system), the tension is handled by establishing a hierarchy among the conflicting forces (in which all forms of diversity are subordinated to an underpinning metaphysical unity). This hierarchy is not intended to dissolve one of the opposing elements, but rather to solve the tension through subordination of one to the other.

Does this hierarchical turn provide a working solution to the paradox of mastery? If it does, the solution does not sound any less paradoxical, since it could be stated as follows: since one's ultimate nature is completely beyond any specific condition (including social functions), one's realization consists in fulfilling one's specific condition and its inherent law out of pure duty. The need and value of consociation is both asserted and denied, and the same individual is invited to strive for both social embodiment and devotional disembodiment.



Lecture Seven:  
Tragedy

## 7.1 Introduction

The self aims to master uncertainty, but this entails a paradox, which emerges along two dimensions, embodiment and consociation, in tension with one another. Due to embodiment, an individual is in a condition of need and precarity. This uncertainty cannot be faced, let alone mastered, without the help of others, and hence without some form of consociation. And yet, consociation creates new needs and makes the individual dependent on social structures that tend to hold one back from complete emancipation.

When a tension emerges between connected and yet conflicting elements, there are two basic strategies that can be attempted to alleviate or solve that tension. One strategy consists in *distancing* the components that generate the tension. By keeping them relatively apart, by finding the right distance or space to separate them, by preventing them from coming too close to one another, it might be possible to alleviate the problem. The limitation of this strategy emerges when the elements to be distanced are co-dependent in such a way that one can never be totally isolated from the other, unless both are abandoned together. Another strategy consists in *subordinating* the same components, by establishing one as dominant over the other. If the conflicting elements are posited in a hierarchical structure, the tension can be managed by means of restraint and subjugation. The issue with this strategy is again that if the conflicting elements are sufficiently interdependent, then the dominion of one element over the other could always be reversed or challenged. Distancing and subordinating are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be combined to varying degrees. Nonetheless, they are sufficiently distinct to allow for a relatively independent treatment in terms of hermeneutic reconstruction of how they play within specific contexts.

In the last two lectures, we saw how the paradox of mastery is addressed by ancient Indian culture, thought, and practices. We can now add that the strategy of *distancing* seems the most relevant in this context. In Lecture Five, we encountered the ancient Vedic seer as a member of a relatively small-scale community. Fully immersed in the community's system of meanings and values, the seer develops his poetic practice for the purpose of cultivating visions, which will deliver the knowledge and power needed for the whole

community to thrive and negotiate with other agencies (gods, ancestors, and so on) that populate the cosmos. For as much as the seer is an integral component of his community, his visionary power is also something extraordinary, rare, and valuable, and not shared by everybody—meaning that it is also potentially alienating. The farther the seer pushes his vision (reaching towards the very beginnings of the world, for instance), the more unintelligible his words become and the farther he moves from the horizon of meanings that all members of the community share. Seers seek to become immortal, like gods, who are still actively involved in the community, and yet also set apart from it. Distance separates and weakens communal bounds, but in so doing it also weakens the very ground upon which the seer's power rests. Moving towards greater light, the Vedic seer ends up appearing darker and more obscure.

In Lecture Six, we discussed some further developments that take place in ancient India, starting from the sixth century BCE. On the one hand, Vedic practices undergo a strong ritualization. The seer becomes a remote, legendary figure, replaced by the brahmin priest, a ritual specialist who knows how to perform the traditional rituals in the due manner. Right performance (orthopraxis) becomes key for mastering uncertainty, while visionary powers are left behind. However, a new soteriological model also emerges, according to which true mastery of uncertainty (now conceived of as true immortality) can be gained only by transcending all visions and reaching 'that one' who is beyond all contents of experience, all objects, all perceptions. By cultivating anaesthetic trance, the Upaniṣadic sage is someone devoted to directly knowing his 'true Self' (*ātman*), which is nothing but *brahman*, the universal principle behind all experience, pure intransitive awareness, undifferentiated, changeless, eternal. The problem with this model is that it threatens to undermine or devalue the whole of consociate life. The sage is devoted to ascetism and regards worldly life as inferior. The strategy of distancing scales up and becomes a plea for transcending the whole world of family and ordinary social life altogether. This is a challenge that will keep Indian culture busy in the attempt at finding some mediation or at adjudicating which of these ways of life is preferable.

In this and the next lecture, we turn to the ancient Greek world, focusing on roughly the same period, between the early sixth century up to the third century BCE approximately. Commonalities between ancient Indian and

## Lecture Seven: Tragedy

Greek cultures begin with the possibility of tracing the origin of both to common archaic ancestors, arguably linked with the prehistoric Indo-European tribes that spread both south-East towards the Indian subcontinent and north-West towards the European continent. Historians have documented how the development of ancient Greece took place not in isolation but through constant exchange and interplay with other cultures, both in the Middle East and farther East.<sup>78</sup> Our purpose here is not that of charting these interesting historical relationships. Rather, we shall investigate how the paradox of mastery discussed in the previous lectures can be seen at play in ancient Greek culture, and how in this context it is addressed by predominantly using the strategy of *subordinating*, rather than of *distancing*.

Our current working hypothesis is that the paradox of mastery is a structural feature that arises from the very idea of conceiving of the self as a device for mastering uncertainty. This entails that wherever selfhood is enacted, *some* form of the paradox will be (at least potentially) present or detectable. However, this broad hypothesis does not entail that the paradox should appear the same in any context. In fact, the opposite is more likely. Depending on the specific declensions that different cultures and communities develop, they will be led to conceptualize mastery and its paradox in different terms. After all, if the paradox depends on the tension between embodiment and consociation, since both variables are subject to historical variations and are indexed to historical circumstances, we should expect to observe historical diversity in the way this paradox surfaces in different times and places. To some extent, we already noticed by the end of Lecture Six that subordination seems to emerge in the solution offered by the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Hence, there is no attempt here

•• 78 Among the classical studies on this front, see Martin Litchfield West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (1971); Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution. Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (1992); Id., *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis. Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (2004). For an overview of the scholarly debate between Greek religion and its connections with the Near East, see F. S. Naiden, 'Recent Study of Greek Religion in the Archaic through the Hellenistic Period' (2013). For an overview of the historical evidence about continuous contacts in the ancient world between various cultures ranging from Greece to India, see Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002), chapter 1. McEvilley draws attention in particular to the importance of the Persian empire (especially between the mid-sixth century and the early fifth century BCE) in attracting to its courts both Greek and Indian workers, mercenaries, craftsmen, artists, and physicians, by facilitating potential contacts between seemingly distant cultures.

at making one strategy the exclusive province of one culture only. The point at stake is only to acknowledge that one strategy might become more prominent and even paradigmatic in a certain culture rather than in others, without entailing that its use might be exclusive, rigid, or homogeneous.<sup>79</sup>

The strategy of *subordinating* entails a contest between two poles (if not individual agents), in which one gains supremacy over the other. The active-passive dichotomy we encountered discussing Foucault's account of self-mastery in Lecture Zero could be seen as one abstract way of conceptualizing the strategy of subordinating. The active pole is such because it is capable of subordinating the passive pole under its power (or at least restraining it in some way). The active principle dominates the passive one, in the same way a victorious hero dominates their rival, or one social group enslaves another. The crux of this strategy is that whatever is kept in a position of inferiority, passivity, enslavement, or subordination is, by definition, something that could escape that condition and subvert it. One can attempt at subordinating another only because the other could do the same and turn out to be the actual master. Even a subdued slave remains always a potential enemy.

In this lecture, we shall focus on three domains in which the strategy of subordination is fleshed out in ancient Greek culture: (i) the relationship between human individuals and communities with the gods; (ii) the relationship between human individuals within different social groups (the family kin and the broader political society in particular); (iii) the ontological relationship between all things that happen and exist.

•• 79 We can claim that we observe different declensions of the same paradox if we can reasonably establish that the actors involved were struggling with the problem of mastering what they perceived to be a crucial manifestation of uncertainty, and if this struggle is cogently related with the two dimensions of embodiment and consociation in their mutual interlinkage and interplay. It will remain open for empirical investigation to assess the extent to which the difference pointed out across cultures might be more a matter of emphasis, priority, or relevance attributed to the same elements, rather than an actual lack of certain conceptualization. Perhaps both Indian and Greek cultures considered the paradox of mastery in terms of both *distancing* and *subordinating*, although they gave more priority to one or the other. If this is so, we could also investigate how much our own historically situated reconstruction of these cultures contributes to the way we carve up the differences we recognize. But since we can interpret ancient cultures (and even our own culture, for that matter) only from a situated point of view, there is no neutral standpoint from which we could dispassionately observe the past without shaping it to some extent. If it is our current historically situated standpoint that shapes our reconstruction (as inevitably it will do to some extent), this cannot be avoided, but only taken into account in weighing up our reconstruction.

## 7.2 Gods, seers, mysteries

Archaic and classical Greek culture share the sort of worldview based on weak embodiment that we already discussed in Lecture Three and Five. By the fourth century BCE, the Greeks had established a sophisticated way of life, very different from that of the small-scale societies we discussed in relation to the phenomenon of shamanism. Nevertheless, the broad way of conceiving the nature of agency and the place of humans within their broader environment is akin to the sort of communitarian model of agency that can be attributed to shamanic cultures.<sup>80</sup> Unlike the Vedic culture, however, the Greek did not develop anything comparable to the collections of the *Vedas*. They did not have established schools or groups devoted to transmitting received knowledge about the gods and rituals (analogous to the brahmin schools that preserved the *Vedas*). Epic poets played a crucial role in voicing and expressing sacred knowledge about the gods, their myths, and their relations with humans. But Greek poetic creations were markedly different from those of the Vedic seer and did not give rise to (nor aspire to) a comparable ritual system.<sup>81</sup>

In Greek religion, priests are public officials who are mostly responsible for the correct execution of rituals and for managing temples. Different Greek city-states have different temples and worship different groups of deities, although they roughly share the same pantheon. Flexibility allows various gods to move from one place to another, or to ascend or descend in the importance of the devotional activities tributed to them by each local community. Rituals often revolve around a sacrifice, which typically entail the ritual killing of an

•• 80 The importance of shamanic elements for the emergence of the Greek culture has been emphasized since the now classical study of Eric Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951).

81 Commenting on the difference between Vedic hymns and Homeric epic, Jamison and Brereton, in their 'Introduction' (2014, 14), write: 'it [the poetry of the *R̥g-veda*] was a type of oral composition very different from what that designation now generally brings to mind in scholarly, especially Homeric, circles. It was not an anonymous floating body of infinitely variable verbal material (re-) composed anew at every performance, generated in great part from fixed formulae that formed the poet's repertoire. In contrast to the vast sprawl of epic, on which the usual model of oral-formulaic composition was formed and tested, R̥gvedic oral composition was small-scale and verbally complex. Though orally composed and making use of traditional verbal material, each hymn was composed by a particular poet, who fixed the hymn at the time of composition and who "owned" it, and it was transmitted in this fixed form thereafter.'

animal; usually cattle, sheep, pigs, or goats. Understanding the exact nature of Greek sacrifices has been object of longstanding controversies (see Parker's chapter 5). For present purposes, it is important to stress that in many cases, the sacrifice can *also* be seen as a way of establishing a communication with the gods and opening a channel through which prayers from the humans to the gods could be rewarded with blessings from the gods to the humans.

Greek religion was based on an idea of cosmological order. This idea is analogous to that already encountered in other cultures and times. And like other cultures, religion, for the Greeks, is a way of enacting the cosmological order and reasserting the human role in it via animal sacrifice. This point is reinforced by reflecting on the nature of Greek gods. Gods were both associated with natural phenomena (like Hermes with winds) and more abstract qualities (like Eros with love), and separated into heart-dwelling gods (chthonians) and heaven-dwelling gods (Olympians). Greeks also worshiped *heroes*, which 'are biographically dead mortals, functionally minor gods' (Parker 2011, 110). Myth was an important source for establishing the origin of various gods and their association with certain places or shrines. However, myths were not formalized theological statements, but rather the (often collective) product of epic poets. One of the most famous and important examples are Hesiod's *Theogony*, which is a poem about the birth of the gods, and a number of Homeric *Hymns* devoted to various deities.

However, Greek gods seem to have a lot of flexibility in their manifestations, locations, powers, and importance, which also change over time. Accounting for an enduring core or identity of the gods has proved quite hard. Parker favors a revised structuralist model:

That model seeks to show how, within the spheres in which it is involved, each deity is active in a way distinctive to itself. But it has no way of predicting in what spheres the deity will be active. The power that Aphrodite exercises at sea is one of calming and conciliation, appropriate to herself. But there was no necessity that she should exercise her powers at sea at all; she does not calm storms on land. Zeus's control of the thunderbolt is a symbol of his general sovereignty, we can allow. But power over the sea or over earthquakes could equally have been a symbol of cosmic control. Conversely, why could

not turbulent Poseidon have wreaked atmospheric havoc on land? The explanation for these distributions of activity seems partly to lie in history (an ancient division of what we will have to call spheres of activity between Zeus and Poseidon, for instance), partly in market demand: numerous gods become involved, each in their own way, with seafaring, child care, and marriage, for instance, because of the complicated human anxieties associated with these crucial activities and experiences. (Parker 2011, 96)

On this model, gods identify major agents of change, or more or less specific ways in which events can be channeled or steered. Invoking Zeus is not the same as invoking Aphrodite. Despite overlaps and potential competence conflicts, Greek gods seem to embody relatively distinct powers that manifest in distinctive ways in which the course of the events in a certain sphere of life can evolve. In this sense, they represent the dynamic forces (agencies) that operate in the cosmological order in which human beings live.

The picture sketched so far suggests that an average Greek person in the classical period might have had religious beliefs mostly based on the received tradition and the pervasive enactment of religious rituals. These beliefs would concern the existence of various gods, which can be made propitious through appropriate rituals, often involving some animal sacrifice. One core aspect of this system is that humans and gods can communicate. Seeking appropriate channels for establishing this communication is essential to ensuring a harmonious interaction between human communities and the godlike agents that influence its fate. As mentioned, sacrifice is a formal and official occasion for seeking this contact, although not the only one.

A widespread figure in ancient Greek culture is the *seer*, who works as a wandering specialist in the art of establishing specific contact between human individuals (or sometimes collective groups) and gods. Unlike the Vedic seer we discussed in Lecture Five, the Greek seer is not an inspired poet who also administrates rituals, but rather a master of divine hermeneutics who specializes in interpreting the signs sent by the god and possibly takes appropriate action in response.

Michael Flower, in his *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (2008) has provided an in-depth account of Greek divination and seers. The seer (Greek *mantis*) is a



commonly encountered figure in various sources, both in literature and in history. Usually, the seer comes from an elite family and wanders from town to town, offering his (seers are often males) services to clients, who usually are willing to pay high fees for securing them. The seer is an expert in divination, namely, in the technique of detecting signs sent by the gods (through various media, from the flight of birds, to the livers of sacrificial animals), and then interpreting these signs as answering specific questions posed by the client. Most often, the seer aims at solving practical dilemmas, such as ‘is it better to do  $x$ , or is it better to do  $y$ ?’ This view presupposes not only that the gods can foresee the future and might share that knowledge with humans, but also that the course of the future remains relatively open. A good seer can not only recover information about what is going to happen, but might also be able to act in such a way to steer future events favorably, or at least prevent disasters. Divination is a particularly crucial art to face uncertainty.

As Flower comments:

The rites of divination were not only ubiquitous in Greek society; they were also uniquely authoritative. This was true not only for the uneducated masses, but also for the elite, and not just in the archaic period, but even during the classical and Hellenistic periods. [...] The emotional intensity that could be involved in undergoing a divinatory ritual is graphically documented by the experience of Pausanias (9.39) when he visited and consulted the oracle of Trophonius at Lebadeia in the second century a.d. He tells us that after the inquirer emerges from the oracular cave, where he encountered the god either in sight or in sound, he is “overcome with terror and unconscious both of himself and of his surroundings. Later, however, he will recover his senses no less than before, and the ability to laugh will return to him.” [...] Pausanias was willing to subject himself to this disorienting experience not because he had to or because it was expected of him, but because the experience was useful and meaningful for him. The various rites of divination, taken together, constituted a rational and coherent, as well as a socially useful, system of knowledge and belief for the Greeks. It was socially useful in that it aided decision making, circumvented indecision, and arbitrated disputes. It was logical in that it was predicated on an

implicit set of beliefs that made sense for the Greeks: that the gods are concerned for the welfare of humankind, that they know more than humans, and that they are willing to share some of that knowledge by way of advice. (Flower 2008, 104-105)

The example provided by Pausania introduces an important variant of Greek divination, namely, the consultation of oracular shrines. The most famous oracle was probably the Pythia in Delphi, who was considered to be the mouthpiece of Apollo. Oracles answered questions, usually by entering a possession trance, while seers acted more as exegetes of signs provided by the gods, but without necessarily experiencing trance. The premise upon which both operate is the same that underpins the rest of Greek religion, namely, that gods not only exist, but communicate with humans and care for them, so much so that they are willing to share part of their knowledge with them and help them in appropriate circumstances. As Flower stresses: ‘just as possession divination was dependent on an inspired *techne*, so technical divination, to be practiced most successfully, was in need of an innate prophetic gift. I have called this intuitive divination’ (Flower 2008, 91).

The Greeks also knew other ways of establishing contact with the gods. An important phenomenon is constituted by so-called *mystery cults*.<sup>82</sup> Unsurprisingly, we know relatively little about the actual details of these cults. Mystery cults were often open to a variety of individuals from different social groups (including women) and operated in derogation of social hierarchies otherwise segregating or subordinating individuals based on their group affiliation. Mysteries were also structured in various stages, in which adepts progressed through a process of initiation, which usually culminated in a special experience or revelation, saved for the few and kept strictly secret for the non-initiated.

One of the most relevant and perhaps oldest cults was based at Eleusis (near Athens) and devoted to Demeter (the goddess of agriculture) and her daughter Kore (also called Persephone). The cult celebrates the myth of Kore, who is kidnapped by Hades (the god of the dead) and brought to the underworld.

•• 82 For a brief overview, see Parker 2011, 250-255. For a more detailed treatment, see Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (1987) and Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (2010).

Demeter desperately seeks her daughter until Kore is eventually freed, but her return to the world is only temporary due to a trick played by Hades. Besides the mythological account of the seasons (Kore's temporary stay in the underworld is associated with winter, her return with spring), the myth has explicit eschatological overtones. As a common feature of mystery cults, the cult of Demeter and Kore was also seen as a glimpse into the afterlife and the cult was used to ensure a good destiny after death. The initiated would experience something like the wandering of the soul after death, and eventually the reaching of a place of safety and joy.<sup>83</sup>

In his comparative study of rebirth eschatology among various cultures, *Imagining Karma* (2002), Gananath Obeyesekere devotes a quite extensive discussion to ancient Greece (especially chapters 5 and 6). He analyses various small but intellectually significant groups of thinkers (which include Pythagoreans, Empedocles, Plato, and Neo-Platonists) who all developed theories about the cyclical rebirth of the soul, regarded this cycle as itself a cage to escape, and conceived of the path leading to freedom from rebirth in terms of ascetic practices and contemplations. These views remained somewhat elitist and were addressed to small-scale sodalities of adepts mostly concerned for their own individual salvation. Besides these views, though, there were also more popular movements that arguably appealed to larger groups. The epic poet Pindar (fifth century BCE) voices this alternative, which envisages a period of reward or punishment after death based on one's moral conduct in life. If one manages to keep one's conduct spotless for three rebirths, one is eventually reborn in the Isles of the Blessed and automatically escapes the rebirth cycle.<sup>84</sup>

In small-scale societies, the rebirth cycle tends not to be envisaged as a problem. Cultural developments, often associated with forms of ascetism (as we observed already in Lecture Six) problematize it and introduce the idea of a superior form of salvation, connected with escape from the cycle. This possibility of escape, as it becomes more widespread and accepted, invites one, in

•• 83 For more details, see Jennifer Larson, *Ancient Greek Cults. A Guide* (2007), chapter 6.

84 For further comparisons between rebirth views in ancient Greece and India, see Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002), chapter 4, who also argues why the most likely historical diffusion route for the doctrine of ethical rebirth goes from India towards Greece (possibly via Egypt) around the seventh or sixth century BCE.

turn, to take action during one's life in order to better one's destiny in the afterlife. One's actions during life become not only something that will bring immediate consequences here, but they are also invested with long-term consequences after death. Once this view is endorsed, it becomes possible to care in this life for one's future destiny, by adhering to or supporting various practices. Mystery cults in ancient Greece seem to cater for these sort of eschatological expectations and needs, which apparently did not receive much attention in other Greek religious forms.

A strong interest in the eschatological destiny of humans after death is central to sects and cults associated with the mystic bard Orpheus and with the god Dionysus. For present purposes, we shall focus on the cult of Dionysus.<sup>85</sup> Richard Seaford, in his *Dionysos* (2006) has provided a nice short introduction on the most salient points that surrounds the Greek conception and interaction with this god. Dionysus is associated with wild animals and wine, thus embedding the image of wilderness and intoxication. His male adepts are the satyrs, half human and half horse, who form his retinue (*thiasos*), while his female adepts are called *bacchae* or maenads (literally 'raving ones'). Dionysus is associated with several myths, which include the story of his dismemberment and resuscitation when he was a child, and various attempts to kidnap him (often ending with Dionysus showing his wild nature to the aggressors).<sup>86</sup> Dionysus is presented as a god that comes from outside of mainland Greece, a stranger, perhaps an indication of his association with the values of non-domesticated nature, agriculture, and lower social classes, more than with actual geographical provenance.

The cult of Dionysus has a strong focus on the relation between individual and community. Dionysus's adepts (satyrs and maenads) are ecstatic, possessed by divine frenzy, and are freed from any other social bond.<sup>87</sup> The *thiasos* forms an ideal community of equals in which all adepts follow the lead of Dionysus.

•• 85 Radcliffe G. Edmonds III, *Redefining Ancient Orphism. A Study in Greek Religion* (2013) has recently argued that there is no unified 'orphyic' tradition, but rather a series of doctrines and views that in time came to be associated under the same reference to the mythic Orpheus. The interested reader can look at this study as an entry point into the debate on this aspect.

86 For further details, see Jennifer Larson, *Ancient Greek Cults. A Guide* (2007), chapter 10.

87 Rouget, *Music and Trance* (1990), part II, chapter 1 offers a detailed account of Dionysian cults as forms of possession trance and discusses the role of music in their enactment.

This model has an ambivalent meaning with respect to the traditional social structure, both at the level of family and at the level of the political community (*polis*). As Seaford comments with respect to maenads:

The polis is composed of separate households, a structure that is most conspicuously embodied in the tendency for each woman to be confined to the domestic sphere. And so for her to leave her separate household (in some versions, as in *Bacchae*, specifically her loom) so as to transcend the boundaries, both physical and psychic, between herself and other women and between herself and nature—this is a symbolic reversal of the civilised structure of the polis. But this reversal of the structure of the polis is also the most conspicuous possible expression of its communality. The polis contains a tension between adherence to the polis and adherence to the household. In the symbolic expression of this tension in myth and ritual, adherence to the household is best symbolised by those who in reality adhere almost exclusively to it, the women. Hence the mythical resistance of the women to Dionysos, their unwillingness to leave the parental or marital household for his collective cult. Dionysos overcomes the resistance (in the daughters of Minyas, the daughters of Proitos, the women of Thebes) by inspiring frenzy in them. Hence also the ruthlessness with which Dionysos imposes frenzied selfdestruction (kin-killing) on the ruling family that vainly resists his communal cult, a theme which in the communal Dionysiac genre of tragedy extends to myths that do not contain Dionysos. (Seaford 2006, 34)

However, as Seaford also remarks, this same model can also be used to support the power of a dominant political leader. Later Hellenistic kings tended to present themselves as embodiments of Dionysus, coming to unifying their people under their lead as a single *thiasos* (by thus also breaking their affiliation to more local and small-scale political organizations). More generally, Dionysus represents the conflicting relationship between individual embodiment and consociation. On the one hand, he disrupts traditional forms of consociation and leads people of both sexes to join his retinue of satyrs and maenads. On the other hand, the *thiasos* becomes a new community for the adepts, in which

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they are all equal among themselves (contrary to otherwise segregating social hierarchies), but also all equally subordinated to the lead of Dionysus himself (or perhaps to one of his embodiments in a powerful and charismatic political autocrat).

The experience of Dionysiac possession and the merging into Dionysus's *thiasos* had not only social but also eschatological significance. Dionysus was associated with mystery cults that likely focused on the experience of death and ensured a joyful afterlife for the adepts. Again, following Seaford:

The unknown power that mystic initiation attempts to control is the power of death. And so it pre-enacts, in the controlled form of ritual, the process of dying. It stages the anxiety of death that leads to the bliss of the next world. And so because death is an unpredictable rupture of personal identity, mystic initiation must abolish the fundamental categories that constitute personal identity. It may therefore, as we have seen, enact a controlled confusion of male with female, human with animal, living with dead, mortal with immortal. And because the power of death is absolute, the even greater power that is bestowed by control over it easily becomes a political issue. (Seaford 2006, 74-75)

As already noted in Lecture Three, death is more likely to be interpreted as sheer annihilation of the individual only when a form of strong embodiment has already been accepted, according to which the individual is essentially identified or dependent upon a specific individual body. There is little evidence that this form of strong embodiment was upheld in ancient Greek thought, which was more likely adherent to a weak form of embodiment. In this context, death is surely a radical change, but this change is not a transition from being to nothingness, but rather through different forms of existence and experience. In Homeric epics, the underworld and afterlife are quite gloomy, and this might be interpreted in light of the Homeric emphasis on the values of strengths and heroism, which cannot be fulfilled after death. Mystery cults, including those devoted to Dionysus, seek to turn the transition towards the underworld into a more positive hope for a better destiny. This hope is supported through the experience of possession undergone by the adepts and the

way it transforms the perception of one's own identity. In possession trance, one deliberately loses one's ordinary identity and merges into the larger community of Dionysus's *thiasos*. By dissolving the boundaries between self and other, possession trance is experienced as a moment of utter freedom and bliss, due to relief from any bondages (a mechanism we already encountered in Lecture Four). If death is associated with the destiny of a particular individual (what is experienced as 'me' or 'myself') and is seen as a bondage, then the adept can find in the experience of possession a paradigm for understanding death as a (permanent) dissolution of boundaries.

Instead of fearing the loss of one's power (like the Homeric hero), satyrs and maenads under the guidance of Dionysus enjoy the empowering experience of losing themselves and merging into a broader ground, which ultimately makes irrelevant whether one is still in this or in the next world. In this respect, this sort of possession trance, with its strong emphasis on unification and merging, comes quite close in terms of its intentions (although not necessarily in methods) to anesthetic trance. But instead of fostering a sense of unity due to a progressive shutting down of sensory experience (as in anesthetic trance), it seeks the experience of unity through frenzy and physical communion (hence the recurrent mentions of orgiastic and sexual frenzy). As a result, instead of leading to the discovery of an ultimate eternal reality, absolute, ineffable, beyond time, Dionysiac possession focuses on the freeing and empowering experience of the individual's own dissolution, which is both terrifying and blissful, yielding more of an existential transformation than an ontological insight. One might be tempted to see Dionysiac possession as the experience of self-transcendence *without* ontological Transcendence.

The ancient Greek attitude towards the gods is indicative of a distinctive way that uncertainty is handled in their culture. Human agents act and interact in a world of manifold other agents, and some of them (the gods) are conceived of as particularly powerful. This playfield creates a significant degree of uncertainty, since not only material conditions are subject to natural changes, but the course of events can also be steered in different directions by the direct interventions of multiple and often conflicting agencies. The way the gods take central stage in the epic actions sung in Homer's *Illiad* is the most glaring instance of how human fate is seen as profoundly shaped by divine interven-

tions. In such a context, humans can do their best to understand what the gods want and plan through divination, and to ensure their alliance through sacrifice and rituals. But these strategies can only manage uncertainty, they cannot eliminate it. There is a constant tension towards catching any signals the gods might be sending and understanding them as best as possible. But the decoding of divine signs is always matter of interpretation, and this manifests a distinct form of uncertainty: hermeneutic uncertainty, namely, not being sure of what something actually means.

The Greek conception of human relations with the gods thus allows for two diverging scenarios. On the one hand, one might try to withdraw as much as possible from the mingling with the gods. This sort of atheistic turn is not unknown among the Greeks, but it surely regarded as odd (if not dangerous or blasphemous) from most of mainstream society. Being godless, one sets oneself apart from received norms and traditions, by thus facing marginalization if not direct ostracism and persecution.<sup>88</sup> Unsurprisingly, atheistic positions are thus relatively rare. But even a softer approach that simply tries to keep human affairs as separate as possible from those of the gods would encounter problems and resistance. If the gods are there and genuinely contribute to human events, not addressing them properly (namely, according to tradition) would simply yield even greater uncertainty. Withdrawing from negotiation with the divine seems thus contrary to the purpose of mastering uncertainty, and it might be attempted only insofar as this ideal of mastery is relinquished. In any case, this strategy would not lead to a greater mastery or to a more certain condition.

On the other hand, one might try to push human subordination even further towards a divine principle. Dionysiac cults provide an instance of how this could be accomplished. By becoming a satyr or a maenad, a human being can withdraw from other social bonds and merge into the *thiasos*. The new community is entirely ruled and led by the god, who possesses their adepts. Through ecstatic faith they are healed from the crisis of uncertainty that otherwise plagued the ordinary human condition. In this scenario, stronger subordination to a higher principle seems to yield greater certainty and control, although

•• 88 For a discussion of atheism in Ancient Greece, see Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (2015).



only at the price of making the individual self considerably thinner, if not foregoing it altogether. The further problem with this solution is that it requires two steps: a disruptive action through which the individual is separated from his or her original community, and a constructive step in which the same individual is integrated within the *thiasos*, or his or her new community. This transition engenders a crisis of the preexisting order and a need to navigate one's way from it to something that might still be unknown and might first need to be discovered and adequately conceptualized.

As we shall see, both these strategies, and especially the latter, inspired by some core elements of the cult of Dionysus, are explored in Greek tragedy.

### 7.3 The tragedy of mastery

Tragedy can be directly linked with the cult of Dionysus (Seaford 2006, chapter 6). By the second half of the sixth century BCE, Athens hosted what was already an important festival, called 'City Dionysia.' The event evolved into a more structured performance, which included scripted song, changes in ordinary identity, use of masks, and the enacting of mythical scenes. Dionysus's *thiasos* might be seen as the ancestor of the tragic *chorus*, and actors on stage as individuals possessed by mythic figures and gods who revive their stories, by thus opening up mysteries for the sight of the whole community (*theatron*, the Greek word for 'theatre,' literally means 'viewing place'). By the fifth century BCE, Athenians could enjoy the seasonal representations of tragedies and even contests among tragediographers. As we shall see, philosophers were both spectators and critics of this new genre. But to see why and how that matters for our investigation into the paradox of mastery, we need to look at one concrete example: Aeschylus's masterpiece, the *Oresteia*.

The *Oresteia* is a trilogy performed for the first time in 458 BCE at Athens, written and directed by Aeschylus, who was originally born in Eleusis (525 ca. BCE) and who would die a few years after the performance (455 ca. BCE). The first play, the *Agamemnon*, represents the mythical hero coming home victorious after the ten-year long war at Troy. His wife, Clytemnestra, initially welcomes him, but has actually planned to kill Agamemnon in revenge for his killing of their daughter Iphigenia, who he sacrificed in order to ensure the success of

his Troy expedition. The second play, *Choephoroi* (literally ‘Libation Bearers,’ which Oliver Taplin rendered more simply as ‘Women at the Graveside’) presents the return of Orestes, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra’s son, who was sent away from home when Agamemnon departed for Troy. Orestes seeks to vindicate his father by killing Clytemnestra, and succeeds in doing so. This, however, raises the fury of the Erinyes, a mythical retinue of female figures who defend the rights of parents and punish the children who transgress them. This provides the cue for the third play, the *Eumenides* (‘Kindly Ones,’ rendered by Taplin as ‘Orestes at Athens’), in which Orestes flees from Argos (where the previous events took place) to Athens, seeking help from goddess Athena. Athena sets up a formal trial, in which the Erinyes play the prosecutor and the god Apollo the defender. Even though the jury is equally divided pro and contra Orestes, Athena’s own vote (or her rules in case of *ex aequo*, depending on interpretations) determines that he will be absolved from his crime, and the Erinyes will have to be welcomed and respected in Athens.

As the plot makes clear, much of the *Oresteia* turns around vengeance and retaliation. The model is straightforward: an offence needs to be expiated with a similar offence (hence a killer must be killed). This trend is somehow broken in the third play, in which the intervention of Athena’s legal institution sets Orestes free. This structure easily allows for an interpretation in which Athens’s new political institutions (Athens turned into a democratic regime around the beginning of the fifth century), including the legal ones, are extolled and magnified, as leading to the overcoming of internal conflicts that were endemic among aristocratic families.

Another underlying feature of the whole *Oresteia* concerns gender and women’s subordination. Female characters lead most of the action. Starting from the background myths, Helen of Troy (whose kidnapping by Paris sparked the Trojan war) is often evoked in the *Agamemnon* as the paradigm of the ominous woman who will bring destruction and conflict. Helen is compared with a lion. When it is still a kitten, the lion is welcomed and nourished in a human house, but as it grows older ‘as repayment to / its rearers for their help, / it showed gratitude / by slaughtering their sheep; / served the household with / an uninvited meal— / many cruelly killed, / and blood splashed round the hall.’ (*Agamemnon*, III.727-734, transl. Taplin 2018, 31).

This comparison paves the way for introducing Clytemnestra, who at that point is playing the faithful wife preparing for the return of her king, but who is plotting to kill him. As we shall see in greater detail, Clytemnestra provides the paradigm of the woman who violently revolts against her subordinated condition.

Many other prominent female characters, though, do not share this attitude of rebellion. Iphigenia is presented by the chorus in the beginning of the *Agamemnon* as a pure and innocent victim of her father's sacrifice. Agamemnon's sacrifice is the kernel of Clytemnestra's resentment, but it is also introduced as an almost desperate act, forced by a prophecy who announced that the goddess Artemis needed to be placated for Agamemnon's expedition to succeed. In fact, Agamemnon's choice is presented as a grave dilemma: 'heavy chaos waiting / for my not obeying: / heavy, though, the future / chaos if I butcher / my own household's precious glory, / stain my hands with daughter pouring / life-blood on the altar table. / Which of these is free from evil?' (*Agamemnon*, I.206-210, transl. Taplin 2018, 10-11). Although there are differences, we face again the issue of war and kin-killing that we discussed in Lecture Six in the case of Arjuna.

If Iphigenia is introduced only as a passive victim of a dilemma that involves the human duties towards the gods, one's own family, and other human allies, Cassandra presents a case in which submission and resistance merge. Cassandra is a prophetess, possessed by the god Apollo, and originally from Troy. She came to Argos as Agamemnon's slave (and concubine). Cassandra explains how she received the gift of prophesizing from Apollo. The god wanted to have sex with her, initially she accepted, but later refused, and Apollo punished her by condemning her prophecies to be met with utter disbelief. Cassandra's role on stage is that of creating a dramatic interlude between Clytemnestra escorting Agamemnon into the palace, and the revelation that she has killed him in the bath. Cassandra explains to the chorus of (male) elders the curses that surround Agamemnon's house, which are due to Agamemnon's father Atreus, who murdered his nephews and served their flesh to his brother Thyestes. Then Cassandra announces quite explicitly the imminent killing of Agamemnon himself. Exceptionally, this time the Chorus both understands and seems convinced by Cassandra's foresight. Cassandra knows that she is

going to be slaughtered with Agamemnon and decides to strip herself from the ritual symbols of prophecy, disdainfully rejects Apollo who led her to this fate, and fearless enter the palace, singing: ‘this is the way it is for humans: / if they have good fortune, it is like a shadow; / if they are unfortunate, / it takes a dampened sponge / to wipe the picture clean away. / And I feel far more pity for these things than those’ (*Agamemnon*, VI.1325-1330, transl. Taplin 2018, 55). Cassandra calls for revenge against both Clytemnestra and Apollo, but meanwhile embraces her tragic fate without fear.

In the next two plays, female characters play a prominent and diverse role. In *Women at the Graveside*, the chorus is composed of women who came to Agamemnon’s grave for ritual mourning, accompanying Electra, Orestes’s sister. During the play, all the female characters (including Cilissa, Oreste’s old nurse) are coalized against Clytemnestra and her partner Aegisthus, who are seen as tyrants usurping Agamemnon’s throne. They strongly foster and support Orestes’s resolve to murder his mother. In *Orestes at Athens*, the chorus is composed by the Erinyes, female goddess of the underworld, daughters of goddess Night, seeking the blood of those who killed their own parents. Clytemnestra’s ghost briefly appears on stage to steer the Erinyes to hunt Orestes and vindicate her. But Orestes flees to Athens, where he invokes goddess Athena’s judgment. Orestes’s trial quickly become a contest between the god Apollo and the Erinyes themselves, and once Orestes is absolved from his crime, Athena must persuade the Erinyes to abandon any plans of revenge against Athens and instead stay and be honored as goddesses of the underworld and the family.

Considering that only male actors could be on stage, and that (most likely) women were not allowed to watch the play, we see that the *Oresteia* is a trilogy heavily centered on women’s struggles and drama, who are nevertheless all enacted by male citizens, disguised as women, for male spectators. From this point of view, we can extract a general message that emerges from the trilogy: subordination is dangerous (it creates greater uncertainty) for the dominant party, if the subordinated party is oppressed and deprived of some form of recognition. Recognition does not entail the breaking of subordination, but quite the contrary is a means of ensuring its stability. Recognition works as a compensation for a position of inferiority of some sort, which can make that

position more acceptable to the inferior. Through the help of this recognition, the inferior can merge with the superior in a harmonious community, segregated and yet joyful. This sounds like a message for the male citizens of Athens about how they should handle their wives, daughters and women.

*Orestes at Athens* illustrates this point. The play opens with the Pythia at Delphi, Apollo's official prophetess, who upon entering the shrine is repelled by seeing the Erinyes there:

But these ones have no wings, and are pitch black,  
and utterly repulsive, reeking with disgusting snorts,  
and from their eyes there drips revolting ooze.  
Their whole appearance is not right for bringing near  
the shrines of gods, nor human houses either.  
I never have set eyes upon this race of creatures,  
and I've no idea what country could  
have bred them without damage or regret.

(*Orestes at Athens*, I.50-55, transl. Taplin 2018, 124)

The Erinyes are seeking Orestes, who came to Apollo's temple for refuge. Apollo can purify Orestes from his killing, but he cannot subvert the fact that he will have to be persecuted for having done it. Apollo can set the interpretation of Orestes's killing right, and yet cannot simply dismiss its consequences, namely, the fact that Orestes will be hunted by the Erinyes. In the overall structure of this third play, the real conflict is clearly between the Erinyes and Apollo, and the conflict is both of justice and jurisdiction, in which Apollo (a younger, male god) wants to overpower and subdue the older goddesses. The Erinyes embody an ancient law of retaliation, as they sing:

Firstly, listen how we  
make allotments among humans  
as we think is upright justice:  
when a man is pure in actions,  
there's no threat of anger from us,  
and he lives his life undamaged;

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but the sinner who attempts to  
hide his violent deeds of murder—  
we bear witness for the victim,  
and extract the blood-price from him  
so he pays the final reckoning.

(*Orestes at Athens*, V.310-320, transl. Taplin 2018, 135-136)

In their song, they also suggest that they bring about their vengeance by making the victim mad. In fact, their first appearance on stage, at the end of *Women at the Graveside*, is seen by Orestes only. In this sense, the Erinyes also embody the force of remorse that torment the wrongdoer and can drive them out of their mind. But they also provide a further justification for their task, which has to do with their own subordination to Olympic gods. They sing:

This standing was allotted to us  
from our birth:  
to share no common feasting with  
the gods above;  
we have no part in rituals that  
don white robes.  
Our chosen role is as destroyers  
of a house  
when violent strife leads one to killing  
kin most close;  
then we wear down his strength and drain  
him to a husk.  
Because we free the other gods from  
this grim task,  
they do not have to bring such cases  
to the test.  
And Zeus excludes our blood-soaked party  
from his feast.

(*Orestes at Athens*, V.350-365, transl. Taplin 2018, 137)

Here, the Erinyes suggest that their role of terrifying avengers is not only due to justice, but also to their own exclusion from the community of the Olympian gods. The Erinyes are presented as the daughters of Night, one of the oldest goddesses in Greek theogony. They are old women, almost strangers to the Olympians and inducing a sense of revulsion in them. Being excluded from the larger community and taking no share in 'Zeus's feast' with the others, they pursue the only task that is left open for them to retain some power and charisma, namely, that of defending the family kinship.

Apollo, emblem of the younger Olympians, shows disdain towards the Erinyes. One might wonder whether his plan of encouraging and fostering Orestes's killing of his mother was not just meant to tease the Erinyes themselves and then show his greater power over them. In fact, after the trial has established that Orestes should be released, the chorus of Erinyes sings: 'you younger gods have ridden down / the ancient laws, / wrenching them roughly from my hands / into yours. / [...] Hear me, my mother Night: / the gods' deceitfulness / has stripped me of old right, / and made me nothingness' (*Orestes at Athens*, VIII.775-830, transl. Taplin 2018, 154-157). The Erinyes's duty might be regarded as horrible, yet it gives them at least some role to play in the world, and brings them even respect of some sort, based on fear, if nothing else. The outcome of Athena's trial strips them of this role and thus constitutes a further humiliation, which provokes their plea for revenge.

After the trial, Athena thus has to persuade the Erinyes to stay in Athens and become the good-willing guardians of the household. Athena promises that they will be honored with sacrifices and be kept in high esteem, since 'no house could thrive except with your support' (*Orestes at Athens*, VIII.895, transl. Taplin 2018, 158). This promise eventually does the trick, and the furious and horrible Erinyes becomes the 'Kindly Ones' (*Eumenides*), to the point that one might wonder whether it isn't this transformation that the traditional title of the play hints at. What Athena achieves is to give them a new form of social recognition by transforming their role from that of fierce persecutors of the wrongdoers, into that of the propitious protectors.

Interestingly, both the Erinyes and Athena acknowledge that transgression of the law (and murder in particular) will be punished, and that good citizens should be led to act virtuously also through fear. As the chorus sings:

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There is a way that terror can  
improve the minds of men,  
and fear prove beneficial since  
good sense is reached through pain.  
Those who do not cultivate  
at heart a sense of fear—  
the same for cities as for men—  
will not hold Justice dear.

(*Orestes at Athens*, VI.510-525, transl. Taplin 2018, 143)

Athena will reiterate almost the same message (*Orestes at Athens*, VII.690-700, transl. Taplin 2018, 145), fully endorsing this principle. Athena sees that the potential violence and fear that is proper of the Erinyes can be put to good use as a forceful deterrent against crime, and thus as a means of upholding justice. However, in their new role, this fearful aspect moves to the background, and the Erinyes can now play a more cheerful function as protectors of the whole community and its households. The play ends with a procession in which women exit Athena's temple and escort the Erinyes to their new cave, where they will be worshipped. The whole stage is flooded with this procession of women (or rather, men dressed as women) celebrating their role.

This aspect connects the *Oresteia* to the Dionysiac cults, through the trope of the excluded or segregated group that receives full recognition and reintegration into a larger community, portrayed with joyful aspects. Recognition, however, is not used to eliminate subordination, but rather to ensure that subordination does not lead the subordinated party to exercise its power in a destructive way. In this sense, social recognition becomes a form of domestication.

This whole grand finale is predicated on an explicit attempt at enforcing an ontological segregation between genders. Apollo, in his defense of Orestes, invokes an infamous argument:

The person who is called the mother  
is no parent of the child, merely the feeder  
of the new-implanted embryo.



The true begetter is the one who thrusts;  
 and she is like a stranger acting for a stranger:  
 she keeps the seedling safe, provided no god injures it.  
 I offer an exhibit that will prove the point  
 and show a father can give birth without a mother:  
 here stands the daughter of Olympian Zeus as witness.  
 She was never cultured in the darkness of a womb.  
 (*Orestes at Athens*, VII.655-665, transl. Taplin 2018, 150).<sup>89</sup>

This argument wins over only half of the jury, and yet it leads to Orestes being absolved. Athena herself agrees with Apollo: ‘this is because no mother gave me birth, / and so in every way I’m for the male—/except for intercourse—with all my heart. / I’m strongly on the father’s side, / and shall not grant a wife’s fate precedence—/not one who killed her man, the master of her house’ (*Orestes at Athens*, VII.735-740, transl. Taplin 2018, 152).

The ideology of women subordination to men is also at the core of Orestes’s own plan to kill his mother. Orestes was threatened to do so by Apollo himself, who announced that failing to vindicate his father would have led him to excruciating pains. And yet, Orestes himself acknowledges:

Should I believe at all in oracles like these?  
 Well, even if I did not, still it must be done, the deed.  
 For there are many urgings which combine to this one end:  
 besides the god’s command,  
 there is the heavy burden of my grief,  
 and pressure from my lack of wealth;  
 and I should not allow the glorious citizens of Argos,  
 valiant conquerors of Troy, to live on as they are,  
 subjected to a brace of women.  
 (*Women at the Graveside*, III.295-305, transl. Taplin 2018, 87)

•• 89 This doctrine is echoed in Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, 763b 31 and following, who attributed it to Anaxagoras and other presocratic thinkers. For further discussion, see Sophia Connell, ‘Aristotle on Women: Physiology, Psychology, and Politics’ (2021).

The same ideology that insists on women's subordination resurfaces in the intense dialogue between Clytemnestra and Orestes, in which she tries to dissuade him from his intention. The dialogue involves a number of turns and twists. It opens with Clytemnestra asking for a 'men-killing-ax' to defend herself, but as soon as she stands in front of Orestes, she abandons that intention and shows her breast to her son, asking him to remember her role as mother. Her claim is ambiguous. In a previous scene, Cilissa, Orestes's old nurse, recalled how she had breastfed Orestes since he was born. Clytemnestra is thus either deliberately lying, or reconstructing an idealized memory, or perhaps both. In any case, Orestes hesitates initially, but is encouraged by his friend Pylades who states: 'treat any human as your enemy before the gods' (*Women at the Graveside*, IX.902, transl. Taplin 2018, 111). Orestes advances further justifications for killing, mentioning the slaughter of Agamemnon but also the decision to send him into exile when he was a child. But Clytemnestra manages to rebuff these charges, by pointing to Agamemnon's own wrongs and to the fact that she sent Orestes not to exile but with an allied family for protecting him. Then the discussion turns more decidedly towards gender roles. When Clytemnestra complains that 'it's hard for wives when separated from their man,' Orestes rebuts: 'The man's hard labor keeps their women safe at home.' Having said that, Clytemnestra realizes: 'It seems you mean to kill your mother, then' (*Women at the Graveside*, IX.920-923, transl. Taplin 2018, 113). While Clytemnestra can build an *ad personam* argument, calling attention on Agamemnon's faults and her own love for Orestes, she cannot win when the discussion moves in the domain of social hierarchy. Just before this, the chorus (who in this play is composed by the women of Argos) sings:

The female-ruling  
power of illicit passion  
breaks the union  
that binds humans into households.  
[...]  
Comparing all of these ruthless  
atrocities from the past,  
there's not one surpasses the coupling

this household detests the worst:  
 the treacherous plot of a woman  
 who murdered her warrior lord,  
 and sleeps with another. I value  
 the wife who remains subdued.

(*Women at the Graveside*, V.599-630, transl. Taplin 2018, 100-101)

When it comes to social hierarchies (and hence to gender subordination and segregation), Clytemnestra's claims lose all their force and seemingly make no good sense even for the women of Argos. With her slaughter of Agamemnon and concubinage with Aegisthus, Clytemnestra has broken the rules of the social structure in which she operates. Her position was one of subordination, in which her agency was almost entirely dismissed. She had to witness the sacrifice of her daughter, to bear the decision of her husband to embark on a ten-year war, and then to come back with a new concubine. According to social norms, she should have simply accepted all of this, perhaps with grief, but without protest. She was expected to act more like Cassandra, and yet she ended up being a lion, akin to Helen (which Clytemnestra at some point explicitly defend and vindicate, *Agamemnon*, VIII.1461-1465, transl. Taplin 2018, 62).

In the intense dialogue between Clytemnestra and the Chorus (the old men of Argos) that follows the murdering of Agamemnon in the first play, Clytemnestra presents various reasons for her action. She mentions the intention of vindicating Iphigenia, of course, but she also mentions having acted under the impulse of the *Daimon* of the house, the god-like entity that has cursed the dynasty of Atreus. Eventually she further refers to her love for Aegisthus, and her jealousy for Cassandra (*Agamemnon*, VIII.1435-1445, transl. Taplin 2018, 61). This dialogue is not strictly conclusive, but it shows a number of different reasons and motivations for Clytemnestra's deed. Some of them, like the role of the *Daimon*, seem to take some responsibility away from her, although she is also willing to vindicate full responsibility for her own action. By the end of the dialogue, she states:

... I'm willing  
 to agree a solemn promise

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with the Daimon of this bloodline:  
that if only it will go and  
leave this palace, and oppress some  
other house with kindred murders,  
I shall be content to manage  
with a fraction of our riches,  
just enough and nothing further.  
This I promise, if I can then  
purge this household from the madness  
of our killing one another.

(*Agamemnon*, VIII.1569-1575, transl. Taplin 2018, 67)

After this declaration, Aegisthus enters the stage, and he engages in a violent exchange of mutual threats with the chorus. Clytemnestra intervenes to pacify them:

No, my dearest, let's not do more damage.  
We've already reaped enough unhappy harvest;  
let's not have yet further bloodshed.  
Go back to your houses, you respected elders,  
go before you suffer; yield to how things are determined.  
We have done the things we had to.  
If this proves the end of troubles, we would welcome that,  
since we've been lacerated by the Daimon's talon.  
That is my woman's contribution,  
in case anybody thinks it worthy of attention.

(*Agamemnon*, IX.1655-1661, transl. Taplin 2018, 71)

Upon accomplishing her plans, Clytemnestra seems aware of *not* having an option of reconstituting a superior and more harmonious community. She knows that her folk will nurture revenge and that she has done something against common norms. Her solution is simply acknowledging this much, that no choice seems free from sorrow and grief, and she prays for the *Daimon* to go away, to simply stop adding more sorrow. She does not seek a reconciliation

of the conflict, but rather a compromise with it, based on acceptance of the inevitable truth that humans must face suffering during their lives, and no choice is free from it (Cassandra shared the same wisdom, as we saw).

To summarize, the *Oresteia* presents a complex and multifaceted account of how the paradox of mastery can be dealt with. It focuses on the issue of subordination, which is here exemplified by gender roles and their function in both household and broader social life. Clytemnestra breaks this subordination, by showing both the inherent danger entailed by the act of subjugating a party (the metaphor of the lion), and her needs to call back some agency by withdrawing from what she perceives as oppression. But her acts are seen even by her own community as too outrageous to be accepted. She knows that harmony cannot be restored, and perhaps that it is not even possible in the first place. She gives up the very idea of mastery, and instead settles on an attitude of acceptance of the inherent sorrow that accompany human fate. From the point of view of those interested in securing mastery, this is obviously not a solution, but simply a fault that needs addressing. The second play shows one way in which the hierarchy is re-established by Orestes's killing of his mother. But if Clytemnestra's deed revealed an inherent problem in the traditional form of subordination, simply reasserting it through retaliation will not do. The third play illustrates how a better solution must consist in *taming* the subjugated party: the subordinate receives recognition as a reward for their loyalty. The inherent danger in subordination can thus be put at good use to foster the stability of the social order (the Erinyes's fear-inspiring nature can be enlisted for defending the respect of civic laws). The Erinyes are thus tamed, they become the 'Kindly Ones.' Recognition is used not to dispel subordination, but rather to stabilize it and uphold its ideology. This seems to be what the final scene of the trilogy is intended to show, in the procession of male citizens in women's clothes, extolling the propitious role of the Erinyes as the new guardians of the household—who are still hosted in underworld, though, in a cave, far away from the light of the day, the business of men, and the glory of the younger Olympian gods. And yet, if subordination structurally empowers the subordinated party to potentially disrupt the hierarchy, to what extent is this form of taming through recognition good enough to ensure a stable order? Do we witness here a dissolution of the paradox of mastery, or rather a deferment of its explosion?

## 7.4 Being and nothing

Before concluding this lecture, it is tempting to make one final leap, perhaps speculative, about how the model we have discussed so far could be developed. Subordination of two different elements or poles entails an inequality in their weight or power: the stronger dominates the weaker, one has more, the other has less. If one pushes this model to the extreme, subordination becomes the absolute opposition between all and nothing, the maximum and zero, the positive and the negative. In this extreme form, subordination is still a relation between two poles, but now one of them is completely empty of any content, weight, or power, it is reduced to sheer nothingness; so much so that positing such a nothingness entails a performative contradiction. To posit anything, some sort of quality must be attributed to it, but attributing anything to nothing undermines the very act of positing nothing as such. However, in this extreme opposition, even the positive side is profoundly transformed. If the positive is the absolute antagonist of an absolute negative, then anything that is different from it (anything that is *not* the absolute positive) would count as non-positive, hence as the negative itself. If anything (say a human being) is something, and yet is different from the absolutely positive (a human being is not the absolute positive), then, such a thing must be a non-positive, hence, a nothing (because a human being is not the absolute positive, it is nothing at all). Difference can be conceived only as the radical alterity between the absolute positive and its complete negation. Whatever is not the absolute positive must be a nothing. Within the positive itself, no differentiation could remain. To the point that even the differentiation between the absolute positive and its negative might appear paradoxical (if the negative is nothing at all, how could the difference between the positive and the negative be real?). In any case, this absolute Positive is not a harmonious manifoldness of related differences, but a blank eternal and undifferentiated Being. Since nothing is left to the negative, the positive keeps all reality for itself. And yet, by concentrating reality in just one simple point, the absolute positive becomes also undifferentiated. It simply *is*, but nothing else could be said of it.

Consider how this model could be derived from the structure of subordination we discussed so far. In the *Oresteia*, there is a suggestion about the need for

combining subordination with recognition, to defuse the risks engendered by subordination itself. This risk is voiced in the Erinyes's claim that the younger gods have 'made me nothingness' (*Orestes at Athens*, VIII. 830, transl. Taplin 2018, 157). In the play, this is a figure of speech, and yet it hints at the way in which complete lack of recognition, along with repression and forceful dismissal of one's agency, has the power of annihilating its victim. After all, the communitarian model of agency entails that one is identified as a *doer* and whatever hinders or even destroys one's ability to act erases one's own being altogether. The ending of the *Oresteia* shows a great attempt at *taming* the subordinate through recognition, without annihilating it completely. While this solution defuses the imminent treat, it keeps open the possibility that the subordinate will revolt again in the future. The problem of uncertainty is managed, but not solved. And this open-endedness might thus lead to take a further leap, envisaging a stronger, even extreme, model of subordination such as the one just sketched. Instead of taming the subordinate with recognition, one might go all the way down and annihilate it, depriving it of any reality. And yet, this will apply also to the dominating principle, which will be transformed into a pure, ineffable, positive presence, of which nothing more could be thought or said. The world of differences and becoming which usually manifests in between the two extremes of absolute positive being and absolute negative nothingness, cannot be real after all. Differences and becoming are themselves unreal because the only true difference is the absolute difference between absolute being and nothing.

From the little we know through the surviving fragments of his poem *On Nature* and the scattered witnesses collected in ancient sources, Parmenides (whose dates are uncertain but who was arguably active around the mid-fifth century BCE, and was thus a contemporary of Aeschylus) is the presocratic philosopher who explicitly articulated this absolute opposition between being and nothing.<sup>90</sup> In his poem, Parmenides describes his initiation by goddess *Justice (Dike)*, who shows him two paths. The path of Day is the path of truth and states that being *is*, and not-being *is not*. Since the two are absolute oppo-

•• 90 For a general introduction and a collection of available fragments, see David Gallop, *Parmenides of Elea. Fragments. A Text and Translation with an Introduction* (1984).

sites, being cannot become nothing, and nothing cannot come to be. Becoming is a contradiction. Along the path of Night, most mortals *believe* that becoming is the arising into being of what was nothing before, or the coming back into nothing of what was existent. But this cannot be the truth, becoming is an illusion at best, or the wrong interpretation of phenomenal evidence. Justice thus convinces Parmenides that he should pursue the path of Day and keep away from the path of Night. To remain within the truth, one should deny the world of multiplicity and becoming as it appears, dismiss its pretended reality, and remained assured by the absolute unity of being, which is eternal, incorruptible, and unmoving.

Parmenides is credited as the first philosopher who relied on logical argumentation to counter what seems obvious from empirical evidence (becoming, manifoldness) and to establish a metaphysical view (only pure being is). In today's Western philosophy, Parmenides is still alive. Since the 1960's, Emanuele Severino (1927-2020) developed a complex and sophisticated metaphysical system based on the idea that Parmenides was essentially right on one point, namely, the fact that becoming cannot be interpreted as some sort of passage between being and nothing (or vice versa), because this passage is contradictory and (thus) inconceivable. Severino took this point further by articulating a full-blown eternalist metaphysics, in which all things, in virtue of being something rather than nothing, must be eternal and immutable. What manifests as becoming is thus nothing but the (infinite) disclosure of the eternal in their emerging into the horizon of appearing. In one of his key works, *Essence of Nihilism* (first Italian edition 1971, English translation 2016), Severino argued that derogating from Parmenides's principle is the genuine essence of nihilism. Severino understands 'nihilism' as the belief that beings (which are to some extent acknowledged as being different from a sheer nothing) are identified with or reverted into nothingness at some point; they are conceived as subject to ontological destruction. The nihilist does not see the eternity of all beings that belong to them just in virtue of being different from nothing. Not seeing this point, they believe (at some level) that entities (which are not-nothing) can in fact turn into nothing. Hence, nihilism is a supreme form of contradiction, or a 'folly' as Severino would say. In Severino's historical account, the whole of Western thought struggled to find ways of accounting for the



reality of ontological becoming *pace* Parmenides's denial of it, and because of that (according to Severino) the whole of Western thought provides in fact as one grand development of nihilism.

Moving from a different angle (and ignoring Severino's project), Michael Della Rocca has advocated for what he called *The Parmenidean Ascent* (2020). Careful rational analysis of core concepts of Western metaphysics reveals that the sort of distinctions that they wish to establish are in fact untenable. Della Rocca interprets Parmenides as the first who argued against the positing of any real difference or distinction, since all efforts of positing genuine distinction ultimately fail to satisfy the principle of sufficient reason (according to which there must be a reason in virtue of which something is posited, no brute facts are allowed). On Della Rocca's reading, Parmenides is a defender of strict monism. All differences need to be transcended and left behind. The real is completely undifferentiated and hence ineffable, all differences and distinctions are unreal or ill-conceived. According to Severino, Parmenides does indeed reject the reality of differences (hence the reality of any finite ordinary entity, like this table, this human being, that chair, and so on). But while for Severino this is an *inconsistency* on Parmenides's side (because differences genuinely appear at the phenomenological level, hence they cannot be reduced to sheer nothingness, nor dismissed as illusory), Della Rocca rather defends Parmenides's original attempt at proving that only an absolute being void of difference can be genuinely real. Despite this fundamental disagreement, both Severino and Della Rocca agree in regarding Parmenides's method to establish his conclusions as primarily based on pure logical argumentation (for Severino, the principle of identity and non-contradiction is key, for Della Rocca the principle of sufficient reason).

Given how Parmenides has been interpreted, it might be hard to imagine something more remote from social concerns than his poem. And yet, Nuria Scapin, in her *The Flower of Suffering. Theology, Justice, and the Cosmos in Aeschylus' Oresteia and Presocratic Thought* (2020) has shown that Aeschylus was himself receptive to the developments in presocratic philosophy and his notion of justice, for instance, can be seen in line with the sort of cosmological broadening and generalization that the concept was undergoing among presocratic thinkers. Without having to establish (even if it cannot be entirely ruled out) a

direct link between Aeschylus and Parmenides, we can state that they were both part of the same culture, which was struggling with the enduring problem of mastery. Parmenides does *not* offer the same solution that emerges in the *Oresteia*, and yet this difference is predicated on a broader background in which a spectrum of possible options was explored.

If we take Parmenides's idea of an absolute opposition as a way of developing an extreme model of subordination, then the political dimension of Parmenides's thought emerges quite clearly. If the world of appearance is nothing but a phenomenon, which is often badly interpreted, then all social hierarchies and subordinations are equally sheer appearances, they belong to the path of Night, not to the path of Day. Moving towards absolute subordination, one actually *escapes* from subordination, insofar as no determinate or specific subordination (like those that most commonly apply to empirical human beings) remain as genuinely real. Accepting the absolute subordination of nothing to Being is thus a way of foregoing all other subordinations as unreal. This is a strategy analogous to those we already discussed in Lecture Six, which moves towards disembodiment and anesthetic transcendence.

This similarity does not necessarily entail or presuppose a direct historical link between Parmenides's thought and the ancient Indian sources we discussed, although it does not exclude it either.<sup>91</sup> For present purposes, we can just notice that even within ancient Greek culture, the same spectrum of possibilities is present, and the option of moving towards transcendence is explicitly voiced. Perhaps the greatest gulf between what we know about Parmenides and what we learn from ancient Indian sources is the lack in the former of any clear hint at the *practice* of anesthetic trance. Parmenides seems to have the sort of hermeneutic framework to interpret the results of that practice but makes seemingly no reference to it. Perhaps he arrived at that interpretation through another route (traditional history of philosophy would support this option, stressing how Parmenides arrives at his conclusions *through reason alone*). Or perhaps Parmenides did not consider it appropriate to describe that practice

•• 91 For a discussion of historical parallels, see Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002), chapter 2, especially pp. 48-59. McEvilley draws attention, for instance, to the view defended in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (VI.2) by Uddālaka, who contends that Being alone (and not non-Being) is the only ultimate and real principle, which is strikingly similar to Parmenides' own position.

in writing. We noticed that Dionysiac possession comes close in results to anesthetic trance but does not seem to make a leap into transcendence. Parmenides does make the leap, but seemingly without linking it to a specific trance-like method or practice.

Perhaps we need to take a broader approach in conceiving of the ways in which anesthetic trance is practiced or can be articulated. Let us maintain that its main goal is that of shutting down sensory inputs, unify and simplify the content of experience, to the point of reaching a seemingly intransitive form of awareness (in which no subject-object duality can be discerned anymore). This goal might be pursued through different roads. In Lecture Six we discussed how Upaniṣadic sages resorted to devices common in their context, such as the recitation of a sacred syllable or mantra, or the concentration on breathing (broadly understood as life-force). The basic mechanism of anesthetic trance is quite simple: powerful concentration on one object will withdraw attention from the senses, and without paying attention to their stimulation, sensory perception will progressively fade. The metaphysical and cosmological view of an underpinning undifferentiated unity behind all manifoldness can be read as a homological metaphor for the process of concentrating attention to one point, withdrawing it from its ordinary dispersal in the manifoldness of sensory experience. This suggests that anything that is powerful enough to manipulate attention in this way could be exploited for moving at least in the same direction. Now, Parmenides is credited as the founder of pure logic and argumentation, and his arguments are notorious for moving blatantly against empirical evidence. Could not be precisely *this* the sort of method he developed for inducing anesthetic trance? Not a sacred syllable, but a rational syllogism would do the same trick. In the next lecture, we shall come back to this idea.

Be that as it may, we know too little about the historical Parmenides in order to invest much more in speculation and guesswork. What can be reasonably stated is that ancient Greek thought is fully capable of conceiving of transcendence, and this conception can be seen in line with one possible extreme development of the model of subordination that pervades the Greek way of understanding mastery and selfhood. Historically speaking, there will be later attempts at deliberately cultivating anesthetic trance, in a form comparable to

that used by Indian ascetics, to reach a direct experience of transcendence. But for that, we have to wait for Plotinus (204-270 CE), who lived in Alexandria and Rome, and who is mostly renowned as the founder of Neo-Platonism. There is solid historical evidence of Plotinus's and Neoplatonists being knowledgeable about Indian thought and perhaps even practices.<sup>92</sup> The importance of this connection cannot be overstated, given that Plotinus played a crucial role in Augustine's conversion and interpretation of Christianity, including Christian meditation (which in turn had a foundational role in the subsequent development of Western culture, as mentioned in Lecture Zero). But for as much these connections are fascinating, we shall leave them aside, since our main task is not that of tracing historical influences across the Hellenic and the Indian worlds, but rather to map the ways in which the self has been conceived and the problem of mastery associated with it has been dealt with.

Anaesthetic trance could have been at work in Parmenides's thought, and it will be revived by Plotinus some eight centuries later. What comes in between, though, is the birth of classical Western philosophy, and especially the development of Plato's own views, who was conversant and yet profoundly critical of Parmenides.

•• 92 For a discussion of the possible historical links, see Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002), chapters 22, 23, 24; and Paulos Mar Gregorios (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy* (2002).

Lecture Eight:  
Dialectic

## 8.1 Introduction

The self emerges as an attempt at mastering uncertainty. Over the last lectures we mapped different ways that this attempt is confronted with difficulties—or even, at times, what seems like an inescapable paradox. In trying to master uncertainty, one has to deal with elements (mainly embodiment and consociation) which do not eliminate uncertainty, but rather create new forms of it. We explored how ancient Indian and Greek cultures faced this paradox. In the Indian context, one prevalent strategy is that of *distancing* the conflicting elements so that they might cease to engender tension. In the Greek context, on the other hand, the prevalent strategy seems that of *subordinating* one element to the other in order to ensure that one will retain control over the other. This distinction should not be overstated and surely there are good examples of both strategies in each culture, as well as cases of hybridization. But for present purposes, retaining this somewhat more schematic view helps us to bring into relief the main options that are available. If the self is constructed along a spectrum of possible ways of mastering uncertainty, it also true that the paradox entailed by this construction can receive different solutions, which can be compared and related to one another in a relatively systematic way.

So far, we also noted that both in ancient India and ancient Greece, when the paradox of mastery emerges more explicitly, its solution is sought in the direction of a weakening of embodiment and even of consociation. Ascetic practices that emerge in the old *Upaniṣads* move markedly in the direction of Transcendence and challenge the established social structures based on household life. In Greece, such a radical move is less common, or at least less apparent in the extant sources about the archaic and classical period. And yet, both mystery cults and new forms of political organization challenge the more traditional forms of consociation. If pushed even further, as might be the case with Parmenides, this approach leads towards a leap in the Transcendent, which in turn entails a radical re-interpretation of the phenomenal world of difference and becoming as sheer appearance, which is *not* genuine reality or Being. By ascending towards Being, the paradox of mastery is handled insofar as both embodiment and consociation are emptied, and thus their tension fades.

As an alternative, we could expect a move in the opposite direction, towards a stronger form of embodiment that equates an agent with one individual living body. This naturalist view is most prominent perhaps in today's Western culture, as we discussed in Lectures One and Two, but there are also examples of this sort of approach (often glossed as 'materialism') both in ancient Greece and in ancient India.<sup>93</sup> Even so, we already discussed some of the problems connected with it. The trajectory we are now following explores why the reasons for moving towards Transcendence can be equally problematic (by shedding further light on some of the justifications for today's resistance against moving towards this end of the spectrum). As we shall see, *neither* strong embodiment *nor* strong disembodiment provide entirely satisfying and viable solutions to the paradox of mastery. The paradox somehow forces us to stay in the middle of our spectrum, and yet to find a different way of staying there.

Across the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self, we observed that the deliberate and methodical cultivation of trance-like states plays a pivotal role. Different forms of trance are used to alter and even reengineer ordinary experience by transforming the way in which selfhood is constructed and interpreted. Poietic practices (which includes forms of visionary trance) use the power of imagination to withdraw the individual from their engagement with the ordinary environment and allow their identity to become spread over various avatars and domains. Possession trance pushes imagination one step further, by inducing the individual to fully identify with a different entity or personality (usually associated with a superior spiritual being), thus abandoning more or less entirely (and for a shorter or longer period) the ordinary sense of self. Anesthetic trance goes even further, building on the intuition that the sense of self is not necessarily bound to any set of perceptions with which it ordinarily identifies. Anesthetic trance seeks to progressively overcome any basis for identification, until experience becomes intransitive; that is, until there is no more experience of anything. Most often, this is achieved by progressively shutting down sensory stimulations, imagination, and perception, until the adept

•• 93 In the Indian context, this approach is fully developed by the Cārvāka or Lokāyata school, which seems to have developed since the sixth century BCE. For a fuller treatment of it, see Ramkrishna Bhattacharya, *Studies on the Cārvāka/Lokāyata* (2011). For a comparison between Greek and Indian developments on this front, see Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002), chapter 13.

enters a state comparable to dreamless sleep. These three forms of trance differ widely in their manifestations and in the techniques used to establish them. Moreover, the ways of socializing visionary and possession trance (commonly through various forms of social rituals) are often different from those of anesthetic trance, which is usually pursued in seclusion. Despite these differences, though, the three forms of trance constitute a relatively continuous spectrum, which maps onto the spectrum of possible forms of experience discussed in Lecture Two.

In contrast to ancient India, we find less elaborate reflections on the meaning of these various forms of trance in ancient Greek culture. And yet, we do encounter trance-like practices playing an analogously key role in shaping social, historical, and intellectual phenomena. In the previous lecture we also observed how a form of expression peculiar to ancient Greek culture, the tragedy, seems to build on some forms of trance. In some tragedies (like the *Orestia* trilogy) we encounter individual characters that illustrate visionary and possession trance (Cassandra, and the Pythia), but the overall genre can also be connected with Dionysian possession more broadly. As for anesthetic trance, we noted how Parmenides might well provide a hermeneutic framework for interpreting the sort of experience expected from anesthetic trance.<sup>94</sup>

On one reading of his poem, Parmenides can be interpreted as asserting an absolute opposition between positive and negative, between Being and nothing. This opposition is absolute in the sense that whatever is not pure Being has to be considered sheer nothing. The only difference that matters is this opposition.

•• 94 Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002), chapter 6, provides a more elaborate discussion of existing parallels between ascetic practices in India (akin to those discussed in Lecture Six) and their acceptance among Greek circles, especially by Plato in his mature dialogues. McEvelley's discussion is helpful in displacing the cliché of conceiving of Greek philosophy as primarily devoted to theoretical contemplation, versus Indian philosophy as primarily devoted to spiritual practice (a cliché partially challenged by Hadot as well, as discussed in Lecture Zero). The presence of ascetic themes in Plato's mature dialogues (especially the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*) raised the issue of whether Plato remained committed to their pursuit throughout his career. McEvelley supports this option. Here, however, we shall take at face value the way in which Plato's later dialogues, the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* in particular, challenge his earlier views, and also the sort of practices that can be most helpful in reaching the philosophical ideal. This does not mean that the late Plato reverted to a more hedonistic position, but rather that he saw some inherent problems in the way the experiences produced by asceticism were interpreted. For discussion of Plato's ascetic views in the *Phaedo*, see Derek van Zoonen, 'Tricked by Pleasure: Plato's *Phaedo* on the Dangers of Bodily Pleasure' (forthcoming).



Specific differences between things are thus unreal. Insofar as a certain thing is not pure Being, it is just nothing, and insofar as that specific thing *is* something, it is not a specific thing, but just Being. On these grounds, Parmenides can be seen as reducing the world of multiplicity and difference to a sheer illusion, asserting instead that only pure Being is real, and all the rest is nothing at all. Since Being is conceived in absolute terms, it cannot be differentiated in any way and it must be conceived as completely intransitive: it cannot be the *being of* something, it can only *be*. From this point of view, Parmenides does offer an instance of the sort of conclusions that in ancient Indian culture are explicitly derived from the use of anesthetic trance. However, can we say that Parmenides made use of anesthetic trance himself? A standard historiographical view would be skeptical on this front. Parmenides should rather be seen as one of the first Western philosophers who built his cosmology of Being entirely based on rational argumentation. The same historiographical view would then easily grant that how Parmenides's arguments are supposed to work is far from clear, but this would not detract (the view goes) from the fact that Parmenides's method has little to do with trance, and it is based on pure reason alone.

In this Lecture, we turn to one of the leading voices of classic Greek philosophy, and perhaps one of the most influential philosophers ever, Plato. It is possible to show that, among Plato's dialogues, there is some trace of the use of a method that is akin to anesthetic trance in its objectives. This method is best presented in Plato's *Parmenides*. Scholars are rightly cautious in attributing to the historical Parmenides the views that Plato attributes to him in his dialogue. We shall confine our discussion to simply showing that in the *Parmenides* we have Plato presenting a method akin to one form of anesthetic trance, which *he* ascribes (rightly or wrongly) to the historical Parmenides. Given our focus in these lectures, we shall not follow up the historical issue of whether this attribution is correct. Rather, we shall then turn to another method that Plato introduces in a dialogue that is considered to be composed shortly after and in connection with the *Parmenides*, namely, the *Sophist*. Here, the leading character is another 'visitor from Elea' (Parmenides's birthplace). However, the visitor is now ready to go beyond Parmenides and devises an alternative method that will be able to vindicate the full reality of phenomenal difference, precisely what Parmenides reduced to sheer illusion. This new

method is called ‘dialectic’ and works in a different way from the method illustrated in the *Parmenides*.

As we shall see, the dialectical method outlined in the *Sophist* makes it possible to reach a well-defined definition of any given thing, capable of separating it (and hence acknowledging the reality of the thing’s defining difference) from all other things. For present purposes, the importance of the contrast between these two methods is that Plato offers arguments for *rejecting* the validity of anesthetic trance as a viable means to understanding and interpreting reality. However, Plato is no friend of materialism or strong embodiment, but rather seeks to preserve a path towards some sort of transcendent and eternal reality. Dialectic is the new method that is supposed to provide just this. As we shall see, the dialectical method is akin to the forensic approach we encountered in the ending trial of the *Oresteia*. Plato’s dialectic could have been inspired by major intellectual, juridical and political reshaping taking place in Athens during the fourth century and witnessed in tragedy. Be that as it may, in the *Sophist* Plato defines the philosopher as a new character (whether tragic or comic is up for debate), who is both keen to transcend the world of becoming, and certain that this cannot be accomplished by anesthetic trance, nor by reaching towards an alleged absolute and ineffable reality. The sort of absolute transcendence advocated by Parmenides is dismissed as an ill-conceived interpretation of experience.

## 8.2 Overcoming differences

A fairly standard interpretation of the *Parmenides* goes as follows. Plato’s early dialogues (for instance, the *Meno*) introduce Socrates as an inquirer concerned with finding out genuine definitions for the concepts used by various interlocutors. Socrates himself does not defend a particular view. His aim is rather to cross-examine the views of those who pretend to know what they are talking about, in order to show that they actually turn out to be quite confused and even lack a solid grasp of the main object of their pretended wisdom. In this sense, Socrates operates mainly as a critical character. In the middle dialogues (like the *Republic*), Plato reshapes this earlier image of Socrates, and makes him a more assertive character. Now, Socrates sees that in order to genuinely know

anything, it is necessary to postulate the existence of certain eternal and immutable essences, the *ideas* (or *forms*). Only ideas provide a reliable account of physical and changeable reality. However, Plato's middle dialogues never offer a full-blown systematic account of what ideas are and how this theory would work. In the *Parmenides* (one of the most important late dialogues), Plato offers a cross-examination of his own theory of ideas and exposes several flaws in it. Here, it is Parmenides the character who is responsible for this critical investigation, and Socrates the one who turns out to be under inquisition.

Two important points need to be added. First, in the *Parmenides*, Socrates presents the appeal to ideas as a way of accounting for the seemingly contradictory nature of reality. The same entity can possess different qualities, but this appears to Socrates contradictory if taken at face value. Consider a subject S, and qualities Q and F, where Q is not F ( $Q \neq F$ ). If S is both Q and F, this means that S is both F and not-F, which looks contradictory. Socrates's solution is to postulate that the same subject is sharing in multiple ideas, which in turn account for its different qualities. Hence, the subject is not identical with any of these ideas, but different ideas simply happen to be instantiated in the same subject.<sup>95</sup>

Second, each idea is conceived and exists in itself and by itself. In the introductory part of the dialogue, Socrates challenges Zeno, Parmenides's disciple, to show that this might not be the case:

If someone first distinguishes as separate the forms, themselves by themselves, of the things I was talking about a moment ago [...] and then shows that in themselves they can mix together and separate, I for my part, [...] would be utterly amazed, Zeno. (*Parmenides*, 129e, transl. Gill and Ryan 1996, 130)

Socrates presents this as a challenge to Zeno. Zeno has argued that assuming genuine multiplicity in reality entails problems, and Socrates agrees. But he further pushes Zeno to prove that there is genuine multiplicity within the ideas

•• 95 This model of sharing can be seen as a philosophical refinement and abstraction of the communitarian model of agency we discussed in Lecture Three.

themselves, namely, that ideas are not defined in themselves and by themselves, but that they can also mix together. This challenge reveals an important assumption in Socrates' view: ideas are something that exist in themselves and only in virtue of themselves; each idea is unique and self-standing, pure, unmixed with anything else. Hence, Socrates can challenge Zeno to show the contrary and regard this possibility as genuinely amazing and paradoxical. As it turns out, Parmenides steps into the debate and offers several arguments to show that Socrates's account of ideas as separate entities is untenable. Nevertheless, Parmenides makes the following remark:

Yet on the other hand, Socrates [...], if someone, having an eye on all the difficulties we have just brought up and others of the same sort, won't allow that there are forms for things and won't mark off a form for each one, he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same. In this way he will destroy the power of dialectic entirely. (*Parmenides*, 135b-c, transl. Gill and Ryan 1996, 138)

Parmenides here suggests that positing ideas in the rigid way suggested by Socrates, as entirely self-standing and mutually independent beings, is untenable. And yet, abandoning ideas altogether is also problematic, since this 'will destroy the power of dialectic entirely.' Notice that Parmenides here is not talking about *knowledge*, but about *dialectic*. Parmenides is not saying that without ideas we could not know anything (a claim that Socrates would surely accept), but he is rather saying that without ideas we could not engage in dialectic. This point can be interpreted in various ways, but for now, we shall stick to the following: in Parmenides's view (unlike in Socrates's view), ideas are necessary *tools* needed for dialectic, but they are not the ultimate goal of philosophical research. What, then, is this goal? Socrates is confused at this point, and Parmenides remarks that this is due to his lack of training in dialectic:

Socrates, that's because you are trying to mark off something beautiful, and just, and good, and each one of the forms, too soon [...] before you have been properly trained. [...] The impulse you bring to argument is noble and

divine, make no mistake about it. But while you are still young, put your back into it and get more training through something people think useless—what the crowd call idle talk. Otherwise, the truth will escape you. [...] If you want to be trained more thoroughly, you must not only hypothesize, if each thing is, and examine the consequences of that hypothesis; you must also hypothesize, if that same thing is not. (*Parmenides*, 135c-136a, transl. Gill and Ryan 1996, 138-139)

Training in dialectic would entail the ability of advancing a hypothesis about a given entity, and derive what the consequences are, and then take the opposite hypothesis and again derive what the consequences would be. Parmenides quickly expands this scheme, by further adding that the same must be done both in relation to the hypothesized thing considered in itself, and then considered in relation to other things (*Parmenides*, 136b-c). We can see why Parmenides stressed the necessity of not dismissing ideas, since they form the basis of the dialectical deduction. Ideas are stable and well-defined objects one can hypothesize; without them the method would have no fixed starting point. However, this does not commit Parmenides to claim that ideas are needed in order to know particular entities or sensible things. His point concerns method, not knowledge. We might surmise that Parmenides is after something else than just knowing this or that reality (even through ideas). As we shall see, he seems to envisage the goal of dialectic as reaching towards something beyond all ideas.

After this method has been announced, Socrates acknowledges its difficulty. Upon request, Parmenides thus illustrates how dialectic is supposed to work, and this illustration takes up the second and denser part of the dialogue. Here, Parmenides is assisted by a young boy, named Aristotle (only a homonym of Plato's later disciple), whose function is mostly that of helping Parmenides through his series of deductions, by offering an easy counterpoint and, as he says, 'would allow me a breathing space' (*Parmenides*, 137b). Notice, then, that the sort of dialectic in which Parmenides is about to engage is not properly a dialogic discovery (as in the early Socratic dialogues) in which both parties share. Here, the interlocutor is just an attendant, who is supposed to provide some external support for Parmenides's own solo performance.

At this point, Parmenides engages in a series of eight deductions. Scholars usually focus on the various arguments presented in them. For our purposes, we shall focus instead on two aspects: the general scheme that Parmenides applies in each case, and the overall experiential cumulative effect of the eight deductions. To appreciate these points, consider the salient aspect of each deduction.

The first deduction starts from the hypothesis: 'if it is one,' the positive assertion that 'one' is such that it is one. Having posited this idea, Parmenides derives a number of conclusions, including the fact that the one is neither a whole nor has parts; does not have beginning, middle, or end; is unlimited and without shape; has no location; is neither in motion nor at rest; and is neither the same as nor different from another or itself. Eventually, Parmenides concludes that the one cannot be in time, and hence it cannot be said to *be*. Notice this conclusion: *if the one is (hypothesis), then the one is not (consequence)*.

The second deduction takes as its starting hypothesis again 'if it is one,' but this time it builds its consequences on the acknowledgement that the hypothesis entails that the one must partake in *being*. Parmenides deduces then pretty much the same list of consequences that constitute the first deduction, but this time all the consequences are asserted positively. Hence, for instance, this time Parmenides shows that the one is both a whole and has parts, is both limited and unlimited, is both in motion and at rest, is both the same as and different from the others and itself, and partakes in time.

Notice the paradoxical results that start building up at this point. From the first deduction, we learned that if we hypothesize that 'the one is,' then we have to conclude a whole list of negative consequences, including the fact that 'the one is not.' However, *from the same hypothesis*, it also follows that the same list of properties can be all asserted, even when they are clearly contradictory (like being both in motion and at rest). Hence, not only do the particular conclusions in the second deduction appear paradoxical, but deductions one and two are also in contradiction with one another.

Deductions three and four then expand on this same scheme but considering the consequences that follow for what is not-one, namely, for the others. In other words, if the one is, Parmenides deduces a set of consequences for the others (the not-one), and here again, the consequences both positively assert (third deduction) and negatively deny (fourth deduction) the same predicates to the same subject.

Deductions five, six, seven and eight then replicate this same scheme, now starting from the negative hypothesis: ‘if the one is not,’ and then deducing positive and negative consequences, both in relation to the one (deductions five and six), and in relation to the others (deductions seven and eight). Hence, the eight deductions are symmetrically structured and all mutually contradict each other. After having concluded, in the eighth deduction, that if one is not, nothing is, Parmenides then remarks:

Let us then say this [i.e. if one is not, nothing is]—and also that, as it seems, whether one is or is not, it and the others both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other. (*Parmenides*, 166c, transl. Gill and Ryan 1996, 175)

This conclusion can be interpreted in two ways and both might be relevant for Plato’s own discussion. The most direct way is to acknowledge that *none* of the deductions actually establishes a positive result, and they all together exhaust the logical space entailed by the given hypothesis by *preventing* the establishing of any final conclusion. If we take this point seriously, then the last four deductions, in particular, strongly suggest that the world of experience is merely an appearance, dream, or illusion. Things seem to be there, but actually they are just shadows. Throughout his deductions, Parmenides always starts by positing a sharp hypothesis, which is assumed to stand in itself and by itself, namely, as distinct and different from its opposite. The cumulative effect of his dialectic method is that none of the hypotheses actually stand, and their conclusions are mutually contradictory. This means that having gone through the deductions in an exhaustive way, it is necessary to give up the *idea* of any ontological sharp difference. Differences themselves are just illusory, like the appearances of the many things that can be observed in the world: they both are and are not, are both many and one. The consequence is that *difference* is not a genuine constituent of reality, which in itself is beyond (or above, or behind) difference. In this way, Parmenides reaches a monist (and Parmenidean indeed!) conclusion. But this conclusion is not asserted itself as yet another hypothesis, because in order to do that, it would be necessary for him to state this as a claim and to sharply

distinguish it from its opposite, which is precisely what the claim denies is possible. The only way of experiencing the illusory nature of all differences and thus to access the ultimate nature of reality beyond any differentiation is by intuitively jumping from the dialectical tangle that shows the unviability of asserting any form of difference into the ineffable nature of a non-differentiated reality. And, in doing so, Parmenides's dialectic method is actually offering a discursive instance of anesthetic trance, not too far in practice from the *neti neti* approach encountered in the *Upaniṣads*.

However, one can also take a different reading, and argue that Parmenides's deductions were meant to show to Socrates the fundamental flaw in his initial understanding of ideas. This option is well presented by Mary Louise Gill in her introduction to her translation of the *Parmenides*. She writes:

The key issue in the second part of the *Parmenides* is Socrates' assumption in Part I that the one cannot be both one and many. This is the false assumption that ultimately leads to the conclusion in Deduction 8—and that conclusion is Parmenides' final response to Socrates' original challenge in Part I. Socrates' assumption is false, and it must be false because there is a world to be explained. Our question is how to make sense of the idea that the one is both one and many. (in Plato's *Parmenides*, transl. Gill and Ryan 1996, 107)

If one examines the actual content of Parmenides's arguments in the various deductions, it turns out that we can distinguish two conflicting claims: (a) the multifarious world of phenomena is real; and (b) this world cannot be explained if we assume (as Socrates does in the first part of the dialogue) that the one has to be conceived in itself and by itself, independently from both the many, and from *being* as such. The reality of the world itself is more assumed than demonstrated in Gill's reading, but this would square well enough with Plato's own intuitions. Hence, we can use Gill's suggestion to uncover the intention of the hidden character in the dialogue, which is Plato himself. Taken at face value, Parmenides's deductions are a way of obliterating the world as nothing but appearances and thus setting up an intuitive insight into the intransitive nature of reality. Perhaps this is the sort of approach that the historical Parmenides could have defended and tried to convey in his poem. However, Plato exploits



this strategy to present both the wrong and the potentially right way of avoiding Parmenides's conclusion. The wrong way is positing ideas as given in themselves and by themselves, as in the relatively naïve account that Socrates explains in the first part of the dialogue. The potentially right way of escaping from Parmenides's own view is to take stock of his dialectic tour the force as a *refutation* of the assumption that ideas must be conceived in isolation from one another or, more profoundly, that one and many, or one and being, should be conceived as separate ideas. Remember that Socrates challenged Zeno to show him that ideas can mix, that they are not entities that exist separately from one another. Parmenides's performance can be *interpreted* as illustrating precisely this point, namely, that ideas should not be understood as self-standing unrelated units. Parmenides himself more likely wanted to use his performance to instead support the conclusion that multiplicity is ultimately unreal, and not that ideas should not be conceived in themselves. Plato realizes that neither the early naïve account attributed to Socrates, nor Parmenides's interpretation of the results of his dialectic performance are tenable. They share a common assumption: ideas do not mix. To move away from both, Plato is going to develop explicitly the view that ideas, at a very fundamental level, always mix. This is the plan carried out in the *Sophist*, where it is clearly presented as a way of going beyond (the historical) Parmenides, while it also works as an amendment to Socrates's (or Plato's) early view of the nature of ideas.

However, before leaving the *Parmenides*, it might be worth reflecting on the reasons why Plato would find Parmenides's denial of the reality of difference in need of correction. After all, in the myth of the cave (*Republic*, 514a-520a), Plato himself defended the idea that our experience of the sensible world is nothing but a copy, an appearance, made on the basis of immutable entities, which we cannot perceive through the senses. If this is true, Plato would agree with Parmenides in considering the whole of sensory experience as ultimately illusory (a claim that also emerges as a point of agreement between Socrates and Zeno in the prologue of the *Parmenides*). But if Gill's reading is correct, then it is precisely out of a concern *for the reality of the world itself*, that we should revise the theory of ideas. It would be question begging to say otherwise, since ideas are only postulated and not directly known, and they are postulated for the sake of explaining the phenomenal world, after all. And yet,

if Plato would sympathize with the view that the phenomenal world is somehow illusory in its appearance and surely not the ultimate reality, why would he be concerned with 'saving the phenomena'?

Here is a possible answer: Plato realizes that Parmenides's dialectic (anesthetic) method is self-defeating and cannot constitute the sort of access to an ultimate reality that it proclaims to achieve. Even if all diversity and multiplicity is nothing but appearance and illusion, *the fact* that there is appearance of diversity and multiplicity cannot as such be taken as an illusion. In other words, the fact that certain phenomena are judged to be illusory presupposes that those phenomena genuinely and really appear in the first place (otherwise they could not be objects of judgment). However, if there is the appearing *of* something, then a transitive form of experience must be taken as completely real and valid in its own right. Intransitive experience of the ineffable can then only be *different* from this transitive experience of something *else*, and at best they constitute two opposite domains of experience. But these domains are not asymmetric like absolute Being and absolute non-being in Parmenides's own poem, since here they are *both* genuinely real (appearances are real as phenomena, unlike Parmenides's absolute non-being, which cannot appear at all). Hence, the *difference* between these two domains must also be equally real and even be constitutive of the nature of both domains, since each of them can be defined and discerned in contrast with the other. If we really have these two genuinely distinct domains of reality (phenomenal appearance and intransitive experience), the experience of the ineffable cannot be said to constitute a privileged access to ultimate reality (since also the domain of appearances would be ultimate in its own right). More importantly, the experience of the ineffable cannot be *absolute*, as it pretends to be, since it stands in contrast with the experience of the other appearances, which are also equally real.

Perhaps it is possible to claim that the ineffable is the *ground* of all the other appearances. However, even before embarking on this discussion, it should be observed that the experience of the ineffable is entirely predicated on the overcoming of the experience of differences and the reduction of any difference to sheer illusion or appearance. But it turns out that one difference at least is as real and ultimate as the ineffable itself, namely, the difference between the ineffable and the domain of what appears to be something (else). Hence, it is

experientially impossible to reach a genuine and pure contact with the ineffable, because it is experientially impossible to overcome the reality of differentiation, given that even the experience of the ineffable has to be based on its difference from the experience of what appears.

In other words, if the ineffable was not genuinely different from the domain of phenomenal appearance, how could one possibly know when the experience of the ineffable is reached? But if this difference between the two domains is real, then it is *false* (at the level of the interpretation of experience) that all differences are just illusory, since we just got this one difference that is required even by the experience of the absolute ineffable. And yet, if this difference is real, then the experience of the absolute ineffable cannot be *absolute*. One *can* have an episodic intransitive experience (among other experiences), but it is not possible to *interpret* this experience as one that reaches a domain of reality beyond all differentiation, a domain that would make all other domains unreal. This latter interpretative move is simply incoherent because it does not realize that it denies its own condition of possibility, namely, the reality of genuine difference between the intransitive experience of the ineffable and the experience of phenomenal appearances.

This point brings to the fore an internal flaw in the whole anesthetic approach towards absolute Transcendence. The method offers a potentially misleading interpretation of its own results, by presenting intransitive experience as the reaching of an ultimate reality, which in fact cannot be genuinely ultimate and absolute, given that intransitive experience is predicated on the reality of transitive experience from which it really differs. If transitive experience is dismissed as unreal, then also intransitive experience becomes unreal. But if transitive experience is real, then intransitive experience cannot be absolute, it cannot constitute an ultimate reality. Appreciating this internal problem is crucial and gives a whole new spectrum of meanings to Plato's attempt at overcoming Parmenides. There is more to it than just savaging Socrates's early theory of ideas. What is at stake is properly understanding the role of difference in the constitution of experience, and realizing that difference cannot be overcome by anesthetizing it. As we shall now see, Plato's own solution is presented in the *Sophist*. It is a brilliant solution, except for the fact that it will make experience and thought inevitably bound with language and its limitations.

### 8.3 Rescuing differences

The *Sophist* provides one possible solution to the problems introduced in the *Parmenides*. Here, Plato advances a new way of conceiving of ideas or forms as necessarily interconnected and sharing in one another. Once again, the dialogue is conducted not by Socrates, but rather by a ‘visitor from Elea,’ who thinks of Parmenides as his ‘father.’ And yet, the visitor is ready to overcome Parmenides’s own contention that ‘what is not’ is something that cannot be thought or talked about. In this sense, the discussion in the *Sophist* takes the cue from some of the results of the deductions in the *Parmenides* and then shows another way of disentangling them.

The general purpose of the dialogue is to arrive at a sound definition of what a ‘sophist’ is, especially for the sake of distinguishing between a ‘sophist’ and a ‘philosopher’ (the latter being something like the ‘noble’ and ‘right’ version of the former). The visitor applies a method that is referred to as dialectical but does not work like the one illustrated in the *Parmenides*. In this new method, the purpose is to first identify a common genre to which the thing-to-be-defined belongs, and then progressively divide up this genre into mutually exclusive sub-categories, such that the thing-to-be-defined has to be neatly posited in one or in the other. This process of subsequent divisions is continued until one reaches the point where any new division would directly include the thing-to-be-defined as one of the two parts to be divided.

The visitor begins to apply this method in a number of iterations, reaching various definitions of what a sophist might be. However, all these definitions appear to some extent provisional, until he stumbles upon the issue of falsehood. The sophist, so it seems, must be shown to be someone who is not really an expert as he pretends to be, but someone who deceives and creates only a semblance of knowledge. But how can we define this possibility of falsehood in the first place?

This whole matter of appearing, and seeming, but not being, and of saying things but not true things, has always caused puzzlement and confusion in the past, and it still does. It’s extraordinarily difficult to grasp, Theaetetus, how one is to come out with the claim that it really is possible to say or

believe things that are false, and express this without being caught up in contradiction. (*Sophist*, 236e-237a, transl. Rowe 2015, 129)

The problem is that speaking the false means saying something that does not correspond to how things really are. Falsity is a way of asserting ‘what is not.’ This observation leads the visitor to engage with Parmenides’s views. The historical Parmenides already claimed that thought and speech can only be about Being, while non-being cannot be thought or talked about. The visitor introduces a number of puzzles and problems that would follow from denying this Parmenidean tenet. He then states:

So do you see that it’s impossible, correctly, to express or to say or to think what is not in and by itself; it’s unthinkable, unsayable, inexpressible, and unaccountable. (*Sophist*, 238c, transl. Rowe 2015, 131)

However, even saying this much is contradictory, since it attributes predicates to what is not (*Sophist*, 238e-239a). This constitutes the ‘problem of non-being,’ namely, a series of puzzles concerning the impossibility of talking about non-being (as when one speaks falsehood) together with the impossibility of not talking in a way that somehow entails a paradoxical reference to some form of non-being. To define a speech as true and not deceitful, one needs to be able to spell out what deceitful speech is, by thus granting the possibility of speaking falsehood. At this point, the visitor announces:

In order to defend ourselves we’re going to need to cross-examine what our father Parmenides says and force the claim through both that what is not in a certain way is, and conversely that what is also in a way is not. [...] So long as these things are neither stated nor agreed, we will hardly be able ever to talk about things said or believed and say that they are false, whether we call them images, or likenesses, or imitations, or just apparitions, nor will we be able to talk about any expertises relating to these, either, without being forced to contradict ourselves and make ourselves the object of ridicule. (*Sophist*, 241d-e, transl. Rowe 2015, 136)

In reference to what we have seen in the *Parmenides*, two points need to be emphasized. First, the problem of non-being can easily be rephrased as the problem of accounting for the idea of difference, since non-being is the paradigm for conceiving of the property of ‘being other-than,’ or ‘different-from’ something else. Without offering a valid account of difference, it will be impossible to account for falsehood or appearance. Paradoxically, the visitor’s claim entails that Parmenides himself would not have been entitled to talk about falsehood (about the ‘path of Night’ that he takes non-being to be) or appearances (about the way in which mortals think about phenomena as really changing and partaking of both being and non-being), since in Parmenides’s view it is impossible to talk about non-being, and hence it is impossible to utter falsehoods or distinguish appearances from reality. The series of deductions we encountered in the *Parmenides*, however, suggests one way in which this paradox can be alleviated. On one account of the function of the deductions, we saw that the distinction between appearance and reality does not cut across different regions of what can be said, but rather distinguishes between the whole of what can be said (covered by the deductions) and an ultimate reality that is behind or beyond it, accessible only through some intuition. However, even in this case, Parmenides (both the historical author and the character in Plato’s dialogue) does not seem entitled to make this distinction because this would require accepting the reality of such a difference, while also denying that difference (‘what is not’) is something real.

Hence, the second point made by the visitor: the way out from this tangle consists in *merging* being and non-being to some extent. This is the suggestion that could have been already derived from the *Parmenides*, insofar as it was becoming apparent that Socrates’s positing of ideas as sharply demarcated from one another was the most problematic assumption in the whole discussion. In this sense, the visitor now tries to flesh out a possible way of envisaging being and non-being as somehow mutually interwoven. In so doing, the visitor also introduces several important clarifications, which will end up creating a snowball effect against the very idea of conceiving of dialectic as an anesthetic practice. This latter aspect is particularly relevant for our present discussion and must be stressed.

One of the most important remarks, for instance, comes from the visitor's definition of being:

a thing genuinely is if it has some capacity, of whatever sort, either to act on another thing, of whatever nature, or to be acted on, even to the slightest degree and by the most trivial of things, and even if it is just the once. That is, what marks off the things that are as being, I propose, is nothing other than capacity. (*Sophist*, 247e, transl. Rowe 2015, 145)

'To be' means to be capable of acting or be acted upon. Being and action are convertible to some extent and in some way.<sup>96</sup> Since action is transitive, an intransitive reality cannot be said to be active in any way (Indian thinkers would agree). But this then means that what is entirely devoid of action is by definition a sheer nothingness, it is no reality at all (*pace* Parmenides and Indian thinkers). The visitor goes further:

But—Zeus!—what is this? Are we in any case going to be so easily persuaded that change and life and soul and wisdom are truly absent from what completely is, and that it does not live, or think, but sits there in august holiness, devoid of intelligence, fixed and unchanging? [...] In any case, Theaetetus, it follows from what we have said that if things are unchanging no one possesses any intelligence about any of them at all. [...] And yet if on the other hand we accept that all things are in motion and changing, this account of things too will result in our removing knowability from the things that are. (*Sophist*, 248e-249b, transl. Rowe 2015, 147)

There is here the possibility of interpreting being in a quasi-personalistic and theological way, since being must also possess life and intelligence, hence the key qualities that would make up some sort of divine person. The visitor also repeats the issue already encountered about the conditions of intelligibility of

•• 96 This intuition might be taken to be at the core of the communitarian model of agency discussed in Lecture Three. In this perspective, thus, Plato's definition of being in terms of a capacity for acting can be interpreted as a philosophical abstraction and generalization of that model.

reality and the need for postulating ideas: if ideas are completely unchanging, they escape the domain of knowledge (which is a sort of action) and are of no use in knowing anything. Yet if everything is changing, nothing can be known, because nothing will have any stable nature to be known.

This and connected considerations lead the visitor to conclude that ideas must be taken as connected and partaking in each other. To some extent, some ideas must be able to mix, some to a greater degree, some to a lesser degree. Some ideas might be disjoined, but others must be necessarily linked. On this basis, it is possible to better understand that the one who is genuinely skilled in mastering these distinctions is the true philosopher, the expert in dialectic:

The person who can do this is then surely well enough equipped to see when one form is spread all through many, each of them standing separately, or when many forms that are different from one another are embraced from the outside by one; or again when one is connected as one through many forms, themselves wholes, or when many forms are completely divided off and separate. This is all a matter of knowing how to determine, kind by kind, how things can or cannot combine. (*Sophist*, 253d-e, transl. Rowe 2015, 154)

Notice how different this view of dialectic is from the one we encountered in the *Parmenides*. There, the sort of training that Parmenides advocated had to do with the ability of articulating various hypotheses, permutating elements, considering positive and negative consequences, until the whole logical space surrounding a given idea was exhausted, and arguably mutual incompatible consequences derived. Here, instead, the visitor contends that dialectic is concerned with *distinguishing* between various genres and kinds, sorting out similarities and differences. In this sense, this kind of dialectic is already based on the assumption that ideas do partake of each other. Since this assumption was precisely what was denied in the *Parmenides*, the dialectical practice in the two dialogues is not only different, but it is based on opposite premises.

This becomes most apparent in the way the visitor arrives at a definition of the ‘five great kinds,’ namely, the five most general ideas that can be used to understand the basic features of reality. These are: being, change, rest, same-



ness, and diversity. For present purposes, it is the inclusion of diversity within one of these five kinds that is particularly noteworthy. This move allows the visitor to define ‘what is not’ as an expression of sharing diversity among different things. As he explains:

What is not, then, must necessarily be, both in the case of change and with all the kinds, because with all of them, the nature of the different, by rendering each a different thing from being, makes it something that is not; and in fact in accordance with this same reasoning we’ll be correct in talking of all of them too as things that are not—and then again, since they share in being, in saying that they are, and talking of them as things that are. (*Sophist*, 256e, transl. Rowe 2015, 159)

Difference is one of the most general kinds or ideas, in which all other ideas necessarily partake insofar as they are *distinct* ideas. Socrates’s intuition in the *Parmenides*, according to which ideas must exist in themselves and by themselves, is thus vindicated. In order to be what they are, ideas (like any entity), need to be different from other entities, and this means that each entity *is not* something else. The existence of this property of ‘not-being-something-else’ means that all entities necessarily partake in difference. However, difference must *not* be conceived as a kind in its own right that is absolutely unmixed with all other kinds. In fact, the opposite is the case. By partaking in all other kinds, difference allows for their mutual distinguishability, but also for the fact that things can *both* be what they are *and* be different from one another. This is how the visitor goes beyond Parmenides’s prohibition of talking about non-being.

Such a move comes with an important qualification: ‘when we say something is not, it seems, we’re not saying that it is the opposite of what is, we’re just saying it is different’ (*Sophist*, 257b, transl. Rowe 2015, 160). The visitor makes clear that ‘what is not’ cannot be conceived in terms of an absolute opposite to Being itself, since conceiving of non-being in this way is precisely what leads to the tangle of problems mentioned earlier. The issue with this approach is that it takes difference as an idea that is unmixed with any other, and hence as something that needs to operate as an absolute, like in the absolute opposition (difference) that Parmenides posited between Being and noth-

ing. In this case, difference means that if A and B are different, then they cannot share anything (they cannot also partake of identity). The presence of difference excludes the presence of anything else, including identity. This rigid view of difference is essential to Parmenides's account, but is also precisely what the visitor rejects. In other words, the underpinning difficulty in the Parmenidean approach is to stick to a too rigid understanding of ideas that does not allow for their mixing (which was in fact Socrates's own problem in the *Parmenides*).

Having abandoned this view as unhelpful, the visitor can thus conclude:

So let no one accuse us of having the temerity to declare that what is not is the opposite of being and then say that it is. We have long since waved goodbye to talking about any opposite to being, no matter whether it is or is not, or whether an account can be given of it or it is completely unaccountable. As for what we have now said that what is not is, either someone needs to challenge us and persuade us that what we're saying is not well said, or so long as he is incapable of doing that, he too will have to talk in the same terms as us, and say both that the kinds mix with one another, and that since what is and difference pervade them all and one another, difference, with its share in what is, is, because of that sharing, while at the same time it is certainly not what it has that share in, but rather something different from it; and since it is different from what is, he'll have to say that it is in the clearest conceivable way necessary for it to be possible for it to be what is not. What is, for its part, because of the share it has in difference, will be different from the other kinds, and in being different from all of them it is not each of them, nor all the rest together, only itself, so that what is, in its turn, indisputably is not myriads upon myriads of things. Similarly the other kinds, whether taken one by one or all together, in many respects are and in many respects are not. (*Sophist*, 258e-259b, transl. Rowe 2015, 162-163)

The opposite of being (absolute non-being or absolute nothingness) is not something that is just left behind untouched by this discussion. Rather, it is dismissed as the *wrong way* of conceptualizing non-being. The mistake in this account is taking non-being as something that could somehow stand in its own right without

mixing with anything else. This sharp ontological demarcation is the main problem, and once it is abandoned, non-being can be more helpfully understood as the quality of ‘not-being-something-else,’ namely, as difference. Difference partakes in being and hence difference *is*, and certainly the sharing of difference in being is the sharing of two genuinely distinct and irreducible ideas in their mutual inter-mixing. Difference is different from the being in which it shares (sharing in something else presupposes a difference between at least two entities); and since difference is different from being, it must surely be possible for difference to be what is not, that is, it must be possible to assert that difference is a form of non-being. Moreover, in virtue of the fact that being is different from difference itself, being can be asserted as a kind in its own right. Considering being an idea in its own right vindicates some of the qualities attributed to it by (the historical) Parmenides, who conceived of being as an absolute unity, homogeneous, and lacking any determinations. What allows being to have these qualities is precisely its ability to share in the nature of difference, in virtue of which it can be set apart (i.e., be different) from all the other ideas.

One way of contrasting the sort of dialectic presented in the *Parmenides* with the dialectic advocated in the *Sophist* is by calling the former a ‘segregating dialectic,’ and the latter a ‘relational dialectic.’ Against the segregating kind of dialectic, the visitor reiterates its inability to achieve any form of meaningful discussion:

If one separates each thing off from everything, that completely and utterly obliterates any discourse, since it is the interweaving of forms that gives us the possibility of talking to each other in the first place. (*Sophist*, 259e, transl. Rowe 2015, 164)

To be fair, on our reading at least, the segregating dialectic was perhaps not intended to support colloquial conversation, especially if one uses it as a tool for inducing anesthetic intuition. Be that as it may, supporting colloquial conversation becomes now a central feature in the visitor’s discussion, and he can easily make the point that only a relational dialectic fits this bill.

This turn towards language signals the way that Plato drifts away from the anesthetic approach. In the last part of the *Sophist*, the visitor comes back to

the main topic of dialogue. He grants that ‘speech, when there is speech, must necessarily say something of something; it’s impossible for it to say something of nothing’ (262e, transl. Rowe 2015, 168). This remark is a steppingstone for introducing a ‘correspondence theory of truth’, according to which speech is true when it picks out a relation among things that corresponds to how these things actually are in reality (somehow ‘outside’ of speech itself). Falseness is defined as a lack of such a correspondence between reality and speech. As the visitor explains:

When things are said about you, then, but different things as if the same, and things that are not as if they are—that definitely seems to be the sort of combination of verbs and names that turns out really and truly to be false speech. [...] So what about thought and belief and appearance? Isn’t it clear by now that all these kinds come about in our souls as false as well as true? [...] Well, thought and speech are the same thing, with just this difference, that the first is an internal dialogue of the soul with itself that occurs without vocal expression, which is why it has the name we call it by. (*Sophist*, 263d-e, transl. Rowe 2015, 169-170)

Falseness and appearance instantiate a particular form of difference or dissimilarity between speech and reality. Before this long discussion, it seemed problematic to offer an account of falseness, since difference entails a form of non-being, and according to Parmenides, non-being cannot meaningfully be part of any discourse or even be thought of. Now this Parmenidean worry has been left behind. The visitor thus makes one further move and identifies thought and belief with speech. Thought is ‘an internal dialogue of the soul with itself,’ which means that from a structural point of view, to think and to use language are the same (hence, there is no thought without some linguistic and conceptual articulation).<sup>97</sup> No further justification and argument are pro-

•• 97 Notice that this view remains engrained in any account that equates the cessation of speech or verbalized thought with the cessation of thought altogether. When one interprets an ‘inner silence’ in which no word or speech is heard, as a cessation of ‘thought,’ one is clearly endorsing the Platonic equation between thought and speech. If one further extends this point by equating thought, speech, and conceptuality (since language requires conceptuality and conceptuality is articulated linguistically), the same

vided here to back up this move, which is perhaps taken to be unproblematic or obvious.

But this is far from obvious. The historical Parmenides himself equated being and thought (Fragments 3 and 6) but considered words (speech) as only misleading constructions of mortals who follow the path of Night (Fragment 8). This suggests that he would have denied that thought (which is a truthful manifestation of being) and speech (which establishes nothing but ‘names’ and does not yield the truth) can be equated. We can also add that some Indian Upaniṣadic thinkers, at least, would strongly protest against this conflation of linguistically articulated thought and thought in general, since the activity of cognizing does not necessarily entail having an object, and surely does not entail having to be articulated linguistically. So, by equating thought and speech, Plato is redefining philosophy, opening a new way of conceiving of its nature and tasks, which remains the dominant one today.<sup>98</sup>

This Platonic move does not necessarily entail that philosophy becomes entirely a theoretical affair. Quite to the contrary, if we follow Hadot’s interpretation (Lecture Zero), Hellenistic schools will derive from the practice of Socratic dialogue the inspiration for several spiritual exercises aimed at overcoming individual passions and reaching some sort of universal standpoint; perhaps an identification with a Cosmic Reason or Consciousness. However, these exercises all rely on the interiorization of dialogical (and social) practices, which exclude the method of anaesthetic trance and aim at a final goal more akin to an intellectual understanding of the unity of the universe,

.....  
 experience of ‘inner silence’ could be further interpreted as a cessation of ‘conceptuality’ itself. And if one makes even a further step, and associates conceptuality with differentiation (given that all difference needs to be spelled out conceptually), then the cessation of speech, thought, and conceptuality, might be further interpreted as a cessation of differentiation, hence, as an instance of intransitive experience. But this all relies on the premise that thought and speech are the same, or that speech defines the paradigm for thought. If one rejects this premise (because thought can be more broadly understood as any process, linguistic or not, that contributes to the appearing of any content of experience), then any ‘inner silence’ will be interpreted only for what it is, namely, a localized episodic cessation of verbalized activities, which reveal how these verbalized activities are not strictly essential for the unfolding of experience in general (namely, there can be experience without any verbalized activity going on). Hence, ‘inner silence’ can be interpreted as pointing to the fact that ‘thought’ (broadly understood as the appearing of any content of experience) is *not* necessarily connected with speech, *contra* what is defended by Plato in the *Sophist*.  
 98 Or perhaps, Plato is just reasserting the more archaic view of the essential poietic function of language in providing shape and substance, ‘name and form’ (*nāma-rūpa*) to any thought.

rather than an actual immediate experience of an ineffable and difference-transcending reality.<sup>99</sup>

We noticed above the definition of being as a capacity to act or be acted upon. We then observed how this quickly led to the possibility of personalizing the idea of being, assuming that it must also be somehow endowed with thought and intelligence. Further, the visitor introduced his account of relational dialectic, as the expertise in drawing distinctions between kinds and accounting for the mixing of various ideas. This sort of relational dialectic (which is the special art of the philosopher) is based on a relational account of difference, no longer conceived of as the Parmenidean absolute non-being, but rather as a relational difference among things or entities. Building on this account, the visitor can draw an even stronger connection between language and dialectic, showing why discourse necessarily requires a relational account of difference. This account allows for the possibility of distinguishing between truth and falsity (or reality and appearance). Eventually, the equation between thought and speech closes the discussion, by revealing that the art of dialectic does not concern only a skillful way of *talking* about realities, but also the most skillful way of *thinking*, since there is in fact no difference between speech and thought.

## 8.4 Consequences

Did classical ancient Greek thought come close to anything comparable to anaesthetic trance? In terms of beliefs or ideas, the historical Parmenides is an interesting case, since the tenets of his philosophy do come close to what we also encountered in Indian thought. However, Parmenides himself says very little about any actual method or technique of trance. What he does say is that

•• 99 Later, around the fourth century CE, Christian monasticism will establish a direct link between truth and speech, and more specifically between the truth that oneself can recognize within one's own conscience, and one's ability to articulate and confess it in words. Michael Foucault devotes the last lecture of his course *On the Government of the Living* (2014) precisely to this point. He concludes (2014, p. 312-313): 'The Christian has the truth deep within himself and he is yoked to this deep secret, indefinitely bent over it and indefinitely constrained to show to the other the treasure that his work, thought, attention, conscience, and discourse ceaselessly draw out from it. And by this he shows that putting his own truth into discourse is not just an essential obligation; it is one of the basic forms of our obedience.'

a goddess, Justice (*Dike*), revealed that truth to him in a direct vision. Perhaps this might have been enough for contemporaries who were not prejudiced against trance and were in fact very much familiar with both visionary and possession trance.

However, in the previous lecture we also noticed an oddity in the classical Greek view. In Aeschylus's *Orestes at Athens*, a new notion of justice is introduced. This stands in clear contrast with the sort of retaliation that is ascribed to mythical times and connected with family kinship. Scapin's *The Flowering of Suffering* (2020) argues that this new notion of justice is inspired by Parmenides (among others), since here justice becomes a cosmological principle. This is true, but the way justice works in Aeschylus is different from how it works in Parmenides. Parmenides sees Justice as the power that sharply separates being from non-being and keeps the former aloof from the latter. In fact, Parmenides sees this absolute opposition between Being and non-being not even as the opposition between two realities, but rather part of a single reality: Being, and *nothing else*. From this perspective, all differences are just appearances (at best), devoid of any truth. This sort of justice might be cosmological, but does not work well in court, since it would entail that the very difference between (e.g.) an act's being a matricide or just a homicide is ultimately a sheer appearance. Not a great line of defence for Orestes, and surely not the line of defence used by Apollo in the trial.

What Apollo does in defending Orestes is to use a sort of dialectic to prove that Oreste did kill a woman, but that woman could not be considered his 'mother,' since life comes primarily only from the father, and the mother's womb is just a space that receives semen and allows the foetus to develop. Hence, Orestes killed, but did not commit matricide—surely not the best argument, at least from today's point of view. And yet, from a logical point of view, this sort of argument relies on a dialectical distinction between those conditions that actively contribute to generation and those that do not, hence showing that if something does not actively contribute to generation is less important and might not even be regarded as a parent (a good instance of the *subordinating* strategy). As noticed, not everybody was convinced, the jury was split. But what is interesting here is that Apollo's line of defence aims at dissolving the problem of Orestes's matricide by dissociating (differentiating) the act of killing from the

property of being the son of one's mother. The contradiction is solved by breaking it apart in a way that no longer *appears* to be a contradiction. A claim about a certain form of subordination (of the two parents in the process of generation), leads to a claim about distinction and separation, hence *distancing* the two elements that engendered contradiction (being a homicide and being the son of the woman that one has killed).

Plato's relational dialectic in the *Sophist* looks quite similar to Apollo's strategy. Like Apollo, the visitor of Elea is keen on drawing distinctions and placing his subject of investigation into increasingly more sharply defined camps, somehow hunting it until it is put to the corner of an absolutely precise definition. In this method, the relation of 'being-different-from' something else is not presented as a contradiction, but on the contrary as the *absence* of any contradiction. Difference and distinction are possible once the visitor has overcome Parmenides's too rigid account of non-being, and allowed non-being to be conceived of relationally as something that mixes up with other kinds.

In the *Parmenides*, Plato attributes to his eponymous character a dialectical method that is strikingly different from the relational method used by the visitor and even by Aeschylus's Apollo. This Parmenidean dialectic is based on absolute segregation and its result might be akin to a sort of anaesthetic trance, in which language is transcended and some intuition of an intransitive reality is achieved. The contradiction is solved by stepping outside of language altogether and jumping into the ineffable. In the *Sophist*, as in the ending of the *Oresteia*, this is not what happens. On the contrary, the contradiction is solved by breaking it apart *through* the use of language and dialectic. In this sense, it is tempting to see in Aeschylus an anticipation of Plato's relational dialectic, or perhaps better, to see Plato's relational dialectic as a development and philosophical refinement of a way of arguing that might have been common in Athenian's courts and among lawyers. If one takes the *Sophist* seriously, this latter relational (forensic) dialectic defines the quintessence of the philosopher's art, which is at odds with the special training that Parmenides recommended to the young Socrates in the *Parmenides*. In short, between the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* we can find traces of a change of method in how philosophy is practiced and understood, at least by Plato. Remarkably, this change also concerns the dismissal of any potential avenue for anaesthetic trance, and the



reduction of the sort of liberation that it aimed at achieving as ultimately contradictory and unworkable.

The need to move from a segregational to a relational dialectic is not accidental. Plato's dialogues show that it was based on a fine sensitivity to the problems attached to segregational dialectic. In a nutshell, segregation is based on taking difference at face value (because being something is essentially linked with non-being-something-else, be different from something else), while it also makes it impossible to grant any reality to difference as such (because difference is absolute non-being and hence does not exist). In this way, segregational dialectic is not only paradoxical, but also self-defeating, especially when one moves from the sort of psychological experience that it can support (a blacking out of thought and a jump into the ineffable), to a set of beliefs and views derived from that experience (some form of Parmenidean monistic philosophy). Hence, Plato's move is not just motivated by wanting to try something different, but rather by an insight into the inherent problem that plagues the anaesthetic approach. In the Indian sources discussed in Lecture Six, this sort of problem is hardly acknowledged, and we are going to see that other Indian sources (the discourses of the Buddha in particular) do see the problem but attack it from another angle, more connected with meditative practice itself. In this respect, Plato's contribution is rather unique, since it presents a sustained refutation of the *interpretation* of anaesthetic trance, and especially of the validity of any belief or view based on the sort of non-transitive experience that it achieves.

Plato's relational dialectic has its price. By the end of the *Sophist*, we learn that philosophy has nothing to do with trance, that thought is just inner speech, and that solving contradictions can be done only by carefully using the idea of difference to separate things and their qualities from one another. It is tempting to regard this project as one of the major reasons why so many Western philosophers, working in the wake of Plato, ended up conceiving of the activity of philosophy as a purely rational and linguistic affair. There are of course exceptions, notably Plotinus and Neo-Platonists, who revived the Parmenidean anaesthetic method (often building on Plato's *Parmenides*), and surely *some* later Christian authors (who would be classified among the 'mystics' discussed in Lecture Four) were also open to this line of investigation. But they are easily dismissed as eccentric with respect to the golden standard of philosophical

relational dialectic set up in the *Sophist*. Aristotle, to mention just another hugely influential figure in the history of Western thought, would agree here with Plato's general orientation and with the attempt at moving away from anaesthetic trance. Consider, for example, his discussion of the principle of non-contradiction in book four of the *Metaphysics* and how he rejects the very possibility of admitting any meaning for what is not fully determined (i.e., for what is ineffable). Ironically, in the merging of Greek thought and Christian experience, this might also be a reason why Christians themselves were at some point increasingly weary of anaesthetic trance (variously called 'mysticism,' 'quietism,' and 'enthusiasm') and progressively marginalized it and, at times, openly persecuted it.

Where does this discussion leave us in terms of our investigation into the paradox of mastery? We saw in the previous lecture how ancient Greek culture could move towards the transcendent pole of the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self in order to alleviate this paradox. Weakening embodiment and consociation, the tension between the two is diminished. In the most extreme case, this would reach the point of complete disembodiment and lack of any consociation. Perhaps the historical Parmenides instantiates this more extreme solution. Plato, however, demonstrates why this move is not viable and forces the discussion to remain closer to the middle-range of the spectrum. But in the middle-range of the spectrum the paradox emerges with greater evidence. It is not surprising, thus, to see how much effort Plato himself devoted to reflecting on the ideal conditions for establishing the best form of consociation and society (as he tries to do in the *Republic*, the *Stateman*, and the *Laws*). In all these cases, he resorts to some version of the strategy of subordination, in which the ideal model of consociation is based on the possibility of establishing the right sort of hierarchy, in which the elements that most explicitly and strongly embody the power of reason (hence the power of knowing ideas and mastering dialectic) are seen as the dominating ones. Parallels and similarities with the solution offered by Kṛṣṇa in the end of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (Lecture Six) are not hard to spot. But we already observed in the previous lecture that subordinating by itself is way of *handling* the paradox, rather than a way of resolving it. For Plato, the way to absolute transcendence is dismissed, while the way to strong embodiment is rejected as incompatible with any knowledge

at all (as argued in the *Theaetetus*). Following him, we must stick to the middle of the spectrum, but this forces us to confront an enduring paradox that cannot be entirely solved, only managed.

If the self is a construction aimed at mastering uncertainty, ancient Greek culture reveals a number of ways that uncertainty was dealt with, ranging from traditional ritual practices to philosophical dialectic. But none of these practices can in fact *eliminate* uncertainty completely, and even the knowledge of Plato's ideas remains to some extent provisional and shaky, both because Plato's theory remains open for debate (a good sign that it lacks absolute certainty, despite, ironically, being a theory about how to acquire knowledge of something absolutely certain), and because a relational conception of ideas (which seems to be the most plausible one) would make it impossible to fully disentangle ideas from one another, and from the empirical world in which they are somehow interwoven. But what remains relational, conditional, dependent on something else, must also remain equally uncertain, since its being and knowledge cannot be fully grasped in its own right.

It goes without saying that an ancient Greek person living in Athens in the fourth-century BCE would conceive of themselves differently from their counterpart living in the same period in India, or from another counterpart living in today's Western society. The point of these lectures is not to assert that there is a universal and invariable structure of selfhood that is equally shared by all cultures and across all times. And yet, it would be equally doubtful to deny *some* sense and conception of selfhood to human beings who lived or are living outside of the narrow historical window that embraces Western modernity and contemporaneity. If selfhood is a project, rather than a well-defined object, this project can surely be executed in different ways.

However, what we are now witnessing is that there are some structural problems with the essential goal of this project, namely, the mastery of uncertainty. There is a flaw in the blueprint. Surely, we might further our investigation by drawing a more fine-grained taxonomy of different ways this problem has been addressed. But in the rest of this series, we shall instead take another approach and investigate what happens when, confronted with the difficulties of mastery, one eventually decides to give up the whole project as it has been conceived and discussed so far.



Lecture Nine:  
Music

## 9.1 Introduction

The self is a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering, in a way or another, the uncertainty that is inherent in its conditionality. But what would happen if one were to give up this attempt at mastering uncertainty? At first, such a question might sound strange, since uncertainty seems an inherently unwelcomed problem. And yet, our discussion in the last four lectures shows that mastering uncertainty might not be something fully achievable. Different solutions can be put on a spectrum, in the middle of which we can distinguish two major components: embodiment and consociation. If one remains within this middle range, the two components quickly enter into tension with one another, because consociation not only addresses the condition of needfulness entailed by embodiment, but also creates and supports new needs that prevent a complete emancipation from uncertainty. If one moves towards one extreme of the spectrum, in which disembodiment leads to complete emancipation from any community, a *sui generis* solution might be achieved, but only one in which uncertainty is mastered through a complete emptying of the empirical, biographical self (since the ‘true Self’ thus discovered is the thinnest of all beings, like a metaphysical ghost). If one moves towards the opposite extreme of strong embodiment, by reducing one’s identity to an individual living body, then again, a certain *sui generis* solution can be achieved only by dismissing the whole idea of selfhood as illusory, while also remaining fully exposed to the utter uncertainty of physical embodiment (since nothing is more needful than an individual living body). A question arises: if mastering uncertainty is always so problematic, why keep struggling for it? Is it possible to face uncertainty without attempting to master it? And what would be the consequence of such an attitude? Starting from this lecture, we shall devote the concluding part of this series to exploring this option.

In Western theistic traditions, practices akin to anesthetic trance were used and interpreted by mystics as ways of gaining a direct experience of God (Lecture Four). However, we discussed how both in the ancient Indian (Lecture Six) and in the ancient Greek contexts (Lecture Eight), moving towards Transcendence was regarded as problematic. In the Indian context, asceticism was seen as potentially disruptive of the social order, and significant debates attempted at

somehow domesticating it. In the Greek context, Plato's *Sophist* offers a refutation of the hermeneutic apparatus can be used to interpret intransitive experience in terms of access to an ontological ultimate and absolute reality. Instead of aiming at absolute Transcendence, Plato's philosopher develops discursive knowledge, based on dialectic, which might still aim at glimpsing unchanging and eternal ideas. These remarks show that the leap into absolute Transcendence has never been regarded as the only way, or even as a necessary way, of solving the problems of selfhood.

In contemporary Western culture, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is best-known for his claim that 'God is dead' and his view that any attempt at seeking Transcendence should be dismissed. These claims are often analyzed in terms of the *arguments* that could support Nietzsche's atheistic conclusion, and thus the debate focuses on the reasons for believing in the existence or nonexistence of this particular object, namely, God. Oftentimes this discussion is subsumed under the broader topic of 'secularization' or the corrosion of theistic beliefs in Western culture from at least the eighteenth century onwards (and, as mentioned in Lecture Zero, Taylor provides a nuanced picture of this process).

From the point of view of our discussion, though, we can (and should) look at this issue differently. A Transcendent God can be seen as one (more or less extreme) way of allowing for the construction of selfhood (moving towards one extreme of the spectrum we sketched). The death of God can thus be interpreted as the firm commitment to *not pursuing* the sort of selfhood that results from moving in that direction, or rather the acknowledgement that forms of selfhood that are constructed by moving in the direction of a Transcendent God are no longer considered viable. The death of God can thus be rephrased as the end (or the rejection) of a specific set of practices through which the self can be enacted, in which forms of anesthetic trance plays a crucial role.<sup>100</sup>

•• 100 This does not mean that all theistic beliefs are necessarily supported by anesthetic trance. As already mentioned in passing, the attitudes towards anesthetic trance in the Christian West have been ambivalent. Especially in the early modern period, this practice becomes increasingly regarded with suspicion, both by certain strands of Protestantism (which dismiss it as 'enthusiasm') and by orthodox Catholic church (with its condemnation of 'quietism'). However, by severing the link between theistic beliefs and anesthetic trance, the former tend to reduce in fact to *just* a matter of belief, deprived of any experiential backup. And this disconnection from any sort of direct experience might add one further reason why theistic beliefs started to appear more and more unjustifiable.

From this point of view, Nietzsche's atheistic commitment can surely be seen as the result of a certain trend that develops in modern Western thought. Recall Kant's attitude in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Not only does Kant reject the grounds for offering a compelling rational proof for the existence of God, but he also begins his discussion by rejecting any human access to an 'intellectual intuition' of ultimate reality or things in themselves, which would also allow for a direct knowledge of God. Just a few decades later, Schopenhauer provides a purely atheistic and pessimistic metaphysics (in opposition to Hegel's triumphalist rationalism). Nietzsche was profoundly fascinated by Schopenhauer's work, which provided an initial framework for his own intellectual research. The early Nietzsche, though, turns back to Greek tragedy in the search for a model of how to handle the contradictory nature of reality, its uncertainty, and live up to its challenges, without attempting to master it through pure reason, nor to escape from it through Transcendence, and without sinking into sheer pessimism.

Our discussion will focus specifically on two segments of Nietzsche's thought. In this lecture, we shall start by presenting the seminal ideas about Greek tragedy that Nietzsche introduces in his first published essay, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872). Here, Nietzsche advances three connected claims: (i) life is inherently contradictory and painful; (ii) the only satisfying way of facing this inherent contradiction without falling into despair and pessimism (*à la* Schopenhauer) is by providing an 'aesthetic solution' to the problem of life, namely, by finding a way of listening and staying with the dissonance of life, saying 'yes' to it, and giving expression to it; (iii) the Socratic-Platonic model of philosophy is a betrayal of this ideal, which covers up the inherent dissonance of life with a fake appearance of rationality and a consequent optimism. Nietzsche's essay is a call for the renewal of a tragic culture, and the kernel of this project is later witnessed in Nietzsche's most important, difficult, and perhaps misunderstood work: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885).

We shall devote the next lecture to some core ideas of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, but here we can still do some stage setting by stressing two assumptions that Nietzsche articulates in his reflection on tragedy. The first assumption concerns Nietzsche's underpinning ontological views, which are hinted at in *The Birth*



of *Tragedy* and will re-emerge in the *Zarathustra*. The core idea is that reality is inherently contradictory and thus necessarily painful; life is suffering. The second assumption is stated in the first part of the *Zarathustra* and concerns anthropology. Nietzsche outlines a path of transformation that leads present-day humanity towards a new form of humanity. This anthropological path sheds light on some of the most famous themes associated with Nietzsche's philosophy, including the death of God and the problem of nihilism (an echo of which we encountered in Lecture One). The core of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* presupposes this background. This also reveals why Nietzsche, while shying away from Transcendence, is also no friend of strong embodiment or hard naturalism (as defined in Lecture Two).

## 9.2 Dionysos with Apollo

Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* is a complex essay, partially intended as a philosophical justification for Richard Wagner's new vision of musical drama. In this work, Nietzsche introduces some of the ideas that he will develop across the rest of his career, among which the key notion of *Dionysiac* and its symbiotic and conflictual relation with what he calls *Apolline*.

The essay can be divided into three main segments. The first segment (sect. 1-10) focuses on two principles, the Apolline and the Dionysiac. Their mutual dialectic constitutes, for Nietzsche, the essence of art, and Attic tragedy (as exemplified by Aeschylus) represents a rare, precious and outstanding moment of their perfect combination. The second segment (sect. 11-15) attempts to explain how this achievement has been subsequently betrayed and degenerated. Here Nietzsche focuses on Euripides and Socrates, as two key figures involved in the raising of a new rationalistic attitude, which tends to dismiss or hide the Dionysiac element in life. The third segment (sect. 16-25) moves from ancient Greece to Nietzsche's own time and sets the background for envisaging Wagner's work as a genuine revival of the profound and insightful combination of Apolline and Dionysiac realized in Attic Tragedy.

Nietzsche's interpretation of the opposing characters of Apolline and Dionysiac is not entirely unprecedented (as pointed out for instance by Seaford 2006, 138-145), but attracted both praise (especially from philosophically

inclined readers) and criticism (especially from philologists). For our present purposes, it is important to stress how Nietzsche openly (and rightly) reconnects these two forces or characters to different domains of experience (remember the taxonomy we analysed in Lecture Two): the Apolline expresses the sort of vision that is most directly connected with dreaming and imagination, while the Dionysiac is associated with intoxication, especially in its verging towards the dissolution of consciousness and self-identity (hypnagogic states, dreamless sleep). Nietzsche writes:

In order to gain a closer understanding of these two drives, let us think of them in the first place as the separate art-worlds of *dream* and *intoxication* (*Rausch*). Between these two physiological phenomena an opposition can be observed which corresponds to that between the Apolline and the Dionysiac. As Lucretius envisages it, it was in dream that the magnificent figures of the gods first appeared before the souls of men; in dream the great image-maker saw the delightfully proportioned bodies of superhuman beings [...] Every human being is fully an artist when creating the worlds of dream, and the lovely semblance of dream is the precondition of all the arts of image-making, including, as we shall see, an important half of poetry. We take pleasure in dreaming, understanding its figures without mediation; all forms speak to us; nothing is indifferent or unnecessary. Yet even while this dream-reality is most alive, we nevertheless retain a pervasive sense that it is *semblance*; at least this is my experience, and I could adduce a good deal of evidence and the statements of poets to attest to the frequency, indeed normality, of my experience. Philosophical natures even have a presentiment that hidden beneath the reality in which we live and have our being there also lies a second, quite different reality; in other words, this reality too is a semblance. Indeed Schopenhauer actually states that the mark of a person's capacity for philosophy is the gift for feeling occasionally as if people and all things were mere phantoms or dream-images. (*Birth of Tragedy*, §1, transl. Speirs 1999, 14-15)

Nietzsche sees dreams as always entailing some degree of lucidity, which he characterises as their 'semblance.' This means that while dreaming one retains

some subliminal awareness that the current experience is in fact just a dream. Regardless of how much one could actually generalize this observation, Nietzsche exploits it to create his category of Apolline, as the drive to create images while also (more or less explicitly) retaining an awareness that these are indeed just images; i.e., creations, something made-up and not entirely real. This character of semblance contributes to the enjoyment of the Apolline, since it gives to its product a degree of detachment, an aura of irony and non-commitment. Apollo can be terrible or hieratic, but he is never entirely serious.

The reference to Schopenhauer is crucial. Nietzsche's discussion of the Apolline and the Dionysiac, and even his reflections on music, are explicitly elaborated in a close dialogue with Schopenhauer's core ideas, presented in his masterpiece *The World as Will and Representation* (first published in 1819). To summarize the main points, Schopenhauer holds that the whole world of experience is a representation, a phenomenon (in Kant's sense), something that *appears*. The characteristic of the world is its being articulated in seemingly independent and self-standing ontological units or individuals. The world, as it appears, is a world of objects, things, of manifoldness. However, Schopenhauer also argues that this representation is the product of an underpinning principle, which he calls 'the Will.' The Will is a cosmological force that blindly aims at expressing itself in all sorts of forms and representations. Since individuation occurs at the level of representation (is part of phenomena), the Will should not be considered as an individual principle, but can be envisaged as the only reality that exists (the 'noumenon,' to use Kantian terminology again). In Nietzsche's recasting of these notions, his distinction between Apolline and Dionysiac is meant to capture the dichotomy between the semblance of individuality (Apolline) and an underpinning unitarian principle (Dionysiac).

Nietzsche explains:

one might even describe Apollo as the magnificent divine image (*Götterbild*) of the *principium individuationis*, whose gestures and gaze speak to us of all the intense pleasure, wisdom and beauty of 'semblance.' In the same passage Schopenhauer has described for us the enormous horror which seizes people when they suddenly become confused and lose faith in the cognitive

forms of the phenomenal world because the principle of sufficient reason, in one or other of its modes, appears to sustain an exception. If we add to this horror the blissful ecstasy which arises from the innermost ground of man, indeed of nature itself, whenever this breakdown of the *principium individuationis* occurs, we catch a glimpse of the essence of the Dionysiac, which is best conveyed by the analogy of intoxication. These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken either under the influence of narcotic drink, of which all human beings and peoples who are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life. (*Birth of Tragedy*, §1, transl. Speirs 1999, 17)

Nietzsche (like Schopenhauer before him) is ready to stress the existential and psychological overtones of the metaphysical distinction between phenomenal and noumenal world. The phenomenal world, seemingly governed by the principle of individuation, is mere appearance. To some extent, human beings know that, in the same way in which one can know that a dream is just a dream. However, since every individual *is* this appearance, looking into its apparent unreality is profoundly disturbing, because it entails that what 'I am' turns out to be nothing but a delusion. Nietzsche takes it as almost unproblematic that individual appearance is the most precarious of phenomena. For him, one's sense of being a unitarian individual self is akin to sitting in a small ship while crossing a raging storm in high sea. Yet, Nietzsche also points out that there is a 'blissful ecstasy' in the experience of the breaking down of individuality. If individuality and self-identification is always on the verge of collapse, and thus can be preserved only at the cost of much effort and forgetting, its collapse might actually be regarded as a relief. This is a common feature of both possession trance and anaesthetic trance that we already encountered a number of times at this point.

Nietzsche applies this dual model of Apolline and Dionysiac to the ancient Greeks. Far from being a cheerful hymn extolling beauty and rationality, ancient Greek culture was deeply tormented by the precarious nature of existence. Nietzsche not only dismisses any edulcorating description of the ancient

Greeks, but also takes stock of this existential anxiety (common to all cultures) in order to explain some of the key features of their intellectual achievements. As he writes:

The Greeks knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to live at all they had to place in front of these things the resplendent, dream-born figures of the Olympians. That enormous distrust of the Titanic forces of nature, that moira which throned, unpitying, above all knowledge, that vulture of man's great friend, Prometheus, that terrifying lot drawn by the wise Oedipus, that curse upon the family of Atreus which compels Orestes to kill his mother, in short that whole philosophy of the wood-god, together with its mythic examples, which destroyed the melancholy Etruscans—all this was constantly and repeatedly overcome by the Greeks, or at least veiled and withdrawn from view, by means of the artistic middle world of the Olympians. In order to be able to live, the Greeks were obliged, by the most profound compulsion, to create these gods. This process is probably to be imagined as taking place gradually, so that, under the influence of the Apolline instinct for beauty, the Olympian divine order of joy developed out of the original, Titanic divine order of terror in a series of slow transitions (*Birth of Tragedy*, §3, transl. Speirs 1999, 23)

Nietzsche interprets ancient Greek mythology and religion as based on two different drives. The first and most profound is the Dionysiac drive that somehow testifies the uncertainty of individual existence and constantly acts on it, both as a threat of dissolution and as a source of redemption and relief (insofar as the dissolution of the individual can itself be redeeming). However, the Dionysiac alone does not create a sustainable worldview, since its existential weight is too heavy, and the anxiety and excitement it creates is unbearable if not mitigated. This is where the Apolline comes in. By creating a semblance of well-defined and rational individuality, the Apolline allowed the Greeks to cover the hidden and disturbing uncertainty of all existence with more bearable images of power, control, self-confidence and rationality. Out of this effort, Nietzsche argues, the Greeks created their Olympian gods (which we encountered in Lecture Seven). Notice the reference to tragedy (Prometheus, Oedipus,

Orestes). The mythological background that is presupposed in tragedy is precisely that Dionysiac view of life that reveals that fragility of human existence. And yet, tragedy (in its best form, at least) is not *just* a Dionysiac creation. Rather, it represents the ideal synthesis between Dionysiac and Apolline.

Nietzsche's general point is that the Apolline, by giving a semblance of rationality and control to the original and contradictory unity of the Will, allows it both to be expressed in a form, and to alleviate its struggle. The Will is inherently contradictory in the sense that it can give rise to all sorts of phenomena, affirming and denying them all, being identified with and yet different from any of them. Schopenhauer himself was driven to pessimistic conclusions based on this view: the world has no meaning. Nietzsche struggles to find a way of acknowledging Schopenhauer's metaphysics, while at the same time escaping from sheer pessimism. This, in fact, will remain perhaps Nietzsche's most important theme of reflection throughout his subsequent works (later rephrased as the transition from 'passive nihilism' to 'active nihilism' and eventually to the overcoming of nihilism altogether). Here, he suggests that the genuine solution to the contradictory nature of reality does not consist in breaking the contradiction apart, but rather expressing it, and through this expression, somehow *staying with it*. Breaking the contradiction apart (and thus dissolving its problem) would amount to finding some argument to show that (just to mention a few examples) the Will is not contradictory, or the opposition between Will and representation does not entail any real contrast, or that individuality in the realm of representations is solid and valid. Nietzsche refrains from taking such a path. Instead, he reflects on the way semblance can produce relief. He remarks:

There is no doubt that, of the two halves of our lives, the waking and the dreaming half, the former strikes us as being the more privileged, important, dignified, and worthy of being lived, indeed the only half that truly is lived; nevertheless, although it may seem paradoxical, I wish to assert that the very opposite evaluation of dream holds true for that mysterious ground of our being of which we are an appearance (*Erscheinung*). The more I become aware of those all-powerful artistic drives in nature, and of a fervent longing in them for semblance, for their redemption and release in

semblance, the more I feel myself driven to the metaphysical assumption that that which truly exists, the eternally suffering and contradictory, primordial unity, simultaneously needs, for its constant release and redemption, the ecstatic vision, intensely pleasurable semblance. We, however, who consist of and are completely trapped in semblance, are compelled to feel this semblance to be that which truly is not, i.e. a continual Becoming in time, space, and causality—in other words, empirical reality. If we ignore for a moment our own ‘reality’ and if we take our empirical existence, and indeed that of the world in general, to be a representation generated at each moment by the primordial unity, we must now regard dream as the semblance of the semblance and thus as a yet higher satisfaction of the original desire for semblance. (*Birth of Tragedy*, §4, transl. Speirs 1999, 25-6)

In the same way that dreams are representations of real life and thus resemble it to some extent, and yet are fictional in nature, so what we call ‘real life’ is in fact a dream-like representation produced by the Will. What we call ‘dreams’ are thus second-order representations, even more remote from the source of reality (the Will), since they resemble something (our ‘real life’) that is itself dream-like. In travelling this far from the sorrowful origin of reality, dreams gain an analgesic power, since they temporarily reduce the awareness of how precarious, uncertain, and fleeting our experience of reality actually is.

This is the key insight from which Nietzsche derives his theory of tragedy. According to Nietzsche, tragedy originates as a vision that arises in a subject. This visionary subject (the seer who ‘sees’ the tragedy) is represented on stage by the chorus (hence the tragic subject is originally a *collective* or trans-individual subject, something that is internally complex, multifarious and articulated, in line with the model discussed in Lecture Three). Nietzsche surmises that, in the beginning, the tragedy was indeed just the acting of the chorus. Dramatic characters represent and embody the various forces and tensions that constitute the kernel of the chorus’s tragic vision. Nietzsche contends:

we have come to realize that the stage and the action were originally and fundamentally thought of as nothing other than a vision, that the only ‘reality’ is precisely that of the chorus, which creates the vision from within

itself and speaks of this vision with all the symbolism of dance, tone, and word. (*Birth of Tragedy*, §8, transl. Speirs 1999, 44)

Nietzsche draws on Schopenhauer's philosophical interpretation of music (and of instrumental music in particular). In Schopenhauer's view, music is a language that by itself can communicate without having to articulate discrete semantic units or well-demarcated ideas. Music, moreover, is not necessarily dependent on words. To some extent, this view is predicated on the development of classical instrumental music in the West, especially from the eighteenth-century onwards. From a historical point of view, it is more likely that music and language developed together and that the distinction between the two was not so sharply perceived in archaic, perhaps even in ancient times (just think about the *brahman* we discussed in Lecture Five). However, for present purposes, we do not need to get into the musicological details. Nietzsche is going to distil 'the *spirit* of music' (namely, the philosophical idea behind the phenomenon of music) in order to articulate further his account of tragedy. In doing so, he might well refer to some specific feature that is embodied in the phenomenon of music, but that does not have to be strictly identified with any specific genre or music in history. Nietzsche's account is more normative than descriptive. Be that as it may, what Nietzsche takes to be this *spirit* of music amounts to the ability to clearly express and articulate the dissolution of what is discrete, individualized, by thus revealing the ultimately uncertain and provisional (hence only apparent) nature of any individuality. Nietzsche writes:

The tragic cannot be derived in any honest way from the nature of art as commonly understood, that is, according to the single category of semblance and beauty; only the spirit of music allows us to understand why we feel joy at the destruction of the individual. For individual instances of such destruction merely illustrate the eternal phenomenon of Dionysiac art, which expresses the omnipotent Will behind the principium individuationis, as it were, life going on eternally beyond all appearance and despite all destruction. Our metaphysical delight in the tragic translates instinctive, unconscious Dionysiac wisdom into the language of images: we take pleasure in the negation of the hero, the supreme appearance of the Will,



because he is, after all, mere appearance, and because the eternal life of the Will is not affected by his annihilation. Tragedy calls out: 'We believe in eternal life,' whereas music is the immediate idea of this life. (*Birth of Tragedy*, §16, transl. Speirs 1999, 80)

Nietzsche offers here his own solution to the old problem of the 'paradox of tragedy.' Philosophers, historians, and literature critics have spent a great deal of time considering how it is possible that watching dreadful events such as those presented in tragedy might give rise to aesthetic pleasure. Various solutions have been proposed, among which those of Aristotle and Hume have been perhaps the most influential. In the *Poetics* (especially chapter 4), Aristotle contends that the pleasure derived from watching tragedy has to do with a process of 'purification' (Greek *catharsis*), through which the audience can overcome in themselves the same sort of violent passions represented on stage. Hume, meanwhile, contended that much of the pleasure of tragedy derives from an increased sensitivity to the artistic technique and its ability to represent even dreadful events in a way that is perceived as aesthetically appealing.<sup>101</sup> Nietzsche offers a different view, much more entrenched with his metaphysical assumptions derived from Schopenhauer. The Apolline semblance that plays in tragedy does not merely provide an aesthetically enjoyable depiction of otherwise disturbing events, but it allows for both the expression of a deep existential anxiety that lurks behind any experience, *and* for a representation of the breaking apart of the same Apolline individual identity which is constantly threatened by that anxiety.

The pleasure of tragedy does not arise from a resolution of its contradiction, but rather from an exposure of it. Again, Nietzsche draws from musical experience in order to illustrate his view:

The pleasure engendered by the tragic myth comes from the same homeland as our pleasurable sensation of dissonance in music. The Dionysiac, with the primal pleasure it perceives even in pain, is the common womb from which both music and the tragic myth are born. Could it not be that,

•• 101 See discussion in Mark Packer, 'Dissolving the Paradox of Tragedy' (1989).

with the assistance of musical dissonance, we have eased significantly the difficult problem of the effect of tragedy? After all, we do now understand the meaning of our desire to look, and yet to long to go beyond looking when we are watching tragedy; when applied to our response to the artistic use of dissonance, this state of mind would have to be described in similar terms: we want to listen, but at the same time we long to go beyond listening. That striving towards infinity, that wing-beat of longing even as we feel supreme delight in a clearly perceived reality, these things indicate that in both these states of mind we are to recognize a Dionysiac phenomenon, one which reveals to us the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality as an outpouring of primal pleasure and delight. (*Birth of Tragedy*, §24, transl. Speirs 1999, 114)

In music, and especially in Western tonal classical music, dissonance is constructed and thus perceived as a dynamic element. Classical tonal music is based on the establishment of one ground tone, the tonic, which provides (in theory at least) the basic key of the piece. However, dissonant chords can be used to move away and challenge the tonic. The most common and used dissonance is represented by the chord constructed on the fifth note on the tonic scale, the dominant. Classical composers like Haydn and Mozart would use a modulation to the dominant as a way of ‘escaping’ or ‘moving away’ from the tonic, and a modulation back to the tonic would then be perceived as a ‘returning home.’ By Nietzsche’s time, Wagner illustrates an exasperated use of dissonance in music, which eventually undermines the very idea of having one fundamental key. In this context, dissonance, as the simultaneous resonance of different sounds, is a musical metaphor for contradiction. Nietzsche’s point is that, in music, dissonance (hence contradiction) can be handled in such a way that it becomes possible to want to listen and stay with it, while also creating a sense of dynamics and transcendence, an urge to have the dissonance ‘go somewhere’ or ‘resolve.’

Nietzsche identifies the distinctive achievement of Attic tragedy as the ability of creating a form of art in which, through the alliance between Apolline and Dionysiac, dissonance (the musical symbol of the contradictoriness of any existence) is both expressed and used as an element of self-transcendence. In

this way, Nietzsche seems to articulate the sort of intuition we detected in the evolution of Clytemnestra's own attitude by the end of the *Agamemnon*, when she asks the *Daimon* of the house to go away and leave her and the remaining of the family with the sorrow that the same *Daimon* produced. The gesture is that of moving away from the dissonance, while staying with it. We shall see shortly how this idea remains key in Nietzsche's later thought.

Applying the terminology and conceptual scheme we developed in these lectures, Nietzsche's account of the Dionysian represents the challenge of uncertainty that constantly threatens the self, while the Apolline represents the attempt at constructing an individual self of some sort (the Apolline comes in a spectrum of masks!), hopefully capable of mastering uncertainty. Nietzsche's view of tragedy, by stressing the balancing between the two principles, thus points at a way of constructing a self (Apolline principle) capable of withstanding uncertainty and dissolution (Dionysian principle) without mastering, overruling, subordinating, or hiding it (as would happen if the Apolline principle prevailed), but also without simply sinking into the dread of uncertainty and dissolution (as would happen if the Dionysiac principle prevailed). In other words, Attic tragedy provides a model for how uncertainty can be handled without being mastered, and thus how the essential dissonance that resonates in all forms of existence can be listened to and withstood without having to either run away from it, or be overwhelmed by it entirely.

Before leaving the *Birth of Tragedy*, it might be important to stress a couple of other points that Nietzsche advances here. First, he is vocal about the short-lived fate of Attic tragedy, the glory of which he identifies with the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. By the time of Euripides, he contends, the genre already underwent a sort of mystification. Nietzsche sees in Euripides a new tendency to rationalize the action and make it more intelligible for the audience. What remained unexplained in Aeschylus becomes now exposed in an almost pedantic way (Nietzsche argues), especially through the new device of introducing a prologue where the premises of the drama are explicitly mentioned. Language becomes more colloquial and closer to real life than the dense and difficult poetry of Aeschylus. Nietzsche connects this change with a new intellectual attitude, which he associates with the same intellectualist effort that also characterizes Socrates's philosophy. In short, Socrates (and Plato) find

a new way of solving the contradiction of existence, and this consists in dissolving the contradiction itself, discarding all irrational elements, and offering a more sound, easy, and linear account of events and their meaning. The spirit of music that was used to give voice to the dissonance of existence is betrayed and abandoned. Plato invented a new genre, the Socratic dialogue, which stands in stark contrast with tragedy, of which Plato was no friend. Speaking of Plato's dialogues, Nietzsche writes:

Plato really did bequeath the model of a new art-form to all posterity, the model of the novel, which can be defined as an infinitely intensified Aesopian fable where poetry has the same rank in relation to dialectic philosophy as, for centuries, philosophy had in relation to theology, namely that of *ancilla*. This was the new position into which Plato forced poetry under pressure from the daemonic Socrates. Here art becomes overgrown with philosophical thought which forces it to cling tightly to the trunk of dialectics. The Apolline tendency has disguised itself as logical schematism; we have already observed a corresponding tendency in Euripides, along with the translation of the Dionysiac into naturalistic affects. Socrates, the dialectical hero in Platonic drama, recalls the related nature of the Euripidean hero who must defend his actions with reasons and counter-reasons and thereby is often in danger of losing our tragic sympathy. (*Birth of Tragedy*, §14, transl. Speirs 1999, 69)

Nietzsche sees a direct connection between Socratic intellectualism, Euripides's tragedy, and modern science. Science, too, is aimed at providing a fully rational account of events, in which contradictions are avoided or resolved, and nothing mysterious or inexplicable is left for the inquirer. In this sense, Nietzsche acknowledges that modern science is the late offspring of the *spirit* of Socrates's and Plato's philosophies, even if not directly of their own philosophical tenets.

Admittedly, 'science' is a very broad category and these remarks are just cursory brushes. However, Nietzsche's point about the historical and intellectual link between Greek philosophy and modern science should not appear too difficult to grasp, especially in view of so many accounts of the origins of Greek philosophy as an attempt (the first!) to offer a rational explanation of

natural phenomena beyond and despite traditional mythologies. Scientific attitudes are read back into the beginnings of philosophy, and fundamental traits of (some!) Greek philosophy (especially rationalism and intellectualism) can be seen as inherited by modern science. What makes Nietzsche's assessment sharper and potentially more challenging is the context in which he makes it, namely, in the process of laying out his account of tragedy. If tragedy is a way of listening to the dissonance of existence without fleeing from it, and if Socratism is the exact opposite (the attempt to dissolve the dissonance and the contradiction, and even hide its possibility), then science can be envisaged as an attempt at *masking* the contradiction of existence. This resonates with what we discussed in Lecture One in connection with today's cognitive science. From a certain scientific point of view, the self can be dismissed as merely an illusion (and thus the task of mastering uncertainty can be hidden). In Lecture Two, we also saw Thompson considering certain conclusions reached by cognitive scientists about the non-existence of the self as a form of 'neuro-nihilism.' If Nietzsche's account of the origin of science is right, then today's neuro-nihilism is but the epigone of a long tradition of Socratism, which attempted not to express but rather to dissolve the problem of the self (and the paradox of mastery); even if this can be done only at the cost of denying its reality altogether.

Nietzsche's discussion on this point is also relevant for another reason. By the time he was writing (and even more so today), the Socratic-scientific attitude was not limited to a particular sphere of reality, but shaped the whole of European (today Global) culture. As he remarks:

Our whole modern world is caught in the net of Alexandrian culture, and the highest ideal it knows is theoretical man, equipped with the highest powers of understanding and working in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates. The original aim of all our means of education is to achieve this ideal; every other form of existence has to fight its way up alongside it, as something permitted but not intended. It is almost terrifying to think that for a long time the man of culture was to be found here only in the guise of the man of learning. (*Birth of Tragedy*, §18, transl. Speirs 1999, 86)

Quite clearly, Nietzsche finds this development unwelcome, since it does not provide a genuine solution to the problem tackled by tragedy. The self is still nestled in contradiction, existence is still fragmented and precarious, and simply doing one's best to turn a blind eye and hide this predicament behind the Apolline mask of rationality, won't do. As we saw, the Apolline is primarily connected with the semblance of dreams, and this is further extended so as to encompass the perception of individuality, and even further to include also all rational representations (which are based on the principle of individuation). Scientific rationality is thus but one manifestation of the Apolline, and since the Apolline is essentially a dream-maker principle, it follows that scientific rationality should also be regarded as a dream-like production. The sort of relief produced by a scientific, rational explanation of phenomena, resides in the fact that it seems to dissipate the sense of meaninglessness and uncertainty that otherwise surrounds the dissonance of experience. But this relief is the same relief offered by dreams, which are second-order semblances of the ultimate root of reality (the Will). Science, much like dreams, has thus an analgesic function, but also blurs the perception of the fundamental contradictoriness of existence.

In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche calls for a revival of tragic culture. Having diagnosed the reasons for pushing back from the model Socratic and scientific optimism, he writes:

This insight marks the beginning of a culture which I now dare to describe as a tragic culture. Its most important feature lies in putting wisdom in place of science as the highest goal. This wisdom is not deceived by the seductive distractions of the sciences; instead it turns its unmoved gaze on the total image of the world, and in this image it seeks to embrace eternal suffering with sympathetic feelings of love, acknowledging that suffering to be its own. Let us imagine a rising generation with this fearless gaze, with this heroic attraction to what is monstrous, let us imagine the bold stride of these dragon-killers, the proud recklessness with which they turn their backs on all the enfeebled doctrines of scientific optimism so that they may 'live resolutely,' wholly and fully; would not the tragic man of this culture, given that he has trained himself for what is grave and terrifying, be bound to

desire a new form of art, the art of metaphysical solace? (*Birth of Tragedy*, §18, transl. Speirs 1999, 87-88)

Wisdom here means something different from Socratic philosophy or science. The difference is conveyed by the previous discussion of the Dionysiac nature of inspiration in its fruitful conjunction with an Apolline sense for plastic images and forms. In calling for a return to wisdom, Nietzsche is looking at presocratic Greek culture and philosophy. In brief, he is looking at the world of seers, satyrs and shaman-like figures that proclaimed to be able to ‘see’ and ‘dream’ the meaning of the world, within and in acknowledgment of its contradictory and dissonant nature.<sup>102</sup>

To sum up, in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche sees attic Greek tragedy as the expression and felicitous conjunction of two artistic drives, Apolline and Dionysiac. The Dionysiac expresses the uncertain and contradictory nature of existence, in which individuals emerge only as epiphenomena of an abyssal and ultimately irrational noumenal cosmical Will. The Apolline gives shape to these strivings and stirrings, makes them into images of seemingly certain individual forms, it gives a semblance of order and control, which is nonetheless doomed to be destroyed. In this way, the conjunction of Apolline and Dionysian in tragedy is a way of expressing in its full complexity the dissonant nature of existence in general, and of the nature of each individual self. Listening to this dissonance and being able to fully appreciate its bittersweet, dark beauty is the way tragedy, at its best, manages to genuinely provide relief from the anxiety of existence, while avoiding sheer pessimism *à la* Schopenhauer. Nietzsche insists on the need to *combine* both Apolline and Dionysiac, since none of these drives, when it operates alone or is prioritized over the other, can produce any sustainable or acceptable solution. The Dionysiac on its own promotes excess and chaos, while the Apolline promotes mystification. A case of

•• 102 One might wonder to what extent Nietzsche took inspiration from the character of Empedocles, the presocratic shaman-philosopher who presented himself as both a healer and a sage and theorized that the whole world is shaped by the cyclical combination of two opposing principles, Love and Strife. In Empedocles’s view, only when they are both present and balanced do our world and life as we know become possible. Associating Love with a principle that dissolves divisions and brings unity, and Strife with the opposite principle that dissolves unity and brings separation, the two could be paralleled with Nietzsche’s notions of Dionysiac and Apolline respectively.

the latter is constituted, in Nietzsche's view, by the arising of Socratic and Platonic philosophy and, by extension, modern science. The optimism and cheerfulness that these views proclaim is but a mask of their having hidden and mystified the genuine problem of existence. Nietzsche's envisaged solution consists thus in a revival of tragic culture.<sup>103</sup> This revival should be based on both a practice and an attitude. The practice is here identified with a specific kind of *music* (broadly understood to include playing, acting, performing, and thinking), capable of doing justice to the dissonance of life. The attitude is that of learning how to accept this dissonance and say 'yes' to it. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is convinced that Wagner's music will contribute to both points. Later, he changes his mind and reaches the opposite conclusion.<sup>104</sup> For present purposes, however, it is important to remember that what Nietzsche sees in music is more than just an entertaining form of art. Music is a symbol or a metaphor for that existential attitude that can both express and listen to dissonance, withstanding it without being destroyed by its abyss. Music is the practice of 'yes-saying' to the dissonance of existence.

### 9.3 Ontology and Anthropology

Nietzsche's mature views coalesce in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which he conceived of as a tragedy. However, to fully appreciate the *Zarathustra*, we need to draw attention to two important points that underpin Nietzsche's thought. The first concerns ontology, the second anthropology. In sketching this background, we need to nuance Nietzsche's own statements about Plato's philosophy. While it is surely true that the overall orientation of Nietzsche's thought explicitly aims to move in an anti-Platonic (namely, immanentist, anti-metaphysical) direction, this does not mean (nor entail) that Nietzsche entirely discards Plato's

•• 103 However, Nietzsche's interpretation presupposes that there should be no subordination between Apolline and Dionysiac for tragedy to perform its liberatory role. In Lecture Seven, we saw that subordination was instead a recurrent strategy used in ancient Greek culture to handle the paradox of mastery. One might solve this tension by interpreting Nietzsche's claim as purely normative, rather than descriptive. But we can also acknowledge that in some cases, like in the *Oresteia*, the fact that a form of subordination is represented on stage (as in the finale of the trilogy) does not entail that the work itself (even less Aeschylus as its author) would endorse it.

104 See further discussion in Roger Hollinrake, *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism* (2010<sup>2</sup>).



results. In particular, a case can be made for Nietzsche's critical and important reconfiguration of some crucial Platonic tenets that we encountered in Lecture Eight by discussing the *Sophist*. This observation can be read in line with the rather traditional criticism addressed against Nietzsche (for instance, by Martin Heidegger) concerning the fact that, despite wanting to reject all metaphysics, Nietzsche still remains committed to metaphysical notions (Heidegger stressed Nietzsche's obsession for the notion of 'value', for example). However, another way of looking at the Nietzsche-Plato connection is by using Nietzsche to uncover a much more complex view of Plato's own thought, which can be developed in different directions; that is, Nietzsche helps illuminate some of the most radical aspects of Plato's thought (from the point of view of traditional Western metaphysics at least).

As is already clear from *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche endorses a specific ontological view according to which all reality is becoming and every object is subject to change. This entails that nothing in reality can have an enduring, stable, and fixed identity, but everything is subject to arise and then revert in its opposite. In this picture, moreover, no identity can be established in isolation from other things since becoming always entails a process of change, and change occurs only in the context of diversity, in which manifold different entities or processes are linked with one another. In fact, the very possibility of identifying entities or objects is an epiphenomenon of a more basic relational constitution of reality. Entities and objects are fleeting constructions that we can identify on the surface of what is an inherently ungraspable unfolding process of becoming.

Nietzsche does not deny that there is *some* form of identity. But, he maintains, identity cannot be conceived of without diversity. Nietzsche does not deny that there is *some* form of stability, and yet, stability cannot be conceived of without change. Nietzsche also does not deny that there is *some* form of being or existence, and yet being or existence cannot be conceived of apart from diversity and change. Nietzsche is in fact upholding a somewhat revised version of Plato's relational model of the five great kinds introduced in the *Sophist*.

Given Nietzsche's opposition to Plato, one might try to resist this point. The key difference is that Plato sees these five kinds as themselves distinct from the world of becoming, and in themselves eternal and beyond change. The rela-

tional structure of the five kinds is a relational structure among *ideas*, not among things or empirical realities. This structure is key to understanding the world of becoming, but it is not identical to it. However, the leading problem that runs through the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* is the necessity of rethinking the notion of ‘idea’ in such a way as to overcome some of the difficulties that Plato himself raised, the most important of which is the assumptions that ideas must be rigidly conceived as existing separately and in themselves only. If we grant that the theory of the five great kinds in the *Sophist* provides a solution to this problem by introducing a relational account of ideas, then an overly rigid separation between the five kinds as ideas and the world of becoming cannot be maintained. If there is participation between the five kinds and the world of becoming (if there is no difference to the extent that there is participation), then the five kinds are the *immanent relational structure* of the world itself. In fact, it is only if the five kinds are conceived in this way that they can provide the necessary epistemic scaffolding to generate valid knowledge about the phenomenal world. From this point of view, one might even venture to say that it is not actually Nietzsche that goes back to Plato, but rather some of Plato’s own conclusions that actually set up and anticipate Nietzsche’s relational ontology of becoming.

With ancient philosophy in mind, attributing to Nietzsche the view that reality is becoming sounds like an echo of Heraclitus. What’s more, there is good textual evidence that Nietzsche himself understood his view as a way of revamping Heraclitean ontology. Matthew Meyer, in his *Reading Nietzsche Through the Ancient: An Analysis of Becoming, Perspectivism, and the Principle of Non-Contradiction* (2014) provides perhaps the most thorough examination of this issue. In summarizing the upshot of his reading, Meyer explains:

I argue that Nietzsche’s naturalism and empiricism lead him to adopt the following Heraclitean and Protagorean views that Plato and Aristotle critically analyze in the *Theaetetus* and *Metaphysics IV*, respectively: (1) a Heraclitean unity of opposites doctrine that is thought to violate the principle of non-contradiction, (2) a Heraclitean doctrine of becoming which makes change an essential feature of nature, and (3) a Protagorean perspectivism in which objects of knowledge are held to be projections of and therefore

relative to a subject that also exists only in relation to the objects it perceives and knows. Although these views might seem unrelated, I argue that the unity of opposites doctrine entails a relational ontology in which everything exists and is what it is only in relation to something else and that this relational ontology is not only a common element of Nietzsche's perspectivism, his doctrine of becoming, and his rejection of the principle of noncontradiction, it is also the position Plato uses in the *Theaetetus* to bind the views of Heraclitus and Protagoras together. (Meyer 2014, 2)

An important part of Meyer's discussion is devoted to engaging with the problem of perspectivism. Perspectivism entails that truth is dependent upon the specific perspective of the subject who upholds that truth. Looking at ancient philosophy again, this claim can be traced back to Protagoras, the sophist who famously contended that 'the human being is the measure of all things.' Protagoras is also the polemical target of Plato in his *Theaetetus*, a dialogue that comes just between the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist*. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato rejects the view that proper knowledge can be derived from empirical and sensible experience alone. Reiterating a point that emerges many times in Plato's dialogues (including the *Parmenides*), Plato's Socrates states that sensory experience cannot provide true knowledge, because all the objects of the senses are subject to change, and something that changes cannot be known in a definite, certain and immutable way. Plato argues that what is needed is a metaphysical investigation that can reach absolutely certain and immutable knowledge. As Meyer notes, in the *Theaetetus* Plato also presents Heraclitus and Protagoras as natural allies: if everything is becoming (Heraclitus), then all knowledge is indexed to a particular perspective (Protagoras). Nietzsche can be seen as offering a defence of this Heraclitean-Protagorean view that Plato wanted to discard. Meyer's further point is that this position is not self-refuting insofar it is interpreted as a two-levels theory: the fundamental level consists in uncovering the fundamentally relational and dynamic ontology that underpins reality (the Heraclitean ontological view of reality as inherently subject to becoming), and on this basis, it is possible to consider any *other* view as indexed to (conditioned by, dependent upon) the particular perspective from which it is defended (the Protagorean epistemic view leading to perspectivism).

For present purposes, we must put aside the issue of perspectivism. We can just remark that although Plato is no friend of perspectivism, in his *Theaetetus* he provided a model for how Heraclitean and Protagorean claims can be combined. Even though Plato himself arguably intended this model to be something to be dismissed, Nietzsche instead took it up and endorsed it. In any case, the model was explicitly *articulated* in Plato.

The ambiguous and complex relation that binds Nietzsche to Plato also emerges in connection to Nietzsche's commitment to the Heraclitean unity of the opposites. Meyer summarizes Nietzsche's view as follows:

what Nietzsche does is reject Parmenides' assumption that there is an isomorphism between thinking and being by challenging the idea that the world must conform to PNC [principle of non-contradiction]. Although Nietzsche's flaunting of PNC will worry many, it is important to distinguish between a logical version of PNC that governs statements and their truth values, where a proposition and its negation cannot be true at the same time, and an ontological version that governs things and their properties, where something cannot both be (F) and not be (F) at the same time and in the same respect. For Nietzsche, the unity of opposites, which entails that everything exists and is what it is only in relation to something else, does not violate the logical version of the principle because it does not also state or entail the negation of either the view that opposites are united or the view that everything exists and is what it is only in relation to something else. However, Nietzsche does think that the unity of opposites cuts against the fundamental structures of both language and thought, and therefore it could be construed as violating the ontological version of PNC. This is because the doctrine invites us to accept that the world is one of relations without preexisting relata, predicates without subjects, deeds without doers, etc. This, according to Nietzsche, is a world that we cannot think. (Meyer 2014, 8)

Parmenides's version of the principle of non-contradiction is based on a rigid distinction between opposites. Being and non-being are two incommensurable and entirely independent terms, and it is absolutely necessary that if being is,

non-being is not. This rigid separation between being and non-being is also precisely what Plato rejected in the *Sophist*, when the Eleatic visitor had to ‘kill’ his ‘father’ Parmenides. As a result of his theory of the five great kinds, Plato sought to redefine what counts as a contradiction, by ruling out Parmenides’s rigid contrast between being and non-being, and instead conceptualizing a contradiction as the discordance between speech and reality. Notice: Plato’s move makes contradiction a *logical* phenomenon (a phenomenon dependent on *logos*, speech and reason), and no longer an *ontological* phenomenon (a phenomenon dependent on *to on*, being, or even Platonic ideas). In terms of ontology, the theory of the five great kinds is much more nuanced than Parmenides’s account, and it does allow for a merging of identity and diversity, being and non-being. In fact, Plato’s doctrine seems also more sophisticated than Heraclitus’s view (at least in terms of what we can derive from the surviving fragments of Heraclitus), since it does not simply posit change or difference as more fundamental, but it acknowledges how even they must be understood as relational kinds and somehow involve identity and rest. Nietzsche’s rejection of Parmenides mirrors Plato’s rejection, and Nietzsche’s endorsement of a relational ontology mirrors Plato’s theory of the five great kinds. In the next lecture, we are going to see how Plato’s theory of the five great kinds also offers a sound ontological foundation for Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power.

Nietzsche’s ontology gives rise to an anthropological view of various ways in which human beings can live in a world that is inherently unstable. This anthropological view is explained, albeit often metaphorically, in the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and constitutes the bedrock for understanding Nietzsche’s understanding of the death of God and nihilism. Michael Gillespie, in his *Nietzsche’s Final Teaching* (2017), provides an accessible presentation of the key intuitions behind Nietzsche’s anthropology. To see the connection between ontology and anthropology, consider how an ontological view based on the unity of opposites leads to an anthropological view of human beings as playfields of conflicting passions (again, a spectrum of possibilities). As Gillespie explains:

The essence of human being, [Zarathustra] argues, is not the soul or the self-conscious ego but the body, and the body is nothing but affect or pas-

sion. Passion, however, is not a unity but a multiplicity, and each of the individual passions constantly struggles for expression. Human being is thus fundamentally conflictual, for the body is constantly at war with itself. Human life is thus suffering, and most morality and religion aims at ameliorating this suffering, either by establishing peace among the passions or by devaluing this world of the passions and escaping into an imaginatively constructed beyond. [...] If human being for Zarathustra is passion, then the measure of one's position on the line that Zarathustra uses to define human being is determined by the strength of one's passions. This strength, however, depends not merely on the force of the individual passions but also and preeminently upon their hierarchical organization (NL, KGW VII 2:27). We can imagine them as vectors. If very powerful passions are pulling in opposite or multiple directions, they will counterbalance one another. If, however, they all stand in the service of one drive or master passion, their force will be similarly increased. Therefore, the farther one moves along the line from beast to *Übermensch*, the greater the discipline or rank order of the passions must be. The line that represents human being is thus a measure of power, for power is nothing other than the breadth and effective coordination of the passions under a single head. (Gillespie 2017, 32)

The conflictual (and hence painful) nature of human life was already at the core of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Now we can see it from a more general and theoretical point of view. Unity of opposites means, in anthropological terms, that a human being is a struggle between conflicting forces (the passions), each striving and steering in its own way, at odds with the others. If this point can be associated with the Dionysiac, the idea of a ranking among passions and their hierarchical subordination to a leading passion can be seen as an Apolline component, which gives order and shape to the conflict and steers it in a certain direction. The kernel of Nietzschean anthropology is twofold: on the one hand, it aims at providing a descriptive account of the different options for handling the conflict of the passions, while on the other hand, it seeks a normative account of why a certain option should be preferred.

From a descriptive point of view, the first speech of Zarathustra in Part One introduces a threefold metaphor of various stages of development: camel, lion

and child. Before the camel lies the ‘last man,’ which is understood as the closest to a no-longer-human beast, while beyond the child lies the *Übermensch*, the over-human, which is no-longer-human because it has overcome its own humanity. The last man is the one who does not impose any particular ranking or hierarchy on the passions, but rather attempts at satisfying them all, as much as possible, and sees this satisfaction as its own liberty. Gillespie connects the last man to ‘incomplete’ nihilists:

These are incomplete nihilists, the banal hedonists whom Zarathustra characterized as last men. They do not seek discipline and order of rank but a democracy of the passions in which each is satisfied in turn without repression or sublimation. These people do not see or understand the problem of values since this problem of values is always a problem of the appropriate order or discipline of the soul. (Gillespie 2017, 35)

From this remark, it should be clear that Zarathustra’s normative account seeks to steer humans away from this option. Allowing the conflict of passions to simply express itself and trying to satisfy all conflicting passions as much as possible is nothing but giving up to the very project of being human. Ultimately, this hedonism is just the reverse of a pure Dionysiac spirit, agitated by its turbulent uncertainty, and unable to impose any shape on it. But as we learnt from *The Birth of Tragedy*, Dionysiac in isolation from Apolline is unbearable and self-destructive. In the spectrum of possible options, then, all the remaining alternatives are meant to seek some way of establishing a hierarchy among passions and thus give to their conflict a shape or form that could make it bearable (not only existentially, but also *aesthetically*, as discussed above). From the point of view of our current discussion, notice that the last man more explicitly endorses a form of selfhood based on strong embodiment, in which physical bodily drives are the only concern. The last man is both engaged in the almost impossible task of satisfying all physical drives, and inevitably exposed to the uncertainty that they create. Nietzsche’s disdain for the last man is a hint of his rejection of hard naturalist accounts of selfhood as incapable of providing a genuine and authentic way of facing the dissonance of existence.

The camel is a metaphor for the attempt to find a transcendent moral order, based on commands and obligations, ultimately rooted in a supreme God. Order is achieved, but only as rooted in some world behind and beyond this world of becoming. Both theistic religions (like Christianity) and philosophical metaphysics (like Plato's) provide historical instances of this solution. When this sort of transcendent grounding is no longer available, camel-strategy collapses, and humanity is faced with a dilemma: either resignation, or revolt. Resignation is giving up on the project of mastering the passions and simply accepting one's failure. Revolt consists in taking stock of the change of scenario and actively *destroying* all remaining idols of a world beyond, finding freedom in the fact that there is no such world. This latter attitude corresponds to the metaphor of the lion, and in Nietzsche's view it is embedded not only in modern attempts (including scientific ones) at destroying all appeals to immutable forms and transcendent realities, but also by his own philosophical project. Being faced with this dilemma means being at a crossroad where humanity can either undergo evolution or de-evolution. This is what Zarathustra calls 'the Great Noon,' which Gillespie associates with the two opposite attitudes of passive and active nihilism:

The passive nihilist is a second kind of human being, the Christian who can no longer believe in God but who needs such an absolute. He is driven to despair and resignation in the face of this nothingness. The third kind of man, the active nihilist, is also distraught by the death of God, but he does not fall into despair nor does he resign himself to the world as he finds it. Rather, he falls into a destructive rage and seeks to push over all the remaining idols, to have done with all 'thou shalt.' This active nihilist thus bears a striking resemblance to Zarathustra's lion spirit. Like this spirit, the active nihilist is free but without a home, filled like Turgenev's nihilist hero Bazarov with resentment, seeking to overthrow the existing order. (Gillespie 2017, 35)

The main limitation of active nihilism is that it is mainly a *reactive* attitude. The lion exercises its destructive force against the metaphysical idols of a world beyond, but it does not create something new. The lion opens up the space,



clears the ground, but does not sow new seeds. Hence, while it is preferable than passive nihilism, active nihilism is also something that needs to be overcome. The lion is not an end in itself, but only a transitory moment in the process of self-overcoming. What comes after the lion is precisely a new form of innocence based on forgetfulness. Having destroyed the old idols, one can begin anew, without paying heed to their old meaning and stories. From acknowledging the death of the old religious and metaphysical God, one can face life on earth as a child, freshly come to life, for whom everything can be created from scratch. The child thus represents the genuinely *creative* new stage, the next metamorphosis in which the destructive spirit of the lion is overcome.

Zarathustra initially presents the child as a radically new beginning of a new course in the history of humanity. As Gillespie explains:

The child is not a reactive but an active spirit. It is not driven by resentment or hatred of that which has hitherto imposed order upon it. In contrast to the lion, it is capable of forgetting and thus of a new innocence. Therefore, it can be a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yes. This spirit not only denies its former oppressor, the great dragon and its 'thou shalt,' but it also affirms itself and creates new values. This spirit in other words wills its own will. (Gillespie 2017, 31)

However, here lies the greatest difficulty. The child is not *yet* the overhuman. Sheer innocence and forgetfulness are not sufficient to create something new. Zarathustra himself must realize that his own preaching and development (for how they appear in the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) are still incomplete. The core problem for the child is that the will to create is itself limited and bounded to the past, to the entire set of conditions within which willing takes place. Notice that this is a direct consequence of the relational ontology that underpins Zarathustra's (and Nietzsche's) anthropology. If everything is relational and dependent on conditions, then willing and creating are also dependent on conditions. However, if creation is dependent upon given conditions, then creation is only limited and partial, since it cannot begin a radically new course, something that would not depend on or be shaped by the past. The past conditions the will to create without having been created by the will (remember

the paradox faced by Vedic seers, discussed in Lecture Five). The consequence of this problem is that the child's ability to create is bound and limited. In fact, it is imprisoned by the cage constituted by the past; by the overall set of conditions within which the will to create emerges and that thus entirely shape and determine its possibilities and options. The archenemy of the will to create is its own conditional and inherently relational nature, and it cannot be overcome through sheer forgetfulness.

Here, Nietzsche seems to reframe and rethink in his own way the problem of reconciling determinism and freedom, efficient causation and spontaneity, necessity and creation. What Nietzsche's discussion makes clear is that these contrasting options do not belong to unrelated and rigidly opposed views, but they arise from the very relational core of reality. The antinomy of freedom (to use Kantian terminology) is inherent in the very nature of reality, especially when reality is understood in terms of a relational ontology. Without directly facing this challenge, there is no possibility of asserting an entirely active form of creativity and thus genuinely overcoming the problem of nihilism. The child is not the overhuman yet, it needs to grow. How to do this is the topic of the second and third parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which we shall explore in the next Lecture.

Lecture Ten:  
Life

## 10.1 Introduction

The self is a hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering uncertainty. However, one might wonder whether mastering is what uncertainty really demands. In the last lecture, we began to reflect on a possible alternative, which Nietzsche derives from his interpretation of Attic tragedy. Tragedy represents life as dissonant, and selfhood as contradictory. Tragic characters are usually trapped between different and irreconcilable drives. Tragic plots do not have a happy ending. Tragic heroes succumb to their fate. And yet, in the very process of representing this predicament, tragedy offers a way of withstanding uncertainty, listening to it, perhaps even making peace with it. This ability to listen to the dissonance of life exposed in the tragic enactment transforms the dissonance itself from an unbearable problem into an insight in the rich and contrastive nature of reality. Nietzsche's approach invites three questions: (i) Where is the dissonance experienced? (ii) How can we unveil it and fully perceive it? (iii) How can we develop the ability to listen to it, without attempting to either solve or dissolve it?

The best context for (i) encountering the dissonance of reality is the experience of the self. The self is a tragic character who embodies dissonance. Each human being is a tragic character in their own way. Looking at one's own self, the dissonance is not only experienced most vividly, but is also encountered with an immediacy that makes its relevance and urgency completely apparent. Any dissonance in reality is first of all the dissonance of my own being, this self, who struggles to remain what it wants to be and ultimately fails to maintain control over this precarious identity.

We also discussed how Nietzsche finds a potential tragic component in *science* as well. On the one hand, science can become a way of dissolving the dissonance of reality, explaining it away, and covering its potentially threatening meaning (or meaninglessness) behind the shadows of Apolline optimism. Perhaps oversimplifying, this is what Nietzsche imputes to Socrates and Plato, and to the whole rationalistic understanding of scientific knowledge that took hold in Western thought in their wake (from Aristotle to some of Nietzsche's own contemporaries). However, science can also play the opposite role. By focusing on the philosophy of nature of presocratic thinkers, especially Hera-

clitus, Nietzsche envisions (ii) a way of interpreting the natural world that is specifically aimed at uncovering and revealing its impermanent and contrastive nature. Instead of attempting to reconstruct natural phenomena in a way that would present them as instances of an underpinning rationality, science can equally offer conceptual and empirical tools for appreciating how any shadow of rationality in nature is just that; a shadow, a fleeting epiphenomenon, something that emerges from more fundamental, a-rational, and possibly irrational drives. This kind of science will not match the standards of immutable and eternal knowledge sought by Plato, but it will meet the standards of honesty and authenticity that Nietzsche himself values as the only truly genuine and loyal to life.

In this lecture, we focus on the third question (iii), *how* is it possible to develop this ability of listening to the dissonance of existence, by fostering the new attitude that Nietzsche recommends as the basis for the rebirth of a tragic culture in our contemporary world. This point is perhaps the most ambitious and the most problematic in Nietzsche's thought. It takes central stage in Nietzsche's own tragic work, namely, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for Everyone and Nobody* (1883-1885). Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is admittedly difficult to read, more difficult to understand, poetic and bluffing, deep and irritating. We are confronted with a prophetic character, Zarathustra, who announces the coming of a new form of humanity (the 'overhuman,' German *Übermensch*) who will eventually be able to fully listen to dissonance of life and celebrate it.

Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is profoundly ironic. The historical Zarathustra was an Iranian (Persian) prophet who is likely to have lived between the seventh and the sixth centuries BCE. He was a radical reformer of the Iranian religion of that time, which was (by some accounts) similar to the old Vedic cults we discussed in Lecture Five. Zarathustra impressed a strong monotheistic turn on that religion, a profound ethicization of its practice based on a sharp dualism between good and evil, and a more linear view of history that advances from God's initial creation of the world to its final destruction (contrary to the more cyclical view common in ancient cultures).<sup>105</sup> Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* presents

•• 105 For a historical reconstruction of the emergence and development of Zoroastrianism see Robert Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (1961).

a systematic reversal of all these features. Zarathustra, in Nietzsche's work, is the prophet of the *death* of God, who rejects the established values of good and evil, and finds ultimate salvation in saying 'yes' to this earth and its suffering, by endorsing the idea of eternal recurrence of the same.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* consists of four parts. Nietzsche originally published the first three independently and added the fourth later. Laurence Lampert, in his *Nietzsche's Teaching. An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1986), has provided an exhaustive running commentary to the work. To summarize just the outline of the plot designed by Nietzsche, the first part begins at the end of Zarathustra's ten-years of solitary retreat in his cave, during which he conceived of the ideal of the overhuman, and eventually resolved to announce that publicly. However, the action in the first part shows that Zarathustra's public teaching is a failure which people misunderstand and despise. As a result, Zarathustra decides to return to his cave again.

In the last lecture, we introduced some of the underpinning ontological and anthropological views that shape Zarathustra's teaching in the first part. We left the discussion suspended on the problem of how it is possible for the child to develop its creative will to the point of freeing it from the cage of past conditionings that seem to constrain and determine it. The second and third parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are devoted to articulating the solution to this problem. The dramatic unfolding of Zarathustra's tragedy is meant to stress that this solution is not going to be easy to accept or digest, and even harder to practice. In fact, while Zarathustra eventually *understands* it, he himself cannot fully practice it. Zarathustra remains only the *prophet* of the overhuman, but does not himself become an overhuman. Such a dissonance makes apparent the tragic nature of Zarathustra as a character. The solution so difficult to understand and to practice is based on the doctrine of the 'eternal recurrence of the same.' The practice that unfolds from this doctrine is encapsulated in the idea of *amor fati*, the resounding 'yes' said to the whole of life, including its most horrible and painful aspects.

The second part presents Zarathustra as once again attempting to spread his teaching among the people, but this time he seeks only a receptive audience and manages to attract some disciples. Zarathustra hopes his disciples will prepare the soil for the advent of the overhuman, but by the end of the

second part he is disillusioned about this plan. The core insight gained in this process is the explicit understanding of the will to power and its relation to both life and wisdom. This also allows Zarathustra to diagnose his own problem, namely, being affected by the spirit of revenge. The third part introduces the core teaching of the eternal recurrence, which is seen as the only possible way of overcoming revenge and paving the way for the overhuman. Thanks to this discovery, Zarathustra has a possibility for redemption from revenge and realizes that it is his own task to fully overcome himself and become the overhuman. However, this is still only an intellectual realization, albeit a profound and deeply transformative one. Zarathustra does not achieve this goal just *yet*.

The third part *ends* with Zarathustra coming back to his cave again, while the fourth part constitutes a satirical addendum (in the sense in which a satire play used to follow the play of a tragedy in Greek festivals and constitutes a sort of ironic reversal of the tragedy). In this last part, Zarathustra receives several visitors in his cave, who represent various intellectual characters, all sharing the burden of living in the wake of the death of God. While the third part represents the theoretical culmination of Nietzsche's work, the fourth ironically deconstructs the heroic picture of Zarathustra's own achievement, by stressing the need for Zarathustra to progress even further, hence hinting at the fact that having understood eternal recurrence is still not enough. Zarathustra needs to descend one more time among human beings and embody his teaching in a way that will actually transform existing human life. But when and how this will eventually happen is not presented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

For present purposes we shall focus our discussion on two core themes only: the will to power and eternal recurrence.

## 10.2 Will to Power

The idea of eternal recurrence is supposed to be a solution to the problem of how to support a fully active and creative form of willing. This problem arises from the recognition that *willing* is the fundamental constituent of human nature, and thus the dynamics of the will are also what shapes human evolu-

tion. Our first task is to offer a brief characterization of how Zarathustra introduces this topic. In fact, he does not simply talk about ‘willing’ but rather present human willing as a particular manifestation of a more encompassing force, the will to power, which is somehow equated with the very essence of life itself. This teaching is introduced in the second part, in one of the most important passages, reads as follows:

And this secret did Life herself tell to me. ‘Behold,’ she said, ‘I am that which must always overcome itself.

‘Indeed, you call it will to procreate or drive for a purpose, for what is higher, farther, more manifold: but all this is one and one secret.

‘I would rather go under than renounce this one thing: and verily, where there is going-under and falling of leaves, behold, there life sacrifices itself—for power!

‘That I must be struggle and Becoming and purpose and conflict of purposes: ah, whoever guesses my will also guesses along what crooked ways it has to walk!

‘Whatever I create and however much I love it—soon I must oppose both it and my love: thus my will wills it.

‘And even you, who understand, are only a path and footstep of my will: verily, my will to power even walks on the feet of your will to truth!

‘He surely missed the mark who shot at the truth with the words “will to existence:” this will—does not exist!

‘For what does not exist cannot will; yet what already exists, how could that then will to exist!

‘Only, where Life is, there too is will: though not will to life, but—thus I teach you—will to power!

‘Much is valued by the living more highly than life itself; but out of this very valuing there speaks—will to power!’—

Thus did Life once teach me: and with this, you who are wisest, I go on to solve the riddle of your hearts.

Verily, I say to you: good and evil that are not transitory—there is no such thing! From out of themselves they must overcome themselves again and again. (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II.12, transl. Parkes 2005, 99-100)



In Nietzsche's works, the notion of will to power receives growing attention and is expressed in various contexts, including a semi-biological one (like in this quote) to a cosmological principle extending to all sorts of forces that shape the whole of reality. For present purposes, we can focus on its more immediate biological instantiation. What Life herself is teaching us in the above passage is that being alive means becoming, and hence constantly overcoming the currently present life-form that has been established. This view rephrases the Heraclitean commitment that we already encountered since Nietzsche's earlier writings. In fact, Life *is* (definition) 'that which must always overcome itself.' Overcoming oneself is the process through which whatever is posited at some point becomes the condition for the positing of something different later. No life-form can be considered definitive and final, but each life-form is only a provisional stepping-stone for reaching farther. In the expression 'will to power,' the term 'will' can be taken to denote this drive towards actively changing the current state of reality, and 'power' as the actual capacity or ability to bring this change about. The will to power is always creative, in the sense that it brings about something new, something different, at odds with what was already there. Insofar as Life is will to power, it must also be 'struggle and Becoming and purpose and conflict of purposes.' Alternative expressions, like 'will to existence' or 'will to life' (including 'will to survive') misrepresent the fundamentally creative and tragic nature of the will to power, since they make it something tautological or redundant. Nietzsche's point is that the will to power is much more than a 'will to exist' (or survive), since the will to power does not just aim at establishing and preserving any given state or life-form, but rather at constantly seeking new forms of expression to increase, augment, expand, explore, and create further dimensions of life and experience. This does not mean that power does not entail survival or existence (they do), but rather that survival and existence can be fully achieved only insofar as they aim at the constant and indefinite increase of power.<sup>106</sup>

•• 106 This point is not dissimilar from what Spinoza also stated in his *Ethics* (especially part 3, propositions 4-7, in Spinoza 1985, 498-499), when he demonstrates that each thing is essentially determined to strive for preserving its being, and this *conatus* naturally aims at seeking all possible means and occasions for increasing its power of acting.

At the end of the passage quoted above, Zarathustra also connects this teaching of the will to power to moral values. He maintains that eternal and unchanging values about good and evil do not exist. Values themselves are products of the will to power, and hence are posited only for the sake of later being overcome. This point is the pivot around which Zarathustra defends the need for accomplishing a complete transvaluation of all received values. Before getting into that, though, it might be worth emphasizing how the idea of will to power can be seen as something close to Plato's claim in the *Sophist* (247e) that being is nothing other than a capacity to act. Here is how one can move from Plato's claim to Zarathustra's teaching.

Assume that being is nothing but the capacity to act in some way (either passively being acted upon, or actively acting upon something). The notion of action necessarily entails the notion of change: to act means to bring about some sort of change. The notion of change necessarily presupposes *both* a degree of continuity (identity) and a degree of discontinuity (diversity). A change without any continuity at all cannot be experienced as a change, but only as the sudden juxtaposition of entirely unrelated states of affairs. However, even in the case of a change that brings something about *ex nihilo*, there is the minimal continuity provided by the very existence of the creator, who remains (to some extent at least) the same entity before and after the creation. On the other hand, change without some form of diversity would not appear as change at all. Even the repetition of the identical, *insofar as it is a repetition*, is different from the initial position of the same thing. Repetition is never exactly just repetition of the same. In the very act of repeating, this repeating itself is something new that was not posited before. Hence, we can at best conceptualize change as any sort of alteration that happens in a spectrum, which is defined between the two opposite extremes of rigid identity (no change) and absolute difference (again, no change). Notice that by conceptualizing change in this way (as a blending of the notions of identity, difference and being), we are following in Plato's footsteps.

At this point, we can envision two main kinds of change: those that are more conservative (where change happens closer to the identity-end of the spectrum), and those that are more innovative (where change happens closer to the difference-end of the spectrum). The latter form of change is creative,

and usually ‘creation’ is a term that emphasizes the bringing about of a novelty, something that was not previously part of experience. Giving birth is perhaps the most archetypical model of creation. In this context, Nietzsche’s claim that the will to power necessarily entails a drive towards creation can be seen as the logical consequence of having understood being as the capacity to act, and action as necessarily unfolding in a spectrum of becoming that can be more or less conservative, or more or less creative.

The reason why Life must always verge towards creation (towards the most innovative form of change) is because this is the only way it can genuinely sustain itself. Consider a case where a new life-form *X* emerges in the context *Z* (since no life-form can emerge outside of context—recall the enactivist view introduced in Lecture One). With the emergence of *X*, the context *Z* is necessarily transformed to some extent, if nothing else just because of the presence of *X* in it (which is assumed to be a novelty introduced in *Z*). However, if *X* emerges from *Z* and it has *Z* as its condition, the way *X* changes *Z* upon emerging also changes its own condition for survival. Since change cannot be entirely conservative, insofar as *X* changes *Z* in new and innovative ways, *X* also undermines its own condition for survival (because regardless the sort of change, *X* depended on *Z* as it was when *X* emerged, and not as it becomes once *X* has emerged and transformed *Z*).

Consider how the introduction of a certain species in a natural environment (like *homo sapiens*) can, with time, lead to the depletion of natural resources in that environment due to their exploitation by that species. In turn, this threatens the survival of that same species, which is now confronted with two options. The first is a conservative option, namely, to somehow defend itself and struggle against the adverse change occurring in the environment. The second is a creative option, namely, the overcoming of that life-form and the creation of a new life-form that could better cope with the new environment. The conservative option is ultimately doomed to fail, because no matter how conservative change is, it can never be exempt from innovation (since change entails difference). Innovation creates a mismatch between the environment and the life-form depending on it, which posits a threat for the survival of that life-form. The only long-term viable option is the creation of new life-forms that can adapt to new conditions, and the very-

long-term option is that even these new life-forms will eventually have to be overcome in the same way.

This latter view is admittedly not present in Plato, and yet it follows from his principle that being is capacity to act, to bring about change, and change must be understood in a relational way in which both identity and difference are involved. Nietzsche's will to power takes this view to its logical conclusions, especially when it is used to understand the nature of life processes. Hence, Life herself can teach Zarathustra that 'where there is going-under and falling of leaves, behold, there life sacrifices itself—for power.' Life can be what it is and can remain alive only if it remains loyal to becoming, only if it sustains its inexhaustible process of self-overcoming. In this process, the 'going-under' or the 'falling of leaves' is just part of a more complex process in which now outdated life-forms are replaced by new ones, in the promise that the latter will also be overcome in due course.

Should we conclude that this necessity for self-overcoming depends on the need for life to *be*, namely, the necessity to uphold some form of coherency? In a sense, the answer is 'yes,' but with an important qualification. In this case, life can only be construed as a consistent notion if it does not take any particular life-form as its paradigm. This processual understanding of life, then, is not just a way of providing a coherent account of what life is, but is a coherent way of representing the actually inherent dissonant and contrasting nature of life, in virtue of which life cannot be defined by any particular form, but the whole process of life is also the perpetual overcoming and re-invention of what life actually is and means. One might say that this sort of representation is precisely that tragic form of science that, far from masking the inherent contingency of reality, reveals and exposes it.

The will to power as the nature of life provides the background for Zarathustra's prognosis of the current condition of mankind. As was noted at the very end of the passage quoted above, human beings have created certain moral values—namely, good and evil—and these values served a purpose in the establishing of humanity. They were, then, an important creative innovation at some point in time. However, values, like all other products of life, cannot be eternal and unchanging; they are doomed to be overcome. Zarathustra denounces the dominantly conservative attitude that seems widespread among contemporary human

beings. On the verge of their own disappearance and decadence, they try to hold on to their values, to their notions of good and evil, as if they were eternal. The problem is that they are not and they could not be. As Zarathustra puts it:

Much that this people deemed good was for another a source of scorn and shame: thus have I found it. Many things I found called evil here, and there adorned with purple honours.

Never did one neighbour understand the other: ever was his soul amazed at his neighbour's delusion and wickedness.

A tablet of things held to be good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of its overcomings; behold, it is the voice of its will to power.

Praiseworthy is what counts for a people as heavy and hard; what is indispensable and hard is called good; and whatever liberates from the highest need, what is rare, and hardest—that it glorifies as holy.

Whatever allows it to rule and conquer and shine, to the horror and envy of its neighbour: that counts as the lofty, the first, the measure, the meaning of all things.

Verily, my brother, once you have recognized a people's need and land and sky and neighbour, you can surely guess the law of its overcomings, and why it climbs on this ladder up to its own hope. [...]

Verily, human beings have given themselves all their good and evil. Verily, they did not take it, they did not find it, nor did it come down to them as a voice from Heaven.

The human being first put values into things, in order to preserve itself—it created a meaning for things, a human's meaning! Therefore it calls itself 'human'—that is: the evaluator.

Evaluating is creating: hear this, you creators! Evaluating is itself the treasure and jewel of all valued things.

Through evaluating alone is there value: and without evaluating the kernel of existence would be hollow. Hear this, you creators!

Change of values—that means change of creators. Whoever must be a creator always annihilates.

Creators were at first peoples and only later individuals; verily, the individual is itself just the most recent creation.

Peoples once hung a tablet of the good over themselves. Love that wants to rule, and love that wants to obey, these together created for themselves such tablets.

Pleasure in the herd is older than pleasure in the I: and as long as the good conscience is called herd, only the bad conscience says: I.

Verily, the cunning I, the loveless, which wants its own benefit in the benefit of the many: that is not the origin of the herd but its going-under. (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I.15, transl. Parkes 2005, 51-52)

Zarathustra begins by observing that people in different periods have different standards of good and evil. This remark about the relativity of values is then used to derive the further point that what counts as good and evil is constructed by people through their deliberate effort of distinguishing what actually contributes to their strength and flourishing (good) or what contributes to the opposite (evil). Since people differ across times and places, they will have different ‘tablets’ of good and evil. Creating values and evaluating reality is a fundamental expression of the will to power. Suggesting a form of historical development, Zarathustra then adds that there is a progression from more community-based values (the values of the ‘herd’) to more individualistic-based values (the values of the ‘I’). This progression is an example of self-overcoming. At some time, human life is essentially community-life, group-life. But this life-form based on community needs to be overcome, and this gives rise to more individualistic life-forms, in which older ‘herd-values’ are annihilated, and new ‘individualistic-values’ are created (remember the paradox of mastery we discussed in previous lectures). The notions of good and evil are still upheld, but what *counts* as good or evil changes significantly. Notice that community-based life is not inherently better or worse than a more individualistic life-form. What matters is the fact that one needs to be overcome, and in this process something different will eventually be established. What matters is the process itself, rather than any of its provisional stops.<sup>107</sup>

•• 107 This discussion entails that the establishment, defense, and challenge of moral values is surrounded by struggle and social conflict with different groups. This conflict is more explicitly thematized in Nietzsche’s works on morality and its genealogy (like *The Genealogy of Morals* or *Beyond Good and Evil*). In this context, the will to power might be interpreted in more anthropological and even sociological terms as the will to dominate that a certain group exercises (more or less successfully) upon another. But

The problem with values is that they impose a judgment upon reality that is inherently impermanent and unstable. What *was* deemed good will inevitably change and contradict the reasons why it *was* deemed good in the first place. Since the thriving of a certain life-form transforms its own environment, due to this transformation, what was good for the thriving of that life-form will eventually become outdated or obsolete as the same life-form begins to struggle with the new conditions created by its own thriving. A new good will have to be invented and the old goods will be devaluated. Life contradicts itself all the time. When this fact is taken into account, humanity is faced with the two options mentioned above: either take a conservative and defensive stance or embrace change and enact creativity once more. Zarathustra sees present humanity entangled in the conservative stance, which is best expressed in religious views that seek ultimate value in a transcendent reality beyond the world. As he speaks:

They have called God whatever contradicted and hurt them: and verily, there was much of the heroic in their adoration!

And they knew no other way to love their God than by nailing the human being to the Cross!

As corpses they meant to live, in black they decked out their corpse; in their speeches, too, I still smell the foul aroma of death-chambers. (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II.4, transl. Parkes 2005, 79)

Projecting good and evil into a world-beyond, a transcendent reality, is a way of salvaging them from the harassment of becoming. It is also a way of dealing with the fact that life constantly urges us to change and innovate. Life radically challenges the validity of any established value. By trying to defend old values through the mask of eternity, religious views aimed at transcendence thus serve a conservative strategy, which is ultimately doomed to fail. This is the reason for the inevitable death of God, which defined the starting point of Zarathustra's descent from his cave and his teaching among humans (Prologue, §2).

.....  
 this declension of the notion should not lead us to forget that its more fundamental meaning is broader and points to the self-overcoming nature of life itself, as explained in the *Zarathustra*.

### 10.3 Eternal recurrence of the same

We can now come back to the problem we encountered at the end of the previous Lecture. The will to power is constrained by its own past; that is, by its embeddedness in a network of conditions and relations that the will itself does not seem to have created, but that nonetheless determine what the will can or cannot create.

In a moment of high dramatic intensity, just after a powerful dream, Zarathustra announces the fundamental problem that afflicts human will. If will is will to power, and hence naturally driven to creation, this creative drive is also constantly held back and contrasted by the way in which the past constrains the will. On the one hand, every creative act is situated and one's situation is a given, is something that comes from the past, something that can be dealt with, but cannot be avoided or ruled out at will. On the other hand, anything that is created *becomes* past, and is thus added to the way one's situation constrains one's creative power. While the future can be seen as open and contingent, the past seems to be necessary, since it can no longer be changed. In this respect, the past is the indefinite landscape that remains impenetrable to the creative will and actually contradicts its creative drive. If the will to power must be free to create and invent something new, it must also become free from the way in which the past conditions and determines it. But willing the past (or undoing the past at will) seems an impossible task; hence the will to create, the will to power, is actually imprisoned.

This realization is the great sleekness that Zarathustra diagnoses in humanity:

To redeem that which has passed away and to re-create all "It was" into a "Thus I willed it!"—that alone should I call redemption!

Will—that is the liberator and joy-bringer: that is what I taught you, my friends! And now learn this as well: the will itself is still a prisoner.

Willing liberates: but what is it called that puts even the liberator in fetters?

"It was:" that is the will's gnashing of teeth and loneliest sorrow. Powerless with respect to what has been done—it is an angry spectator of all that is past.



Backwards the will is unable to will; that it cannot break time and time's desire—that is the will's loneliest sorrow.

Willing liberates: what does willing itself devise, that it might be free of its sorrow and mock at its dungeon?

Alas, every prisoner becomes a fool! Foolish too the way the imprisoned will redeems itself.

That time does not run backwards, this arouses the will's fury; "That which was"—that is the stone which it cannot roll away.

And so it rolls stones away in fury and ill-humour, and takes revenge on whatever does not, like itself, feel fury and ill-humour. (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II.20, transl. Parkes 2005, 121)

Life contradicts the human will to power (as part of Life's contradicting herself)—this becomes clear from the way that the circumstances of human flourishing are constantly changing and thus devalue those values that have been established at some point. However, this is only the outer shell of a more fundamental contradiction which has to do with the very temporal structure of the process of becoming and change. All that the will creates becomes past, and what is past cannot be changed anymore since it falls beyond the scope and the reach of the will that created it. Now it can only be a burden, a fate, something that in turn will add new constraints to the will's power to create. Even values themselves, once they have been created as an expression of the will to power and to affirm a certain life-form, become something of the past and a burden for the will, which has to conform with those values and is ultimately constrained by them. Insofar as willing the past seems impossible, the will is imprisoned by this temporal structure. The experience of imprisonment gives rise to the feeling of *revenge*, which defines the ultimate scope and aim of any conservative moral code aimed at the Transcendent. Zarathustra explains:

Thus did the will, the liberator, take to hurting: and upon all that can suffer it takes revenge for its inability to go backwards.

This, yes this alone, is what revenge itself is: the will's ill-will toward time and its "It was."

Verily, a great folly dwells in our will; and it has become a curse for all that is human that this folly has acquired spirit!

The spirit of revenge: that, my friends, has been up to now humanity's best reflection; and wherever there was suffering, there was always supposed to be punishment.

For "punishment" is what revenge calls itself: with a hypocritical word it makes itself a good conscience.

And because there is suffering in whatever wills, from its inability to will backwards—thus willing itself and all life were supposed to be—punishment!

And then cloud upon cloud rolled across the spirit, until at last madness preached: "Everything passes away, therefore everything deserves to pass away!"

"And this is itself justice, that law of time that time must devour its children:" thus did madness preach.

"Morally things are ordered according to justice and punishment. Oh where is there redemption from the flux of things and the punishment 'existence'?" Thus did madness preach.

"Can there be redemption when there is eternal justice? Alas, the stone 'It was' cannot be rolled away: eternal must all punishments be, too!" Thus did madness preach.

"No deed can be annihilated: so how could it be undone through punishment! This, this is what is eternal in the punishment 'existence:' that existence itself must eternally be deed and guilt again!

"Unless the will should at last redeem itself and willing should become not-willing—:" but you know, my brothers, this fable-song of madness! (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II.20, transl. Parkes 2005, 121-122)

Revenge is *ill*-will against (or aversion to) the impossibility of changing the past and not being able to escape its determination, which is why it is experienced as a chain that limits (or imprisons) the will's ability to create novelty. Revenge gives rise to the idea of an inherent guilt in life: since life makes it impossible to actually express the creative drive of the will (and life itself is nothing over and above the manifold unfolding of the will), life itself is suffering, and this suffering must be a form of punishment. From here, a whole moral of life-ne-

gation unfolds, in which the impermanent nature of reality is condemned as worth passing away, and the whole of existence ‘must eternally be deed and guilt again.’ The sorrow for the lack of power of the will to power when faced with its own past is thus at the heart of the conservative strategy that seeks some form of relief in a transcendent world, which can promise a future redemption while at the cost of blaming and condemning all that actually is and is experienced in this world.

The whole possibility for humankind to escape this conservative and self-destructing whirlpool hinges upon the possibility of learning a new way of facing the past, and somehow overcoming the impossibility of willing backward. This is what prompts Zarathustra’s own distinctive teaching: eternal recurrence.

The idea of eternal recurrence can be envisioned as a thought experiment or as a cosmological doctrine. However, limiting the teaching to a thought experiment *only* does not seem to do justice to the profundity that Nietzsche attributes to it, although accepting its cosmological value might lead to a series of metaphysical puzzles and problems that will eventually divert attention from how the thought of eternal recurrence should be used. In fact, it might be best to interpret this thought as a meditative practice of sort, that is, as a *performative* way of shaping one’s interpretation of experience so to make it favorable for the growth of the will to power and its affirmative and expansive effects. As a meditative practice, eternal recurrence does not need to be judged ontologically or cosmologically true to work, since its main goal is to reshape one’s overall way of understanding experience, and this understanding comes before any ontological or cosmological theory.

The thought of eternal recurrence is introduced at the beginning (§2) of the third part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche uses the image of a gateway (echoes of Parmenides’s poem are difficult to avoid), at which the path of the past and the path of the future meet in the present moment. From this standpoint, time is essentially circular; hence, willing something in the future involves creating and willing the past from which this same will arises.

To better understand how this might be the case, consider first the more usual linear progression past-present-future. Whatever is willed in the present will determine the future, but since there is no causal connection running from future to past, the act of will has no impact on the past itself. In fact, the will is

conditioned by the past as the underpinning context in which it is necessarily embedded (given the relational nature of the will itself, as already discussed).

But assume now that time is not linear, but circular or cyclical.<sup>108</sup> This is best captured by thinking of time as a three-dimensional spiral, rather than a flat circumference. Under this assumption, willing in the present to bring about a certain state of affairs in the future entails that the future will eventually evolve in such a way that the same set of conditions that currently hold in the present will be instantiated again. It is not the case that we literally go back from the future to the past, but rather that the natural evolution of future states leads to a re-occurring of the same set of conditions that have already occurred. Hence, becoming does not evolve in an infinite manifold of new and different possibilities, but it maintains a spiral-like shape in which at some subsequent moment in time, the same set of conditions that occurred once will be instantiated again. Eternal recurrence is *eternal* because the process goes on indefinitely and forever; it is a *re-occurrence* because it re-enacts anew the same set of configurations that already occurred previously; and in this sense is a recurrence of the *same*. Notice that sameness here is not ‘absolute sameness’ (*à la* Parmenides), but a sameness that involves some degree of diversity (since the re-occurrence of something entails that minimal difference constituted by the fact that what re-occurs is a *further* or *new* instance of the otherwise identical configuration). This suggests that Plato’s theory of the five kinds and its accompanying relational ontology can provide a crucial framework for better understanding Nietzsche’s idea of eternal

- 108 Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient* (2002), chapter 3 illustrates how the cosmological view of the cyclicity of time was diffused at a very early stage, possibly since Neolithic and Bronze-age period, especially in Mesopotamian cultures. Two natural phenomena underpin this view: the observation of the Precession of the Equinoxes (roughly, the phenomenon in which the point in the sky where the sun raises moves slightly over time, and this leads to the sun raising eventually in a different constellation each 2000 years or so) and the problem of perfect tuning (roughly, the fact that musical intervals of octave proceeds by 1:2, while intervals of fifth by 1:3, but the two progressions cannot be matched perfectly to produce the whole scale). McEvelley stresses that human observation of natural regularities was key to the development of most ancient worldviews, and hence the observation of natural *irregularities* (as in the phenomena of the Precession or the problem of perfect tuning) would have led to intense reflection and speculation. The solution consisted in devising broader systems in which the irregularities can be subsumed in a superior form of order. The idea of a ‘Great Year’ in which a whole world cycle is accomplished could provide such a view. Notice that the idea of cyclicity can be associated both with an idea of *decline* (the current age is worse than the primeval time, the ‘golden age’) and *renewal* (in a perhaps still distant future, a new world-cycle will begin anew). Both aspects are at play in Nietzsche’s view of eternal recurrence.

recurrence. In fact, Plato's theory can provide a way of uncovering the conceptual connection between the will to power and this doctrine.

One intuitive way of justifying the assumption of the cyclicity of time is by assuming that if time is infinite and matter is finite, then in due course matter will have to assume once again all its past configurations, and this recurrence will itself go on indefinitely. However, this intuitive approach does not make apparent the further (and deeper) ontological connection that binds the will to power to eternal recurrence. Consider instead the structure of change and action outlined above. To create something *new*, the will to power has to will something *different* from the set of conditions that determine its current state. However, if the will to power wants novelty not only occasionally (or just once), but always, as its default way of operating (and this is precisely what the will to power wants), then willing a future to be different from the present will necessarily move it within a spectrum of options encompassed by the opposite extremes of sameness and diversity, change and rest. If the present is at rest, the will to power shall create change, but if the present is itself already changing, the will to power shall create a new form of rest. If the present is based on the establishment of transcendent values, then the will to power shall create change and destroy these values. But when the present is based on the absence of established values (nihilism), then the will to power will create new values. If these new values must be different from the old values, they will be based on the earth, and not on a world behind it. But once these new earthly values are established, then the will to power, in order to bring forth something new, will have to destroy them and create new values, which will now be based on something *beyond* the earth. By willing new earthly values, the will to power thus sets itself on the track of eventually creating those same transcendent values that it now wants to reject and destroy. This is the terrifying implication of the eternal recurrence that is so difficult for Zarathustra (and for Nietzsche) to accept.

Eternal recurrence, by binding temporality into a spiral, dissolves the problem of the impossibility of willing backward. By willing the future, the will to power also set out the long-term conditions for the re-occurrence of what is now its own departing state. Hence, this very situation that is now present must also be understood as the result of the will's own wanting it. The past (the set of conditions and situations that now binds the will) is not something gone

forever but rather the long-term consequence of the will's own resolution to always create something new. To foresee its distant future, the will needs to look to its own past. The past is what *has been* willed once, and also what *has to be willed* again and again in the future. As an immediate corollary, one can derive the theorem that becoming is not escapable.

In the third part (§13), Zarathustra is finally able to face this thought in all its implications, and he explicitly acknowledges that eternal recurrence is not really a choice, but rather a fate, since it follows from the very ontological structure that the will to power operates in. The real choice, thus, consists only in turning a blind eye to it (and thus ignoring or dispensing with it) or fully embracing its meaning and consequences. He also explains why it was so difficult for him to fully embrace this thought:

A long twilight limped ahead of me, a death-weary, death-drunken mournfulness that was talking with a yawning mouth.

“Eternally it recurs, the human being you are so weary of, the small human being”— thus yawned my mournfulness and dragged its feet and could not go to sleep.

‘The humans’ earth became for me a cave, its chest sank in, all that was alive became for me humans’ decay and bones and mouldering past.

‘My sighing sat upon all humans’ graves and could no longer stand up again; my sighing and questioning croaked and choked and gnawed and carped by day and night:

‘—“Ah, the human being recurs eternally! The small human being recurs eternally!”—

‘Naked I once saw them both, the greatest and the smallest human being: all-too-similar to each other—all-too-human, even the greatest!

‘All-too-small the greatest!—That was my loathing for the human! And eternal recurrence even of the smallest!—That was my loathing for all existence!

‘Ah, disgust! disgust! disgust!’— —Thus spoke Zarathustra and sighed and shuddered, for he remembered his sickness. But then his animals did not let him talk any further. (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III.13.2, transl. Parkes 2005, 191-192)

As we saw in Lecture Nine, Zarathustra's anthropology focused on human evolution and aims at creating the conditions for the arising of the overhuman. For instance, overcoming nihilism and asserting a new age of creativity (the evolution from lion to child) is set in stark contrast with the sense of resignation and failure of incomplete nihilists. However, if one scrutinizes the thought of eternal recurrence (and this thought is also seen as a consequence of that same relational ontology that underpins both the notion of will to power, and sets the problem of how the past constraints the will) then it becomes apparent that Zarathustra's own project of renewal and assertion of a new tragic age will also eventually lead to the re-occurrence of that same conditions that led to the beast, to the last man, and to the camel, to the world-transcending view of religions, to the life-negating and earth-negating values that Zarathustra so passionately wants to reject.

Notice the supreme Platonic irony of this observation. Wanting the new, it is impossible not to recreate the conditions for the re-occurrence of the old. The opposition between 'new' and 'old' cannot be conceived as the rigid contrast between two entirely unrelated states (or even *ideas*), which might at some point be divorced from one another. Both new and old are just elaborations on the more fundamental kinds of identity and diversity, and these are relationally nestled amongst one another. Hence, one cannot want to bring forth something new without also having to set the very conditions that will eventually led to the re-occurrence of the old as well. This point applies not only to the end-states or goals aimed at by the will, but also to all the intermediary steps, including all the struggles, destructions, wars, and devastations potentially entailed in (at least some) attempts to create something new. To put it shortly, passive nihilism and metaphysical escapism will not be left behind by the will to power that wants to supremely assert its resounding 'yes' to life. That very 'yes' will be the cause that will eventually set in motion the re-occurring of life-negating world-views, and the same struggle to overcome it, again, and again.

Faced with this heavy thought, Zarathustra is encouraged by his animals (the serpent and the eagle) not to be afraid but to embrace his fate:

Your animals know well, O Zarathustra, who you are and must become:  
 behold, *you are the teacher of eternal recurrence*—that is now your fate!

‘That you must be the first to teach this teaching—how should this great fate not be your greatest danger and sickness too!

‘Behold, we two know what you teach: that all things recur eternally and we ourselves with them, and that we have already been here an eternity of times, and all things with us.

‘You teach that there is a Great Year of Becoming, a monster of a Great Year, which must like an hour-glass turn itself over anew, again and again, that it may run down and run out ever anew:—

‘—such that all these years are the same, in the greatest and smallest respects—such that we ourselves are in each Great Year the same as ourselves, in the greatest and smallest respects.’ (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III.13.2, transl. Parkes 2005, 192-193)

At this point we find the shift between the more cosmological and ontological dimensions of the eternal recurrence, and its moral and practical implications. Eternal recurrence can only be ignored or dismissed out of fear of its consequences, *or else* it can be fully embraced as a form of *amor fati*. The only genuine way of allowing the will to be actively creative, is by accepting that creating the future will lead to the re-occurrence of the past. But in order to accept this, one needs to accept and embrace that very past, namely, those sets of conditions and constraints that the creating will is determined to overcome and leave behind. Since the past is the will’s cage and the source of its sense of revenge and guilt, accepting the past requires accepting the heaviest and most dreadful burden that the will could experience.

The path that leads from the child to the overhuman does not consist in *rejecting* the past but rather in being able to say ‘yes’ to the most difficult and least bearable of all realities, namely, that same set of past conditionings that the will experiences as its archenemy, given that such a past imposes a stark limit on the will’s ability to create. Fully accepting eternal recurrence means accepting not just the ability to create something radically new but also the ability to accept those same realities that creation wants to replace and, further, accepting that any act of creation will eventually dissolve itself and lead to the re-occurrence of the same problems and old situations that the will now wants to challenge and leave behind.



As Zarathustra's animals suggest (and notice that here Nietzsche stresses that Zarathustra himself is the learner who receives this teaching, not its proponent), the only way of facing this challenge is by embracing the *whole of it*, down to all its consequences, including the emerging idleness of creating something new only for the sake of allowing it to grow old, be overcome, and eventually contribute to restore the point of departure. Why should one ever embrace such a view? Zarathustra's animals answer: because *there is no other way, this is your fate!* Compare this answer with Kṛṣṇa's ultimate teaching to Arjuna we discussed in Lecture Six: action must be undertaken not for its consequences, but in order to actualize one's own law, one's own fate, and only in *this* lies genuine freedom and salvation. Nietzsche most likely did not know much about the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, but he nonetheless reaches a strikingly similar conclusion (even if his justification for it is different). Unlike Kṛṣṇa, Zarathustra does not build his doctrine of eternal recurrence on the appeal to an ultimate unchanging reality, but rather on the ontological structure of becoming itself, which rules out even the possibility of such an unchanging reality (unless one sees these two opposite metaphysical views as two expressions of the same will to power, which in time is led by its own self-overcoming, to put forward one against the other, again and again).

Compare this also with Clytemnestra's wish in the end of the *Agamemnon*. She prays for the *Daimon* of the house to go away, to leave her and the rest of her community with their sorrow. She would be happy to live with less wealth if only the new precarious equilibrium established by the killing of Agamemnon could be maintained. But to some extent she knows that this condition will be overthrown. The beginning of *Women at the Graveside* explains that Clytemnestra dreamt of giving birth to a serpent, who sucked from her breast a blend of milk and blood. She, who has been compared to the lion (behold!) who eventually kills the family that raised it, is now the mother of another animal that symbolizes betrayal and, in this case, kin-murdering. Seeking the new, the same old scenario will have to be repeated. In this perspective, it takes Aeschylus's invention of Orestes's trial in Athens to suggest one possible way of seemingly stopping the cycle. But we can now wonder whether stopping it is possible at all. Perhaps Clytemnestra's wish was more modest and precarious, but more sincere and commensurate to the nature of life and her inherent self-overcoming.

As Zarathustra's animals stress (and as Greek tragedy amply illustrates), having to undergo one's own destiny again and again is ultimately unavoidable. If eternal recurrence is the upshot of the relational structure of becoming and reality, then it will hold regardless of one's preferences. One's genuine choice, thus, has to do with one's attitude towards it, and one's ability to withstand this thought or not. Zarathustra's fate seems to be that of one who should be able not only to withstand it, but also teach it to others. As the animals say (presenting what Zarathustra himself could or should say):

"Now I die and fade away," you would say, "and in an instant I am nothing. Souls are as mortal as bodies are.

"But the knot of causes in which I am entwined recurs—it will create me again! I myself belong to the causes of eternal recurrence.

"I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent—not to a new life or a better life or a similar life:

"—I come eternally again to this self-same life, in the greatest and smallest respects, so that again I teach the eternal recurrence of all things—

"—so that again I speak the word of the Great Earth-and Humans-Midday, and again bring to human beings the tidings of the Overhuman.

"I have spoken my word, I now shatter on my word: thus my eternal lot wills it—as a herald I now perish!"

"So the hour has come when the one who goes under blesses himself. Thus—ends Zarathustra's going-under.'— —" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III.13.2, transl. Parkes 2005, 193)

The will to do away with the world and escape into some other world (the basis for the conservative strategy that poisons humanity) is based on the possibility of *avoiding* recurrence. Trapped in the prison of not being able to will backward, the will invents an after-life, a world-beyond, in which it could flee after death. The thought of eternal recurrence blocks this option and counters its possibility, thus evoking a more profound dilemma: faced with the repetition of exactly this same life, with all its joys and sorrows, would you be willing to will *all of this again*? Knowing that whatever you try to create will be destroyed, and whatever you try to destroy will be created anew by your very acts, can you

still wish to fulfil your plans? Eternal recurrence is a way of putting the will to power in a corner, blocking any possible escape to a heavenly world, and forcing it to embrace and will *this earth*, and nothing else. This earth is contradictory, dissonant, unpleasing, but also pleasing, harmonious, wise. The Heraclitean tone of Zarathustra's insight emerges again:

Pain is also a joy, curse is also a blessing, night is also a sun—be gone! or you will learn: a wise man is also a fool.

Did you ever say Yes to a single joy? Oh, my friends, then you said Yes to all woe as well. All things are chained together, entwined, in love—

—if you ever wanted one time a second time, if you ever said 'You please me, happiness! Quick! Moment!' then you wanted it all back!

—All anew, all eternally, all chained together, entwined, in love, oh then you loved the world—

—you eternal ones, love it eternally and for all time: and even to woe you say: Be gone, but come back! *For all joy wants—Eternity!* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, IV.19.10, transl. Parkes 2005, 193)

At first, the thought of eternal recurrence might seem to dismantle the very idea of the will to power. After all, if everything is doomed to eternally come back again, what is the point of willing anything in particular? Does not this thought take away any residual possibility for genuinely creating something new?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at the eternal recurrence as a *performative* thought, as a belief aimed at enabling a certain way of acting, rather than simply as a theory (a way of looking at a given reality). As a performative thought (a sort of meditation), eternal recurrence enables the will to power to achieve two goals. First, to overcome its imprisonment with regard to the impossibility of willing the past, and thus the sense of guilt and punishment felt with respect to the way the past determines present conditions. Second, by blocking the escape from the round of becoming, eternal recurrence presents the will to power with the possibility of willing sorrow itself and all the most disturbing aspects of life, instead of trying to flee from them (suggesting that power lies precisely in the strength to withstand the inherent dissonance of life).

Both aspects counter any form of aversion that might be at play towards experience and its structure, and instead foster the ability to equally embrace both joyful and painful aspects of reality. The performative result of the meditation on eternal recurrence is a profound transformation of the emotional and conative structure that provides the background for one's understanding of experience. The underpinning attitude towards experience in general changes; it is freed from revenge and ill-will and infused with a sense of freedom, lightness, creativity, like someone released from a cage and allowed to roam freely.

After all, at the basis of the conservative mode of the will to power there is both a certain susceptibility to suffering, and the inability to overcome it other than by seeking a world beyond. If this conservative mode is what makes humanity sick, the way out of this impasse is an empowering thought that can help the will to power to recover its more creative mode, and apply it to the very core of suffering, the contradictory nature of life and existence itself, embracing and saying 'yes' to it. From this point of view, eternal recurrence is not only a performative thought, but also the most tragic form of thought. It takes as its object the need to create a new way of listening to the inherent dissonance of life and becoming. It is a thought somehow *enacted on the stage of life*, suspended between semblance and truth, like in the best tragedies.

The expected outcome of this performance of the eternal recurrence is the creation of a new type of humanity, or perhaps something that can only be negatively related to what humanity is and it has been so far. Zarathustra calls this new product the 'overhuman.' Zarathustra himself is not yet that product, but the prophet of its coming. The overhuman is both a need and a possibility. As a way of reasserting the creative dimension of the will to power, it is the necessary way out from the swamp of nihilism into which humanity has fallen. And yet, there is no linear and deterministic path that simply leads towards the overhuman. Work (creative work) is required for this to happen. Zarathustra's teaching of the eternal recurrence is presented as the key to unlocking the potential for humanity to overcome itself, as Life itself requires. However, Zarathustra (and Nietzsche himself) is not very explicit about how this overcoming can be concretely achieved. The meditative performance of eternal recurrence points in a certain direction, which has much to do with a reshaping of the human attitude towards suffering and contradiction, changing it from

the no-saying mode into the yes-saying mode. But this is still little more than a fairly general pointer.

After having introduced the thought of eternal recurrence in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche does not elaborate at great length on it in his subsequent works. Rather, he devotes much effort to preparing his readership for the correct reception and understanding of this doctrine. Nietzsche mentally collapsed in 1889, five years after completing the fourth part of the *Zarathustra*. He did not offer a detailed account of the sort of *practice* that it is supposed to accompany and enact the understanding of eternal recurrence. This result can be interpreted as a failure on Nietzsche's own part and thus as a symptom of the untenability or unviability of his ultimate teaching. However, if Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical escapism is sound and we want to explore the possibility of some revival of tragic culture, not having a way to actually *practice* these views is even more disappointing, since they were actually *meant* to be enacted and performed. A possible solution in this respect comes from early Buddhist thought. But to appreciate how this could be, we need to first reflect on some unquestioned assumptions in Nietzsche's view, and on the appropriate hermeneutic framework for bridging Nietzsche's thought and Buddhist practice. This is the task for the next lecture.

### 10.4 Nietzsche against secularism

Before moving on, it is worth emphasizing three core aspects of Nietzsche's proposal that shed light on the direction that we shall pursue further, and how it differs from other alternatives. Nietzsche is a soteriological thinker, that is, he aims to uncover the fundamental predicament of the human condition, the inherent problem in the current state of humanity, and provide a viable solution for it. At the heart of this soteriology is the idea of eternal recurrence. As we saw, this entails three connected points:

- (i) The loyalty to earth and life, the 'yes'-saying and *amor fati* commended by Zarathustra do not bring back, nor are justified on the basis of, a materialist or hard naturalist view, in which human beings are entirely reduced to biological machines.

- (ii) The project of seeking the advent of the overhuman is predicated on a profound criticism of the ordinary way of life of current humanity, the 'yes'-saying is not a way of endorsing and celebrating current practices, values, and worldviews.
- (iii) The overhuman does *not* constitute a definite solution, nor brings about an ideal world in which problems and suffering will end forever, since the overhuman itself will have to be overcome at some later point.

Sometimes, Nietzsche is coopted as a supporter of today's secularism. One might think that since God is dead, and we can no longer genuinely believe in an afterlife, all that we are left with is this biological body, living on this planet, meaning that we better take care of it as best as we can. Usually, 'taking care of it' entails making life as happy and sorrowless as possible for ourselves and alleviating unhappiness and suffering of others. In his reconstruction (mentioned in Lecture Zero), Taylor pointed out the historical roots of this sort of secularism in the eighteenth-century Western Enlightenment. Although this view might share with Nietzsche's a common polemical target (namely, the opposite attitude of seeking salvation into some form of transcendence), this Enlightenment view is at odds with Nietzsche's soteriology, and it is explicitly rejected by Zarathustra.

Nietzsche grants that there is no metaphysical soul, no disembodied entity that can exist independently from the living biological body. But this does not entail that selfhood must be reduced to an individual biological body. There is no self without a body, and yet the self is not *just* a living body. A living body is more than just an individual well-defined organism. As we saw, for Zarathustra a living body is an expression of life and of its constant process of becoming and self-overcoming. Already in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche rejected (following up on Schopenhauer) the ultimate validity of the principle of individuation. In the *Zarathustra*, he further develops a view of life that is incompatible with any reductionist stance (like those exemplified by hard naturalism, as discussed in Lecture Two). Being loyal to life and to the body does not mean being *reduced* to the body. On this front, Nietzsche remains firmly in the middle of the spectrum of possible views of conceiving of the self, in line with his tragic Greek sources, according to which embodiment is best conceived in a weak form.

Moreover, eternal recurrence excludes the possibility of radical annihilation at death. Even if I die when my body dies, since the body is but an expression of a cosmic process of life, this same body will eventually be reconstituted again, and I too with it. Nietzsche rules out the possibility of an afterlife, but this does not entail that life can be confined in the narrow span between the biological birth and death of a particular individual, because the individual itself is nothing but an expression of life in its global and endless unfolding struggle. The reason for taking care of the body, of life, of this earth, is thus *not* that we have got only this limited time, preceded and followed by sheer nothingness (as the contemporary secularist, or perhaps nihilist, might be inclined to think), but rather because our being here instantiates the struggle of life itself to create something new, and it is better for us to live up to the challenge and responsibility that this struggle raises rather than being swept away by it.

As the anthropological picture of the overhuman also makes abundantly clear, Zarathustra (and Nietzsche) is no friend of the ordinary way of life, which is often presented in terms of decadence and passive nihilism (as discussed in Lecture Nine). Embracing life, the body, this earth, saying ‘yes’ to all of that, does *not* mean that our ordinary way of running our lives is fine as it is and we need to simply be more condescending. The lazy hedonism that seeks anesthesia in the compulsive satisfaction of any sorts of sensual cravings is the most remote attitude from that envisaged by the overhuman. Sticking to this ordinary way of life constitutes in fact a conservative way of preventing and hindering creative change and transformation. The ordinary way of life, with its interest in avoiding suffering and maximizing pleasure as much as possible, is what must be overcome to move on from the last man to the overhuman. The ordinary way of life is part and parcel of the soteriological problem, not of its solution.

Ultimately, Nietzsche’s project is *not* that of ending the world’s suffering forever. This is not only impossible, but also *against* the very nature of life and betrays an inability to take up a genuinely tragic understanding of the human predicament. The advent of the overhuman is not the end of all suffering, but the (provisional!) ending of a sick way of dealing with suffering by simply trying to push it away or escape from it into some world-beyond. Giving birth to the

overhuman will cause suffering, and the overhuman will not stop suffering from being inherent in life. What the overhuman promises as a soteriological solution is a new way of withstanding suffering, living amidst it, saying 'yes' to it and thus being freed from the concern for it. And *this attitude* constitutes the way in which suffering will cease to be a problem. A problem can be a genuine problem only insofar as it is felt unpleasantly. But even in this unpleasant feeling, the genuine problem is not the feeling as such, but rather the aversion towards it, the desire not to feel that way. The problem is the 'no' said to unpleasantness and suffering. The overhuman can bring about a new way of reversing this attitude by saying 'yes' to what is not wanted, and by thus dissolving the sense of aversion and resistance to what is unpleasant and sorrowful. Dissolving the aversion does not necessarily dissolve the feeling, and yet it dissolves what made that feeling into a problem, and hence solves the problem.<sup>109</sup>

In giving up the idea of seeking transcendence, contemporary Western secularism tends to jump to the opposite end of the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self. If transcendence is no longer viable, it would seem natural to embrace its most direct opposite, namely, hard naturalism. Nietzsche's own discussion provides an important confutation of this move, by showing that more options are available. However, insofar as contemporary secularism embraces a philanthropic ideal of making the world 'a better place' or ending the world's suffering forever, secularism is recasting, on earth, a markedly transcendent eschatological goal. In soteriological schemes based on a linear progression of time (such as in Christianity or Zoroastrianism), God creates the world and will eventually destroy it. If all goes well, (for some at least) there will be a happy ending, with eternal peace and bliss. Dropping God from the picture, one can still hold on to this idea of the happy ending, or at

•• 109 There is ample possibility for the overhuman to bring relief to others and help them. And yet, this sort of help will be structurally and hermeneutically different from the ordinary way of conceiving of the relief of world suffering. Ordinarily the latter project is conceived of in terms of minimizing feelings (of pain, sorrow, distress). But from a Nietzschean perspective, the problem is not with the feeling, but with the attitude towards it, the aversion towards suffering and pain, the inability to withstand it. Hence, genuine relief will depend on the possibility of helping others to cultivate this sort of strength, endurance, resistance, overabundance of health and energy. For a discussion of this point in terms of different types of 'compassion,' which Nietzsche rejects or endorses (and their relationship with the Buddhist account of compassion), see Antoine Panaïoti, *Nietzsche and Buddhist Philosophy* (2013), chapters 5 and 6.



least to the ideal of bringing about a global and eternal state of happiness and pleasantness for everybody. What is this ideal if not a secularized version of the transcendent eschatology of final eternal bliss? Moreover, what is this ideal if not an explicit acknowledgment of one's inability to withstand the suffering inherent in this life? In seeking this ideal of a globally happy world, the secularist is still playing the same game of the transcendent, despite the change of setting (and this is in fact what 'secularization' means, namely, recasting an originally theological view or notion into a non-theological context).

Nietzsche's insistence on the importance of *facing* eternal recurrence is also due to his realization that to get rid of this residual transcendent eschatology of a globally happy state, it is necessary to dismiss two of its fundamental premises: (i) a linear conception of time based on progress towards the better; (ii) the inability to withstand suffering and thus the desire to erase it from life. The second point is an obstacle to a genuinely tragic understanding of life as inherently dissonant, while the first point misconstrues becoming (by making it a straight linear process) and eventually builds the cage for the will's creative power (by making the past something unchangeable).

Nietzsche's project is not just about offering an alternative to a transcendent way of constructing the self, by reverting to the opposite side of the same spectrum. More radically, Nietzsche seeks an alternative to the project of mastery as such, and hence to the whole project of constructing selfhood in general. The secularist approach remains caught in the project of mastery and seeing the failure of the transcendent strategy reverts to the naturalist one. Secularism is still a form of nihilism. Nietzsche's project is more radical, and more interesting for present purposes. As we shall discuss in the next three lectures, Nietzsche can help us to define certain background conditions that a genuine attempt at disbanding mastery should fulfil. This does *not* mean setting up a secularist agenda, but rather laying down a foundation for moving beyond secularism altogether.



# Lecture Eleven: Relations

## 11.1 Introduction

We began to challenge the idea that uncertainty is best addressed through the attempt at mastering it. Since the self is constructed in this attempt, if mastery is abandoned then selfhood should be seriously reconceived. Uncertainty is inherent in conditionality. Insofar as any entity or reality depends upon certain relations, it is essentially uncertain because that entity or reality cannot be established on its own, but necessarily relies on something else. However, the idea that uncertainty needs mastery requires one further premise: uncertainty is somehow a problem, something felt unpleasantly, something from which one wishes to be relieved. If we seriously challenge the idea that mastery is the best way to face uncertainty, we now need to look deeper into this association between uncertainty and painfulness. What are the conditions under which uncertainty can be felt unpleasantly? In a relational ontology (such as that delineated in Lectures One and Eight), nothing can have intrinsic properties, and hence even uncertainty *cannot* be inherently painful on its own.

We have seen how Nietzsche, reinterpreting Attic tragedy, phrased the problem of uncertainty in terms of *dissonance*. Life is structurally bound to combine contradictory drives. This paradoxical nature, which is proper to the structure of becoming, makes life appear like the joint enaction of contrasting elements, as in a musical dissonance. We can now ask: what does it take for a dissonance to be felt painfully? Much of Nietzsche's discussion relies on the assumption that this is just how dissonance feels. Dissonance is naturally painful. But is this true?

Nietzsche's assumption arguably comes from Schopenhauer, with whom he agrees in concluding that life is suffering, or that suffering is a real and inherent feature of life resulting from its ontological and structural uncertainty. Moreover, in using a musical phenomenon (dissonance) as a philosophical heuristic tool, Nietzsche takes for granted that the musical system of his time is something natural or relatively unproblematic. In the first half of this lecture, we shall thus explore in greater detail the musical notion of dissonance to show how the way dissonance is felt and understood depends on its musical context. Translating this back into philosophical discussion, we can conclude that life is suffering *only under certain premises*, or from a certain perspective. What are the

consequences, for Nietzsche's project, of rejecting the idea that dissonance is *inherently* painful?

Nietzsche advocates for a revamping of tragic culture, capable of supporting an attitude of acceptance towards the painfulness and contradictory nature of life. If life is inherently dissonant and painful, Nietzsche's proposed solution is to say 'yes' to the whole of it, embracing the pain rather than attempting to master or mask it. Nietzsche's discussion highlights that metaphysical escapism aimed at the Transcendent is doomed to fail. The quest for another heavenly world is poisoned by resentment for this life and this world. The ascetic who seeks Transcendence is a sick one, who hates their own sickness and tries to transform or sublimate it into something liberatory. Nietzsche contrasts this conservative strategy that faces the pain of life with a quest for an afterlife, with the teaching of the eternal recurrence, which encourages us to withstand and welcome pain itself. Notice: in both cases the idea that pain is inherent to life is taken for granted, even if the solutions offered diverge diametrically.

However, if life (dissonance, contradiction, becoming) is *not* inherently painful, then we can envisage a somewhat different strategy. First, we should ask: what are the conditions under which life *becomes* painful? We should then investigate whether these conditions are anything necessary or avoidable. If it is indeed possible to face the dissonant uncertainty of life *without* activating the conditions for experiencing it as painful or suffering, then we can face dissonance without being troubled by it. As we shall see in the next two lectures, this is precisely the strategy adopted in early Buddhist thought and practice. In bringing this Buddhist perspective into dialogue with Nietzsche's problematization of nihilism, we are going to answer a Nietzschean question with Buddhist tools.

The Buddha's teaching has been like the ghost at feast in several of the lectures outlined so far, lurking in the background of some of the ideas discussed. In Lecture One, Buddhism was invoked as a potential conversation partner for contemporary cognitive science, especially insofar as it both provides philosophical arguments to expose the constructed nature of the self (and thus the problem nestled in the attempt at conceiving of the self as a substantial entity), and a disciplined practice capable of reshaping habitual cognitive and affective patterns. We also mentioned that this involvement with Buddhism

needs contextualization. For instance, we discussed Thompson's reasons for challenging today's dominant Buddhist modernist approach (both qua theory of Buddhism as exceptionally rational and scientific, and qua practice of introspective mindfulness).

On some historical accounts, both external and internal to the Buddhist tradition, the goal and practice of Buddhist meditation can be construed as a form of anesthetic trance aimed at dissolving the self in some sort of transcendent ultimate reality. As discussed in Lecture One, this 'non-dual' interpretation resurfaces in Buddhist modernist accounts of 'Enlightenment.' We are now able to say that *if* Buddhist thought and practice are constructed in this way, *then* they would not fit Nietzsche's bill of providing a way out of nihilism. And since this interpretation was well-established among early nineteenth-century scholars who popularized the first Western accounts of Buddhist thought, Nietzsche had several reasons to consider Buddhist thought still inevitably entrenched with nihilism.

Nietzsche himself mentions Buddhist thought several times, albeit mostly in passing, throughout his works and unpublished notes. His judgment about Buddhism is overall negative. Buddhism is akin to Schopenhauer's philosophy: it acknowledges the problem (life is suffering), it avoids metaphysical escapism, and yet it fails to provide a positive creative answer. The Buddha was a lion, not yet a child, to use Zarathustra's metaphor. This judgment is shaped by the fact that Nietzsche's acquaintance with Buddhism was mostly second-hand and very dependent on mid-nineteenth-century secondary scholarship aimed at popularizing Buddhist ideas for the European audience. In Lecture One we briefly mentioned how mid-nineteenth century scholars aimed at presenting the historical Buddha through Protestant and rationalistic lenses. Nietzsche's understanding of Buddhism was conditioned by this presentation. However, if we depart from this interpretation of early Buddhism, new options become available and the confrontation between Nietzsche's thought and early Buddhism, in particular, can bear fruitful results. Setting the stage for exploring this possibility takes up the second part of this lecture.

## 11.2 Beyond tonality

Nineteenth-century Western music was mostly based on what is called the tonal system. The tonal system is a historical product of early modern Western music, and by Nietzsche's time it was already increasingly under pressure. As we discussed in Lecture Nine, Nietzsche envisages the way that music handles dissonances as a paradigm for a tragic approach to life. In doing so, Nietzsche takes for granted how dissonances are conceptualized from the point of view of tonality. *This* is the unchallenged assumption that we need to deconstruct; doing so will also provide a useful bridge to early Buddhist thought.

In a nutshell, dissonance is not a natural kind, but rather a way of conceptualizing the relation between different tones from the point of view of an assumed fundamental tone (a tonic, or the tonal key of a piece of music). The properties that Nietzsche imputes to dissonance are dependent upon its being contextualized in a tonal framework. Without this framework, dissonance is not necessarily something dynamic, or unstable, or in need of resolution, nor even something necessarily painful to hear. In other words, it is only in a specific context, or from a specific perspective, namely, that of a tonal system, that dissonance appears in the form Nietzsche conceives of it. As it turns out, the tonal system is a good musical parallel for the way that a sense of self (identity, unity, central coherence in the whole of experience) can arise and be established.

The best guide to explore this issue is provided by some of Arnold Schönberg's reflections on musical thought. Schönberg (1874-1951) was a generation younger than Nietzsche and was well acquainted with his thought. More importantly, Schönberg was one of the most influential composers and musical theorists of the first half of the twentieth century. For present purposes, we shall focus on his essay *Problems of Harmony* (1934), in which Schönberg summarizes his main point that tonality is a historically constructed and contingent device aimed at achieving unity in music (the equivalent of mastering uncertainty in life), but neither necessary nor the only possible way of doing so. This claim also provides a theoretical explanation of Schönberg's own project of developing a new musical system based on 'twelve tones in relation to one another' (usually referred to as 'dodecaphony' or 'serialism'). In following the

unfolding of Schönberg's thoughts, we shall weave a counterpoint between his musical reflections and how they resonate with our general discussion of the constructed nature of selfhood, and with Nietzsche's project more specifically.

Schönberg's starting point is an assertion of the relational nature of music. Music is a relation among codified sounds, namely tones, and musical thoughts are ways of expressing specific and interesting relations among tones. A musical thought can be understood as a way of expressing a certain form of unity among tones or conveying the sense in which a certain series of tones form a coherent whole. Schönberg stresses the perpetual striving of the composer to uncover new possibilities and ways of articulating musical thoughts, while steering away from those forms and structures that would sound tired or no longer interesting. Creating music is thus akin to the will to create novelty (Lecture Ten). As he writes:

An idea in music consists principally in the relation of tones to one another. But every relationship that has been used often, no matter how extensively modified, must finally be regarded as exhausted; it ceases to have power to convey a thought worthy of expression. Therefore every composer is obliged to invent, to invent new things, to present new tone relations for discussion and to work out their consequences. It is for this reason that the technic of music must develop so quickly and so persistently. (Schönberg 1973, 4)

It is not obvious that this striving for novelty has been universally appreciated and valued by composers in the history of music. It is more likely that conservative drives also played a prominent role in certain periods. Nonetheless, Schönberg's view gives prominence to the forward-looking and actively creative attitude that Zarathustra ascribes to the child. And Schönberg himself is confronted with the same paradox of Zarathustra's child: in order to create something new, the inertia of the past must be challenged. In this case, what needs to be abandoned is the idea that musical thoughts can achieve unity only if they are shaped in the framework of a tonal system.

To argue for this point, Schönberg explores the general conditions for the establishment of any relation between tones. His main point is that tones can be related because they are inherently relational, namely, because each tone



already entails a relation to others. Consider, once again, Plato's theorem in the *Sophist*: no identity without difference and relation. In fact, one might even go further and argue that *music* is what provides the blueprint or template for conceptualizing any more abstract relational ontology; unsurprisingly both Plato and Nietzsche were very interested in music.

Schönberg writes:

How, after all, can two tones be joined one with another? My answer is that such a juxtaposition of tones, if a connection is to be brought about from which a piece of music may be the result, is only possible because a relation already exists between the tones themselves. Logically, we can only join things that are related, directly or indirectly. In a piece of music, I cannot establish a relation between a tone and, let us say, an eraser; simply because no musical relation exists. (Schönberg 1973, 5)

The most general way of connecting tones is by considering them as *complex* rather than simple. Schönberg relies on the acoustic theory of overtones, according to which any natural tone comes with a series of overtones. For instance, when one presses a C key on a piano, the fundamental tone that one hears is C, but within that tone, one can also discern another C that resonates an octave higher, and then a G that resonates a fifth even higher. The chromatic scale can be derived from the series of overtones. While the chromatic scale is a way of ordering different tones in a temporal succession, chords can be used to order different tones spatially in the same moment of time.

Tonality arises out of the use of specific technical devices used to emphasize one particular fundamental tone, which becomes the tonic of a key (like C in the key of C major). Traditionally, this is done by alternating relatively consonant chords derived from the very first overtones of the fundamental tonic (like the chord of C major, composed of C, G and E), with other more dissonant chords, which include tones that are farther away in the sequence of overtones and thus are recognized as more extraneous by the ear (like a cord of G major, composed of G, B and D). These chords are thus perceived as dissonant to some extent, and this dissonance can be handled in such a way as to create a sense of need for the re-assertion of the tonic. Schönberg observes:

Even in the relatively simple forms, those most nearly related to the fundamental tone, which employ chords and chord successions that are very near the key, tonality does not appear automatically, of itself, but requires the application of a number of artistic means to achieve its end unequivocally and convincingly. (Schönberg 1973, 9)

The core insight is that no matter how straightforward a sequence of chords is, they do not entail the establishment of a certain tonality all by themselves. Tonality is not something that exists or is inherent in any particular chord, but results from a skillful construction of a series of chords and the use of other devices that create the impression, for the listener, of one key tone dominating the composition. In summarizing his view, Schönberg explains:

Every isolated major triad can of itself express a key. If no contradiction is added it may be taken for a tonic-chord. But every succeeding chord contests the feeling for tonality and pleads for others. Only a few very special kinds of chord-successions permit the conception that any one of the used chords, chiefly the last one, is the fundamental chord of a key. But even this designation is only final if nothing contradictory follows. Without the application of very definite art-means a key cannot be unequivocally expressed. (Schönberg 1973, 10)

Compare this with how the sense of self is constructed. The self is established as a fundamental key-tonic in experience. A key-tonic is a musical construction that results from an artful treatment of the relation among chords and sounds, in which one chord emerges as the establishment of a fundamental key, although this result is never absolute and can always be challenged, it remains uncertain and under threat. The self emerges from the attempt at mastering uncertainty in the same way that a key-tonic emerges from the attempt to establish it on the background of harmonic ambiguity and fluctuation. Like the self, the tonic becomes what defines the 'main character' of a piece of music, and its overall unity in the tonal system. Various ideas can then be introduced and developed in that piece, but the tonic provides a way of unifying their diversity and heterogeneity. However, any deviation from the tonic is

perceived as a dissonance that challenges the establishment of the key-tonic and raises a sense of dynamism and drama in the musical discourse (remember the dynamics between local selves and global selves from Lecture Two). Difficulties and failures in the self's attempt at mastering uncertainty give rise to the vicissitudes of life, and when extreme, to its tragedy.

As Schönberg remarks, any isolated chord can be used to establish a key. However, music is inherently relational and thus always open to becoming (remember the connection between relationality and becoming we encountered in Nietzsche, and its roots in Plato's theory of the five great kinds). Any chord is bound to be followed by something different, and this new chord will contest the establishment of the tonic. While the sense of self can arise and be attached to any given experience, the inevitable change that this experience will undergo challenges the current sense of self. As I identify with my experience when I am awake, whenever I go to sleep and become something else (like my dreaming I), this new experience challenges the earlier identity. While I dream, am I still the same self as when I am awake? As we discussed in Lecture Two, there is no straightforward answer to this question.

In music, composers crafted a number of rhetorical devices (so-called 'cadences') meant to reinforce the sense of a particular key. The final ending bars of any piece of Mozart provide a canonical instance of what that sounds like. However, these devices only work if nothing else prevails or follows. In other words, the 'victory' of the tonic (or of the sense of self) can never be absolute or permanent, it is always the provisional victory of a specific battle, never the victory of the whole war. Schönberg emphasizes that the way the tonic is established is entirely artificial; it is a skillful construction on the part of the composer and is not natural or inherent in the musical matter. The same is true of the self, which can be established and constructed, but never entirely secured.

Schönberg's aim is not to dismiss tonality. In fact, he insists on the pragmatic and aesthetic function that it serves. Tonality provides a powerful tool for creating unity in music and imposing structure on musical thought.<sup>110</sup> Unity

•• 110 In Schönberg's work, the 'musical thought' (German *musikalische Gedanke*) entails something complex and deep, akin to a direct intuition of a superior order of reality, irreducible to fully articu-

and coherence are Schönberg's ways of expressing the ideal of *intelligibility*, namely, the possibility for a listener to understand musical thought. Intelligibility (and hence, unity and coherence) is not an intrinsic property, but arises from the match and fit between the composer's language and the listener's understanding. When the ear understands a musical thought, that thought is appreciated and reveals its aesthetic positive qualities (it sounds 'beautiful'). Tonality is a widely established tool in Western classical music, used to convey a sense of unity and coherence, and hence to support intelligibility and achieve beauty. By contrast, dissonance can be seen as problematic or even aesthetically repulsive only because (and insofar as) it is not understood by the musical ear. According to Schönberg, tonality itself is not the problem. The problem is conceiving of tonality as natural or inherent in music, which is misleading and limiting. The real question is whether it would be possible to achieve comparable (or even better) results from the point of view of unity and form (intelligibility), *without* exploiting the artificial devices based on tonality.

The reasons for seeking an alternative to tonality are twofold. On the one hand, there is the urge to create something new which was mentioned above. After some time, tonal solutions will be experienced as not only intelligible, but predictable and thus uninteresting. They will cease to be an empowering means of expressing new thoughts and will become a constricting past, from which the composer's will must then escape. On the other hand, tonality is a *particular* means of creating unity and coherence, and hence imposes a specific meaning upon the musical material. But since tonality is inherently unstable, it is torn between the Apolline ideal of ensuring intelligibility and the Dionysian framework of uncertainty and disintegration. What if the tonal paradigm is abandoned and the very unstable, uncertain, relational nature of the musical matter becomes the ground for establishing unity and coherence? What if we

.....  
lated verbalization. Musical form enables the composer to express this thought, although the actual expression never exhausts it (see Schönberg's essay *Composition with Twelve Tones* in Id. *Style and Idea*, 1975). This view is arguably influenced by Schönberg's familiarity with a range of Western modern esoteric sources, as documented by John Covach, 'Schoenberg and The Occult: Some Reflections on the Musical Idea' (1992) and Id., 'The Sources of Schoenberg's "Aesthetic Theology"' (1996). However, it also ties in with the Nietzschean distinction between a sense of inarticulate meaningfulness (Dyonisian) and a sense of individualized and articulated form (Apolline). Notice that Schönberg was not only familiar with Nietzsche's thought but also wrote a lied (op. 6 no. 8) based on a Nietzsche's poem (*Der Wanderer*).

try to understand not how a contradiction can be avoided, but how a contradiction sounds in its own right?

From the beginning of these lectures, we have explored how selfhood is conceived along a spectrum. A particular way of constructing the self amounts to a particular strategy for mastering uncertainty. Mastering uncertainty is a way of unifying experience and giving it meaning. Different conceptions of selfhood amount to different ways of unifying experience and assigning different meanings to it. In seeking intelligibility without relying on tonality, Schönberg is seeking the musical equivalent of a different form of selfhood from that which is enacted in the tonal system—or even more radically, an alternative to the whole project of self-mastery.

In music, it is possible to have tonal structures (in which a key-tonic is established as fundamental, like in classical composers such as Mozart or Haydn), or else polytonal structures (multiple tonal structures are superimposed, like in some Stravinsky), or even non-tonal structures (like in some of Schönberg's own compositions). In all these cases, what changes is the way that overall unity and coherence is achieved in relation to the establishment of one, more than one, or no fundamental center of gravitation. Even in music, we are faced with a spectrum of possible ways of creating unity, of constructing (musical) selfhood.

In the extreme case in which no tonal center is established, though, unity will acquire a fundamentally different meaning from the sense of unity that is perceived in a tonal composition. Schönberg achieves this result by taking as his starting point the relational nature of musical tones themselves (their conditionality, hence the equivalent of what would be perceived as uncertainty), and exploits that to build a *series*. A series is a fixed set of tones that will shape most of the other aspects of a given composition by engendering an overall sense of coherence, intelligibility, and unity, but without establishing any permanent center or core (a key-tonic). The structure itself (the series of twelve tones and their relations) is taken as more fundamental than any of its constituent parts. The sort of intelligibility and unity introduced by the use of serialism is based on the *lack* of any unique and fundamental core (or tonic or self). The experience of this absence—this groundlessness—becomes the new focal point around which the rest of the musical experience and thought gravitate.

## Lecture Eleven: Relations

In this way, Schönberg's construction illustrates how one might build a meaning for experience on the acknowledgement of its conditionality and uncertainty, without mastering it or subordinating it to some permanent core, tonic, or self. This enacts in music the tragic view that Nietzsche was after, but also brings us close with early Buddhist thought and practice, as we shall see in the next lecture.

Schönberg continues:

Though the development of tonality was by leaps and bounds, though it has not signified the identical thing at all times, its function has, nevertheless, been one and the same. It has always been the referring of all results to a centre, to a fundamental tone, to an emanation point of tonality, which rendered important service to the composer in matters of form. All the tonal successions, chords and chord-successions in a piece achieve a unified meaning through their definite relation to a tonal centre and also through their mutual ties. That is the unifying function of tonality. (Schönberg 1973, 13)

The question of the self is not just whether it exists or not, whether it is an illusion or just a delusion, but also, importantly, how it is enacted and supported. It is the question of what sort of fuel it runs on (so to speak). Schönberg's phrasing is particularly relevant since it stresses that this is not a matter of replacing one system with another, but of having *more options* available. Schönberg himself sometimes wrote (remarkable) pieces using tonal language, although he also decided at some point to avoid tonality altogether and explore alternative structures. Is it possible to do the same with the self? In Lecture Two, we saw Thompson's claim that we ought not to fall into neuro-nihilism, by considering the self merely an illusion or as entirely non-existent, because without *some* sense of self any experience would seem entirely incoherent. In turn, Thompson claims, this would paralyze action and cognition. Schönberg provides us with a vantage point to address this issue. Unity and coherence in music (the intelligibility of experience provided by a broad and processual sense of self) can be achieved without appealing to tonality (the equivalent of supporting this sense of self with beliefs and conative attitudes that imbue it

with a strong ontological autonomy and independence). This means that what matters most is not the sort of structure that it is imposed upon the material (tones, experience), but rather the intelligibility that follows and the possibility of making that material understandable and meaningful. Selfhood, like tonality in music, is a way of interpreting experience, of making sense of it. We can now see that this might not be the only way.

Schönberg is cautious in framing his point:

It is evident that abandoning tonality can be contemplated only if other satisfactory means for coherence and articulation present themselves. If, in other words, one could write a piece which does not use the advantages offered by tonality and yet unifies all elements so that their succession and relation are logically comprehensible, and which is articulated as our mental capacity requires, namely so that the parts unfold clearly and characteristically in related significance and function [...]. Let us ask then: do unity and coherence depend exclusively on tonality? (Schönberg 1973, 15)

The answer is negative. According to Schönberg, music in the second half of the nineteenth century especially (the music in which Nietzsche himself was immersed) provides ample examples. Among which, Schönberg includes Wagner's music:

If, with the simplest triads [...] we can produce short phrases which do not definitely determine a key, we can also take chords, not too complicated, such as are used in Wagner's harmony, and make rather extensive examples in which no unresolved dissonance occurs, all of which by themselves may refer to a key but which in toto leave no doubt that no tonal center exists and therefore no modulation. (Schönberg 1973, 17)

In Schönberg's interpretation, Wagner's harmony can use relatively simple and traditional chords, which follow each other in relatively traditional ways, and thus allow dissonances to be resolved as expected. And yet, these progressions do not establish any overall tonic. Wagner's works can be regarded as an example of tonal music that escapes the overall goal of fixating a key-tonic as the

musical centre. There is a *semblance* of tonality but without the assertion of any genuine tonal core. To rephrase in more dramatic terms: there is a semblance of strong individuality (the tonic), while at the same time this semblance is also undermined by the overall development. We might wonder whether Nietzsche's musical sensitivity somehow *heard* this point, and whether it was for this reason that he was drawn, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to present Wagner's music as the best expression of the tragic synergy between Apolline and Dionysiac.

In another essay, *Composition with Twelve Tones* (originally published in 1941, then in *Style and Idea*, 1975), Schönberg presents some important aspects of his own composition style. Given our limits of space and time, we cannot delve into this further essay here, but it might be helpful to take a short detour to explore the notion of 'emancipation of the dissonance,' which Schönberg associated with Wagner. Schönberg explains:

In the last hundred years, the concept of harmony has changed tremendously through the development of chromaticism. The idea that one basic tone, the root, dominated the construction of chords and regulated their succession—the concept of *tonality*—had to develop first into the concept of *extended tonality*. Very soon it became doubtful whether such a root still remained the center to which every harmony and harmonic succession must be referred. Furthermore, it became doubtful whether a tonic appearing at the beginning, at the end, or at any other point really had a constructive meaning. Richard Wagner's harmony had promoted a change in the logic and constructive power of harmony. One of its consequences was the so-called *impressionistic* use of harmonics, especially practised by Debussy. [...] In this way, tonality was already dethroned in practise, if not in theory. This alone would perhaps not have caused a radical change in compositional technique. However, such a change became necessary when there occurred simultaneously a development which ended in what I call the *emancipation of the dissonance*.

The ear had gradually become acquainted with a great number of dissonances, and so had lost the fear of their "sense-interrupting" effect. One no longer expected preparations of Wagner's dissonances or resolutions of Strauss' discords; one was not disturbed by Debussy's non-functional harmo-



nies, or by the harsh counterpoint of later composers. This state of affairs led to a freer use of dissonances comparable to classic composers' treatment of diminished seventh chords, which could precede and follow any other harmony, consonant or dissonant, as if there were no dissonance at all.

What distinguishes dissonances from consonances is not a greater or lesser degree of beauty, but a greater or lesser degree of *comprehensibility*. In my *Harmonielehre* I presented the theory that dissonant tones appear later among the overtones, for which reason the ear is less intimately acquainted with them. This phenomenon does not justify such sharply contradictory terms as concord and discord. Closer acquaintance with the more remote consonances—the dissonances, that is—gradually eliminated the difficulty of comprehension and finally admitted not only the emancipation of dominant and other seventh chords, diminished sevenths and augmented triads, but also the emancipation of Wagner's, Strauss', Moussorgsky's; Debussy's, Mahler's, Puccini's, and Reger's more remote dissonances.

The term *emancipation of the dissonance* refers to its comprehensibility, which is considered equivalent to the consonance's comprehensibility. A style based on this premise treats dissonances like consonances and renounces a tonal center. By avoiding the establishment of a key modulation is excluded, since modulation means leaving an established tonality and establishing *another* tonality. (Schönberg 1975, 216-217)

Schönberg first emphasises how the use of chromatism (harmonically remote or foreign tones with respect to the fundamental key) expanded the notion of tonality, by allowing the listener to become increasingly more familiar with dissonances, and to thus dissociate the hearing of a dissonance from the feeling of confusion or even disunity in the piece. Notice that Schönberg's discussion continuously shifts back and forth between musical practice and musical *listening*, stressing how the evolution of musical practice is symbiotic with the evolution of the listener's understanding (although he also, more polemically, remarks that the two do not run at the same speed). This phenomenon shows that unity (intelligibility) in music can exist without a strong centre that legitimizes and upholds that same unity against its many threats. Uncertainty does not necessitate nor require mastery.

Wagner plays a pivotal role in this process. Wagner uses relatively traditional harmonic forms, but also progressively dissociating or undermining their structural tonal function. This process is what leads to the emancipation of the dissonance, which is a *hermeneutic* phenomenon. Becoming more and more acquainted with various dissonances and starting to understand their role and contribution to the shaping of musical unity, the *listener's ear* begins to understand dissonances differently, no longer as something that disrupts or breaks unity and coherence, but as part of it. Emancipation arises from the feedback between new musical styles and how they affect listening practices. Emancipation is not achieved unilaterally by one party moving away from the other (remember the dilemma of the Vedic seer we encountered in Lecture Five), but collaboratively, as all parties move closer to a mutual understanding.

Schönberg remarks that dissonance and consonance are not opposed, but should be considered on a spectrum. The genuine difference between them is not aesthetic (it does not concern *perception*), but semantic (it concerns *understanding*). Dissonances might be more difficult to understand for the ear, but this is just a matter of acquaintance, not an inherent feature of the musical material itself. Dissonances are just 'remote consonances,' there is nothing inherently 'disturbing,' 'painful' or even 'ugly' in dissonances and they are not inherently 'dynamic' or in need for 'resolution.' Dissonances are not 'problems' or 'challenges,' *unless* they are perceived in the narrow framework of a tonal system *and* the listener's ear has not developed the ability to understand how dissonances do not necessarily disrupt unity and coherence. From this point of view, we can see that 'dissonance' does not inherently mean (it does not have to be perceived as) 'suffering' or 'pain.' Whether this happens depends on two variables: the musical context (tonal or not) and the listener's degree of understanding.

Admittedly, the historical development of musical styles is less linear than Schönberg presents it. We should not forget that in playing the role of a historian, Schönberg also aims to legitimize (or at least defend) his own approach by reconstructing a suitable genealogy and lineage. The historical context of Schönberg's own work is well discussed by Luigi Rognoni, in his *The Second Vienna School. The Rise of Expressionism in the Music of Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg and Anton von Webern* (1977, original Italian ed. 1966). Rognoni shows how, in the post-Wag-

nerian period, composers tended to drift along two actually divergent paths. Debussy reacted to chromatism by reducing the use of semitones and experimenting with diatonic, esatonal or whole-tone scales. The Paris circle of composers (which included Ravel and Satie) then tended to develop a poetic based on 'objectivism' and, later, on a form of neo-classicism, of which Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress* (1951) is perhaps the most emblematic example. This is a gesture towards reality, even in its ordinary aspects, an attempt to refrain from what is perceived as excessive drama (*à la* Wagner). Schönberg's own research goes exactly in the opposite direction, since his aim is to exploit the democratic nature of the chromatic scale for the purpose of creating a new language, profoundly shaped by expressionistic features and aims. In doing so, Schönberg does not try to silence or dismiss subjectivity, but forges a new way for the subject to exist and express itself. Notice the paradox: subjectivity and selfhood are authentically expressed not when they are portrayed as objective beings, master of their reality, but when they are exposed in their inherent vulnerability, fragility, failure, uncertainty. These two artistic drives (objectivism and expressionism) can not only be matched with Nietzsche's Apolline-Dionysiac divide, but also understood within the broader opposition between anaesthetic trance (which is aimed at shutting down the self and reaching ultimate reality) and an alternative effort (witnessed in Nietzsche, and perhaps also in Schönberg) to reconceptualize the way in which the self can be enacted.

According to Schönberg the emancipation of the dissonance is a process that needs to be carried out to its conclusion. This does not happen with Wagner, and Schönberg himself takes responsibility for clearly spelling out the theoretical implications of it. To use Zarathustra's anthropological scheme, Wagner still plays the lion's game: he subverts the received tonal order, without inventing a new one. He is still caught in active nihilism, not yet ready to fully become a child. Schönberg offers instead a more radical perspective: systematically avoid establishing any tonic by building musical thoughts on the basis of pre-established and carefully crafted musical series in which each of the twelve tones occurs only once, in a well thought out order. The main rationale for this approach is that all tones are ultimately related together through their overtones, and hence emphasising one central tonic is not needed to achieve unity. As he explains (back in *Problems of Harmony*), intelligibility is based on

the relation of all tones to one another, regardless of occasional occurrences, assured by the circumstance of a common origin. I believe, to be sure, that this interrelationship of all tones exists not only because of their derivation from the first thirteen overtones of the three fundamental tones, as I have shown, but that, should this proof be inadequate, it would be possible to find another. For it is indisputable that we can join twelve tones with one another and this can only follow from the already existing relations between the twelve tones. (Schönberg 1973, 20)

Schönberg's solution to the problem of finding an alternative device to create unity consists in building on the relational nature of tones themselves. Unity *can* be expressed and conceived of in terms of a centralized relation in which all differences converge or are brought back to the same focal point. This is the approach pursued in the tonal system, and is similar to the use of a global sense of self as the focal point of action and cognition. However, Schönberg argues that since all tones are already naturally and inherently relational, they are also connected *by their own natural relationality*. The chromatic sequence of the twelve tones offers the spectrum of tones, and taking this whole sequence as the general framework, a series of twelve tones establishes unity by appeal to the fact that all twelve are (and are expected to be) included in that series. A tonal chord is an incomplete series, in which unity is achieved by reference to a common ground or tonic, which establishes a hierarchy (subordination) or an exclusion (distancing) with respect to other tones perceived as extraneous. A dodecaphonic series, instead, is the complete sequence of the twelve tones, and hence the unity among them is given by the fact that the series must contain all twelve, and each of them is presented in relation to one another, without any subordinating or distancing. Unity is derived from relationality itself. But relationality means conditionality, and conditionality means uncertainty. Hence, building unity by bringing relationality to the forestage means creating unity (intelligibility) by expressing uncertainty overtly rather than attempting to master it. The emancipation of dissonance is the ability to hear a dissonance without expecting it to be resolved. The emancipation of uncertainty is the ability to withstand uncertainty without the need to master it, overcome it, subordinate it, or run away from it. As we will find, this is the direction in which early Buddhist practice moves.

At this point, it should be clear that dissonance itself is relative to the musical system in which it occurs, and its function depends on that context. Not all dissonance needs resolution or is in need of treatment. The use of dissonance in tonal music does not necessarily undermine its tonal character, and by contrast the absence of dissonance does not establish tonality *per se*. Dissonance and tonality are not necessarily linked. However, the way dissonance is perceived within a tonal frame is specific to the work that dissonance performs in that context, namely, that of ‘challenging’ the tonic and thus urging further (re)action. This is the understanding of dissonance that Nietzsche takes for granted. Schönberg shows that this understanding must be indexed to tonal music only, which is but one subset of the possibilities offered by music in general:

since dissonances need not in the least disturb tonality, no matter how increasingly difficult they may make the understanding of a work; and inasmuch as the use of exclusively tonal chords does not guarantee a tonal result, I come to the following conclusion: music which today is called “tonal” establishes a key relationship continuously or does so at least at the proper moment; but music which is today called “not tonal” never allows predominance of key relationships. The difference between the two methods is largely in the emphasis or non-emphasis on the tonality. We further conclude that the manner of composition of a piece abandoning tonality in the traditional sense must be different from that in which tonality is followed. From this angle tonality is seen as *one of the means* which facilitates the unifying comprehension of a thought and satisfies the feeling for form. But since this means alone does not achieve the goal, it may be said that tonality accomplishes but a part of the purpose. If the function of tonality be dispensed with, but the same consideration be given to unity and feeling of form, this effect must be achieved by some other function. Obviously music so contrived can hardly be easy to grasp. (Schönberg 1973, 21)

Dissonance does not *inherently* sound harsh or even dynamic. These moral qualities of dissonances depend on their tonal context. In a non-tonal context, dissonances can have a completely different meaning. Applying this perspecti-

val understanding of dissonance to Nietzsche's early account, we can derive the following conclusion: the unity of the opposites, the contradictory nature of reality and becoming, does not *inherently* entail suffering (it does not necessarily *mean* suffering or pain). If the dissonant nature of life *appears* in this way, this is because it is still heard in a particular context, namely, in a context in which, more or less explicitly, a central tonic core is still established and valued, in relation to which dissonance sounds like a challenge. In other words, Nietzsche's judgment that life is suffering (the bedrock of his tragic view of life) cannot be an *ontological* statement, it can only be a moral judgment, and this judgment can be meaningful only in a particular context in which identity (consonance) has been established or retained to some extent. In judging contradiction *painful*, Nietzsche betrays how much his *ear* has remained faithful to that same metaphysical way of interpreting reality that equates eternal being and goodness. This is in fact Nietzsche's own contradiction. While he acknowledges that everything is constructed and shaped by becoming, he still regards the phenomenon of suffering as belonging to the inner core of nature itself, without realizing that *even suffering must be a construction*. Nature has no inner core.

Notice, this does not mean that the contradiction of life is not real or merely a semblance, in the same way in which the simultaneous overlap between two different tones is not merely the semblance of two genuinely different tones resonating together. What is at stake is understanding this contradiction as a form of suffering. This is a further moral interpretation that mobilizes how the fact of contradiction is understood and lived by someone who experiences and feels it. The feeling of suffering can be only in the hearing of dissonance, not in the existence of dissonance as such. But feeling is not encoded in experience and Nietzsche would grant that it is dependent on its context. And yet, he does not recognize how he himself ends up assuming that suffering must ultimately be an inherent feature of reality. However, this latter point does not logically follow: reality can be contradictory, but this does not mean that it has to be perceived as suffering. The notion of 'dissonance' is meaningful only in relation to its opposite, 'consonance.' In talking about dissonance, Nietzsche still holds onto the idea of a fundamental consonance, which is surely frustrated and impossible to restore, and yet still longed for.

In holding this view, Nietzsche sides with Wagner's lion-attitude towards the self and its problem: he recognizes it, but he does not really manage to move beyond it. And this might explain why it is so difficult for Zarathustra to move towards the overhuman, despite his many efforts. We saw Zarathustra's initial despair when faced with the thought of eternal recurrence: he cannot accept and does not want to acknowledge that his struggle to create something new, to prepare the ground for the overhuman, will bring about the recurrence of his archenemy, the last man. This reveals that Zarathustra is still holding to a certain idea of what a human *should* be, of how human life *should* unfold. This 'should,' despite how much at odds it is with a traditional Christian 'should,' remains Zarathustra's (and Nietzsche's) nemesis, the pivot with respect to which the failure of fulfilling this project (the dissonance of it) can only sound painful. Since this 'should' cannot possibly be satisfied, its dissonance is inescapable and inescapably painful. Life is (i.e., sounds like) suffering.

This observation ties in with the role of the listener (experiencer) in understanding experience. Schönberg stresses that the difference between consonance and dissonance, and even between tonal and atonal music, is ultimately established by the capabilities of the listener to discern and disentangle complex relations between musical tones. Now it should be emphasized that listening (experiencing) not only entails normative demands and expectations, but also that such demands profoundly shape the whole perceptual process. It is not the case that one first perceives something, receives it in a neutral and non-judgmental way, and only afterwards decides how to assess it. Quite the contrary, one perceives what one is looking for, and perception itself is shaped by normative demands and expectations rooted in the perceiver's current concerns. To perceive something, one needs to have some sort of interest, and by pursuing that interest, the experience of perception takes place.<sup>111</sup>

In Lecture One, we discussed the enactive, autopoietic account in which living organisms continuously construct an interpretation of their world based on their needs. Perception is not a passive process of witnessing a pre-given

•• 111 As Spinoza would say, intellect and will, perception and judgment, cannot be divorced from one another, each idea always *simultaneously* entails the representation of a content (the perceptual aspect of it) and an affirmation or denial of some of its features (the normative aspect of it). See Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 2, propositions 48 and 49 (with scholia, see Spinoza 1985, 483-491).

world, but a complex way of enacting a world and playing within it. Any such playing is done for a purpose, because of some sort of stirring, need, urgency, curiosity, or interest. In the context of music, one listens to *music* rather than to any other sounds, because one is looking for that particular phenomenon in the field of auditory experience. If we take seriously the idea that perception is not a purely passive process that precedes any further assessment, but is directed, shaped, and oriented by normative demands, then it becomes clear that listening to music is not a matter of simply receiving sounds, but actively seeking in the experience of sound a certain kind of order or form of unity. This can be generalized to any experience in general, in which the broader form of this normative demand ordinarily concerns a way of mastering uncertainty and thus seeking in experience ways of enacting a self. Zarathustra took issue with this ordinary way of enacting selfhood, and yet his struggle to escape from it has to do with his reluctance to abandon a certain normative demand, *his own* normative demand.

Without a normative demand, perception would collapse and blur. The alternative to the ordinary normativity embedded in the experience of reality cannot be the absence of any normativity tout court. This would be equivalent to reverting to the project of anesthetic trance, finding in the shutting down of experience the solution to the difficulty of bearing with it. We saw why this route is blocked. The real alternative lies in a different way of looking at normativity as such and in ceasing to take it at face value, as something inherent, intrinsic, natural, encoded in things as they are, in reality as such. Zarathustra saw this point, or rather Life taught him this (Lecture Ten). And yet, he might not have been able to fully endorse this view. If one realizes that normativity itself is conditioned, uncertain, and constructed, then the demands that it can pose appear radically different. Any 'should' becomes a 'can' because there is no longer any inherent ground that could determine the necessity in virtue of which something must happen or be pursued. Justice and Necessity are the goddesses that guide Parmenides to discover the way of Being. But if one steps outside of this Parmenidean path, normativity itself must be regarded like any other aspect of experience: uncertain, conditional, constructed. If there is no normativity inherently encoded in the nature of reality (just as there is no inherent necessity for musical tones to be subordinated to a fundamental key),



then any disruption of that normativity cannot be understood (or heard) as painful. The normative demand remains, its disruption remains too, but its meaning is no longer that of the breaking of an oath or the failing of a duty. Normativity in fact becomes possibility; the ability to do, the power to create. Instead of seeking what one should be, one learns what one could enact. Zarathustra's ideal of the overhuman remains yoked to a normative demand about what *should* be brought about, also entailing a precise hierarchy of values and judgments about other available options (the overhuman is *better* than the last man, higher than nihilists of all sorts, and so forth). Zarathustra (and Nietzsche) does not seem able to let go of this hierarchization (he could not let it go without undermining his whole philosophical project), and in this respect, he fails to ultimately transcend the metaphysical worldview that he tries to escape from.

Schönberg's analysis allows us to see that, to sidestep the project of mastery, what is needed is not to define a different anthropological model (as Zarathustra attempted with his announce of the overhuman), but rather to reflect on the ways in which all models and normative demands can be disempowered in such a way as to give rise to unbinding freedom. The point is not to endorse the pseudo-duty of becoming fully human, a better human, or an overhuman. This is only a pseudo-duty, because there cannot be any duty encoded in something that is inherently contingent. If contingency is taken seriously, then no proper duty can be taken at face value, and all duties revert into possibilities, potentials for freedom. To articulate this point further, a confrontation with early Buddhist thought is revealing.

### 11.3 The Buddhist connection

The mid-nineteenth century was rich in philological efforts and curiosity towards what was then called 'The Orient.' Editions and translations of Indian and Eastern texts became more and more widely available to European readers. Schopenhauer was, among Western philosophers, one of the most enthusiastic about these sources. It is thus not surprising, given Schopenhauer's influence on him, to see Nietzsche mentioning Buddhist and Indian thought (especially Vedanta) throughout his works.

In taking up the relationship between Nietzsche's thought and Buddhism, four questions should be distinguished: (i) what did Nietzsche know and read about Buddhism (and possibly about which historical form of Buddhism)? (ii) How did Nietzsche engage with these sources, either in terms of positive influences he received or in terms of his reactions to them? (iii) What can be gained from a dialogue between Nietzsche's philosophy and the Buddhist teachings? Or more specifically (iv), assuming that we agree with Nietzsche's overall project of establishing a way of living and understanding reality that does not revert to metaphysical escapism, how can early Buddhist thought and practice offer indications of how we might reach this goal, perhaps complementary to, or along the direction pointed at by Nietzsche?

The first question is primarily historical and even, to some degree, philological. Although such a question is interesting, it will not be discussed in any details here. There are two monographs that focus on this topic: Freny Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism: Prolegomenon to a Comparative Study* (1981), and Robert Morrison, *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities* (1997).<sup>112</sup> They agree in that Nietzsche was arguably interested in the early emergence of Buddhism in reaction to the Brahmanical context (which we discussed in Lecture Six). He might have thus focused on the Pāli Theravāda tradition, even though later traditions (especially Tibetan Buddhism) were increasingly explored and discussed by his time. A more recent paper, by Thomas Brobjer (2004), surveys all written sources that witness Nietzsche's acquaintance with Indian philosophy. Brobjer suggests that Nietzsche's direct knowledge of Indian sources was in fact rather limited, and largely based on secondary scholarly presentations available to him, both through readings and through personal conversations. Among his interests, Buddhism does figure more prominently than other Indian views, although it would be hard to say that Nietzsche was a particularly profound connoisseur of historical Buddhist thought or ancient texts.

The second question is hermeneutical and asks about the sort of interpretation that Nietzsche developed of the form of Buddhism he was familiar with,

•• 112 For a comparative insightful review of both monographs, see Graham Parkes, 'Nietzsche and Early Buddhism' (2000).

and possibly why that interpretation came about, or what sorts of intellectual drives shaped it. The third and fourth questions are more systematic, since they concern the intellectual relation between Nietzsche's philosophy and the Buddha's teachings, as well as how Nietzsche himself actually interpreted them. All these questions receive an interesting treatment by Antoine Panaïoti, in his *Nietzsche and Buddhist Philosophy* (2013). Panaïoti frames his discussion around the issue of nihilism: how can we live in a world which does not have any inherent meaning? Panaïoti contends that a combination of Nietzsche and Buddhist philosophy can provide a viable ethical framework for addressing this issue.

Panaïoti's discussion proceeds in three steps. The first two chapters of his book explain how Nietzsche interpreted early Buddhism throughout his works. Nietzsche presents himself both as 'the Buddha of Europe' and as the 'Anti-Buddha.' This is because Nietzsche both praises certain aspects of Buddhist philosophy and rejects and criticizes others. He praises the Buddhist attempt to discard metaphysical delusions and dispense with the idea of an absolute Being or God and of a substantial soul. Nietzsche interprets the Buddha's teachings as fundamentally atheistic and sees them as a rejection of the Brahmanical quest for the (re)union between the soul and the ground of reality (*brahman*). The way the Buddha attempted to overcome the dominant metaphysical view of his time is understood as parallel to the way Nietzsche envisions his own task. However, Nietzsche also criticizes the Buddhist account for being unable to move beyond what Panaïoti calls 'descriptive pessimism.' 'Life is suffering,' Nietzsche hears from the Buddha, but then the Buddha does not seem to offer any remedy beyond the resort to a state of pure extinction and non-being, where all suffering (and in fact all experience) can simply cease, and one will be bothered no more. On this reading, the Buddha's teaching would be oriented to achieve a supreme anesthetic against the sorrow inherent in life, which he very well diagnosed. Nietzsche sees this solution as unviable, since it does not move beyond the traditional attitude of saying 'no' to the dissonance and painfulness of existence, and instead tries (like Christianity, in Nietzsche's view) to turn away from it, because it is too unbearable.

The one historical point that Panaïoti stresses in this connection is that Nietzsche's interpretation of both positive and negative features of Buddhism

is very much filtered through his reading and engagement with Schopenhauer (although it should be noted that Schopenhauer might not have been the only one to hold this interpretation of Buddhism, cf. Brobjer 2004):

it is patently obvious that Schopenhauer is the principal source for Nietzsche's philosophy of religion and, by extension, for his views concerning the nihilist mentality, the construction of the *wahre Welt*, Buddhism, etc. Nietzsche's idea that a tacit spirit of life-negation hides behind any ethical or religious quest for Being is a Schopenhauerian idea. When he claims that the desire for *unio mystica* has always been "the desire of the Buddhist for nothingness, *nirvāṇa*," or that "all pessimistic religions call nothingness God," Nietzsche is essentially presenting a rehashed version of Schopenhauer's philosophy of religion. More importantly, Nietzsche's idea that something like Buddhism (in this case Schopenhauer's thought itself) is what takes the place of Christianity once its theistic optimistic garb has been cast away is precisely Schopenhauer's position. [...] The source for the Schopenhauer-Buddhism rapprochement so central to Nietzsche's assessment of Buddhism is Schopenhauer's philosophy itself. It is on the basis of Schopenhauer's own self-understanding that Nietzsche interprets Christianity, Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Schopenhauer's philosophy as expressions of the same will to nothingness. And it is on this basis that he sees the Buddha's and Schopenhauer's ethics as two cases of the same passive nihilism. (Panaïoti 2013, 75-76)

At this point, Panaïoti enters the more comparative and systematic confrontation between Nietzsche and Buddhist thought, reflecting in particular on the attitude towards suffering (chapters 3 and 4) and the role of compassion (chapters 5 and 6). Both points are key issues on which Nietzsche and Buddhism *seem* opposed, and yet Panaïoti shows that in fact they are complementary.

Take, for example, suffering. We know that the gist of Nietzsche's approach is to proclaim a resounding 'yes' to suffering and embrace life in its full dissonance. This is the essence of the tragic stance towards existence, which is expanded by Zarathustra and culminates in the practice of construing eternal recurrence as a way of achieving *amor fati*, the ability of fully accepting the

whole spectrum of experience, including its most sorrowful and unbearable components. In Panaïoti's explanation of Nietzsche's view:

The healthy type's affirmation of suffering takes the form of embracing eternal recurrence in *amor fati*. At the prospect of a perpetual replay of one's entire existence, with all its sorrows and mistakes, eternal recurrence is the most brutal vision of the pessimism of strength. By embracing it, the healthy type overcomes the greatest of horrors and wipes away all traces of guilt. He says yes to all of life, and to all he was, is, and ever will be. In the form of eternal recurrence, becoming assumes the character of Being, or the God Dionysus, and the tragic healthy type "becomes what he is" as an enduring, fixed Self. It is through an ironical embrace of these deliberate and conscious fictions that the healthy type, qua artist, attains the highest health of *amor fati*. It is in this way that he goes beyond enduring and resigning himself to suffering, but embraces, affirms, celebrates, and wills it. (Panaïoti 2013, 130)

Turning to the Buddha's teaching, Panaïoti presents it as a healing practice aimed at removing a widely spread form of disease. The sort of suffering that the Buddha targets is not any painful feeling in general, but a particular domain of suffering that is the product of specific attitudes towards experience. Since these attitudes are based on a form of active delusion (where one actively supports false ideas and views about the nature of reality and experience), they are a form of sickness and removing the suffering they produce consists in nothing more than restoring a pristine form of psycho-physical health.

More specifically, Panaïoti stresses how the Buddha exposes the interplay between three psychological components: the attitude of 'thirsting' or craving for objects and even for the very constituents of experience (like feelings, thoughts, intentions, perceptions and so on), the attitude of 'appropriating' them as if one could genuinely control and claim ownership on these elements, and the pre-reflexive attitude of interpreting experience from the point of view of an 'ego-principle,' the assumption of some unitary and enduring 'self' that is the real ontological basis and main character in the drama of life. These three elements can be seen as constitutive of a particular form of disease, which Panaïoti explains as follows:

the infection of the ego-principle, the appropriation of the constituents by the performing self, and the fever of thirsting are related. The process of “I”-making at the heart of the ego-principle is analogous to a process of combustion. The sense of being a unitary enduring self is generated and maintained in the same way as a flame is: namely, by feeding off the psycho-physical “fuel” which it “appropriates” in the process of combustion/identification. If the fire analogy is translated back into the medical discourse, it becomes possible to describe “appropriation” as a vast inflammation of the entire psycho-physical apparatus. It is by virtue of this inflammation that mental and physical events are “fuel” for the fire of identification via appropriation. The sense of “self,” in turn, arises in so far as the mind and body are thus inflamed. As for the burning fever of thirsting, it is consequent upon the inflammation of appropriation. The mind and body are “inflamed” as a result of the infection of the ego-principle, and by virtue of this inflammation there arises the fiery fever of thirsting. (Panaïoti 2013, 139)

This disease based on thirsting-appropriating-selfying has far reaching ontological and metaphysical implications. It entails a substantialist view of objects, according to which reality and experience is made up of relatively discrete and self-standing ontological units, endowed with a relative degree of stability and permanence, and is hence susceptible to be approached as potential prey for one’s own craving or aversion. At the cosmological level, this metaphysical view escalates in the postulation of an ultimate reality, eternal, unchanging, in which all things ultimately abide. At the psychological level, the same properties of permanence and eternity are equally ascribed to the self.

Two remarks are in order at this point concerning the Buddhist understanding of suffering. First, as Panaïoti observes (2013, 134) the sort of suffering (Pāli *dukkha*) discussed in early Buddhist texts, the cessation of which is seen as the ultimate soteriological goal, do not include any form of painful feeling (Pāli *vedanā*) whatsoever. In various discourses (e.g., SN 36.6), it is stated that even fully awakened individuals do feel some pain. The Buddha himself is often presented as confronted with physical suffering (e.g., SN 1.38 and 4.13), and in his last years he was suffering from backache (e.g., MN 53). Moreover, insofar

as this sort of physical suffering (which includes pain caused by elements, fatigue, other animals, sickness and all sorts of circumstances that befall a human body) can be a hindrance to progress, the Buddha also advises us to tackle it with endurance and patience (MN 2). The sort of suffering that the Buddha invites to eradicate as unnecessary, on the other hand, is the suffering that arises in connection with *thirsting* (as we shall discuss in the next lecture at greater length), and which can be seen as a result of the way one interprets experience. It is the act of wanting things to be or not to be a certain way that makes them painful to bear, since their nature is uncertain and ultimately beyond one's control.

Although Panaioti does not elaborate on it, this point is crucial because it provides a Buddhist diagnosis of the limitations of the meditation on eternal recurrence. In Zarathustra's (and Nietzsche's) perspective, meditating on eternal recurrence is a way of coming to terms with and positively embracing the contradictory nature of life and of the will to power. Succeeding in this task means being able to want the whole of life, asserting life in its dissonant nature, including saying 'yes' to the suffering that comes with it. From a Buddhist perspective, there are two issues with this strategy. The first is one we already discussed in the first part of this lecture, namely, that suffering is not inherent in life, no more than a sense of aesthetic painfulness is inherent in a musical dissonance. Choosing to say 'yes' to the suffering of life presupposes seeing suffering as inherent in life. But in the Buddhist perspective, suffering is not inherent in life, it is a byproduct of thirsting. It arises due to conditions, and it can cease with the cessation of those conditions.

The second, related issue is that the will to power either remains a form of thirst (more specifically, thirst for existence, that is, thirst for asserting and wanting any form of existence), or it is overcome altogether. If the 'yes' said to life is a way of asserting the will to power above, despite, and through the recognition of the inevitability of suffering, then the will to power remains a form of craving for the full spectrum of existence and the full spectrum of possible ways in which life can take shape. As we shall discuss in greater detail in Lecture Twelve, it is precisely by this craving that the will to power produces that same suffering that it needs to accept as inherent in life, while it isn't. The problem that eternal recurrence tries to solve is not a problem that arises from the struc-

ture of life, it is a problem created by the very structure of thirsting through which life is experienced. Hence, finding a superior way of asserting the will to power is not a way out from the problem, but rather a way of sustaining it indefinitely. However, insofar as embracing suffering and saying ‘yes’ to pain reduces aversion (and this seems to be the main point stressed by Nietzsche), then the meditation on eternal recurrence does indeed counter and diminish one’s alienation from life and one’s sense of dejection and disgust towards it. But the relief here comes from a reduction of aversion, namely, from a reduction of thirsting itself. Hence, eternal recurrence is successful in helping us come to terms with suffering insofar as, by diminishing the intensity of the will (thirsting) it diminishes the intensity of the suffering produced by it. Eternal recurrence is successful not because it asserts the power of the will to create, but because it reduces the will’s desire for something else or something different (which is most likely how ancient Stoics understood the notion of *amor fati*). Neither Zarathustra nor Nietzsche acknowledge this mechanism, and perhaps this is precisely the reason why neither of them actually reaches the goal of the overhuman. We shall come back to the details of this Buddhist perspective in the upcoming two lectures.

The second remark about Panaioti’s reconstruction of Buddhist thought helps sharpen this point. He notices (2013, 134) that the kind of *dukkha* produced through interpreting experience in a certain way is a matter of perspective. An ordinary untrained person might not realize how pervasive this form of suffering is, and its full scope is clear only to advanced practitioners. This does not mean that advanced practitioners will suffer more, but rather that they have stopped relying on the forms of anesthetics (illusions, delusions, distractions, sensuality) that the ordinary person has to constantly use in order *not to see* their actual predicament. Ceasing to use this form of anesthetic is a crucial steppingstone for addressing the root problem of thirsting head-on. The point, for now, is that *dukkha* is not an ontological feature of reality (just as painfulness is not a natural feature of dissonance), but rather a conditioned component of experience, and most often results from the way experience is interpreted and from the sort of meaning that it is attributed to it. *Dukkha* itself is thus something constructed and sustained. Consequently, it is also something that can be deconstructed and abandoned. But life in itself is not inherently painful, nor is it inherently pleasant.



Feelings of pain or pleasure are just ways a sentient being faces and experiences reality based on their assumptions, views, and attitudes. Feelings express understanding. And one way of spelling out the core problem is by drawing attention to thirsting, which is primarily a practical and conative attitude, namely, an attitude towards manipulating contents and reacting to them in a certain way.

In Panaïoti's reading, the Buddha's treatment for the disease of thirsting is focused on the ability of first realizing and then experiencing that there is no enduring self at the core of one's life. Once the ego-principle is undermined, the inflammation of appropriation and thirsting will be deprived of its main support and thus will eventually end. In line with what we discussed in Lecture Two, Panaïoti also stresses that the undermining of the ego-principle does not amount to nor require a state of sheer depersonalization. Rather, he stresses how the Buddha or his fully accomplished disciples were in fact 'masters of irony.' As he explains:

The real problem with the activity of inward-directed grasping, or appropriation, is that the identity it delivers is not recognized to be a fabrication. If the self-delusion has all the pernicious effects on human psychology that Buddhist philosophy claims it has, it is because of the delusion that the fabricated, performed self is somehow real. The delusion lies not in constructing the self, but in taking it to be real, or unconstructed. The difference between the common person and Buddhist healthy types, then, is not that the latter have no sense of personal identity whatsoever, but that they are no longer deluded as regards this identity's fabricated status. A Buddhist healthy type who has recovered from the self-delusion could thus continue to perform a "self" for the sake of the functional integration of body and mind, but with full knowledge that this "self" is a construction. (Panaïoti 2013, 153-154)

On this interpretation, the Buddha's therapy is thus aimed at a specific (albeit widespread) form of sickness that ordinarily undermines human health and thus produces an equally specific form of suffering. However, the Buddha does not claim that 'life is suffering,' or that 'life is thirsting.' Life is just the unfolding of various related psychophysical processes. When these processes are affected by

thirsting and appropriation their unfolding takes a specific turn, which creates suffering within the horizon of experience that they define. The Buddha's teaching aims to remove this distortion and recover pristine health. There is nothing 'life-negating' in this approach, which in fact falls in line with Nietzsche's emphasis on recovering from debilitating sickness (often based on, and entrenched with, deluded views about reality and selfhood) and regaining full strength in one's attitude towards life. The sort of suffering that the Buddha aims to bring to an end to is a suffering constructed through a specific interpretation of experience. It is an unnecessary suffering, and yet the most painful one, since it is precisely the suffering indexed to a paranoid concern with 'me' and 'myself,' and hence the most personal, intimate, and serious suffering. Stopping this suffering is not different, in a Nietzschean perspective, from stopping the unhealthy attitude of *decadence* and *ressentiment* that lead to life-negation. What remains is just the ordinary degree of painfulness and sorrow that inevitably accompanies the fact of living a biological life, based on relatively fragile living and sensitive bodies. But once the interpretative suffering is relinquished, any remaining pain will be experienced with an entirely different meaning (no longer as 'my' pain, no longer as a curse or even the result of guilt), and this pain can thus be met as something to which one can say 'yes,' as witness to the inherently vulnerable and tragic constitution of human existence.

In reaching this ideal, both Nietzsche and the Buddha consider the attitude of compassion key. However, Nietzsche tends to see compassion as something that primarily needs to be *overcome*, while the Buddha sees it as something that naturally results from the abandonment of the ego-principle and therefore as a virtue to be developed. Panaïoti solves the contradiction between these two views by showing that the target of Nietzsche's critique is different from the sort of compassion (Pāli *karuṇā*) advocated by the Buddha. What Nietzsche criticizes is a form of bleeding-heart empathy and benevolence, concerned with denial of oneself for the sake of helping others, and crucially affected by sharing in others' suffering. Panaïoti stresses that Nietzsche sees this form of compassion as intrinsically connected with self-denial and thus with life-negation. Not being able to withstand the contradictory nature of life and being overly sensitive to pain and sorrow, the compassionate person attempts to escape this condition by getting rid of themselves and possibly of life. And, as

Schopenhauer also pointed out, self-denial can naturally lead to over-sensitivity towards others and their pain, resulting into a compassionate, selfless stance where one would do anything to alleviate others' sorrow. By elevating this form of compassion to a supreme value, moreover, the mentality of those who cannot bear the tragic nature of life (the *decadents*) is hypostatized as the actual model of a supreme good. In this way, the *decadent* manages to affirm their life-form and protect it.

Next to his critique of compassion, however, Nietzsche also introduces the idea of a different form of compassion, a 'compassion of strength,' which is the result of complete health, overflow of power, disinterested generosity, and life-affirming attitudes. The compassion of strength is therefore far from depressing and, on the contrary, constitutes a way of saying 'yes' to life. Panaïoti argues that this latter form of compassion is more akin to what is positively valued and cultivated in the Buddhist teaching. The key point is that the Buddha's own compassion does not involve thirsting and is not based on a deluded view of the self. Hence, it results in a natural overflow of goodness that emanates from the pick of health and strength that is proper of a fully accomplished individual. In fact, Buddhist compassion is an attitude of understanding towards others' suffering. Compassion sees that all the forms of suffering that constitute a genuine problem are only those forms of suffering produced by one's own deluded reactions of aversion and craving (thirsting, appropriation) towards feelings. These reactions are unnecessary (despite how binding and urgent they might appear), and hence the suffering they engender is entirely avoidable. Hence the wish: 'may all beings be relieved from suffering.' This wish is not a sheer hope, it arises from a profound understanding of the conditional structure of experience, and of the process by means of which its meaning is constructed and can be deconstructed.<sup>113</sup> This compassionate atti-

•• 113 For an account of how the topic of compassion is discussed in the Pāli canon, see Analāyo, *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation* (2015). Analāyo summarizes (p. 26): 'When faced with manifestations of *dukkha*, the early Buddhist compassionate response expresses itself in the positive wish for others to be free from affliction. This response ideally approaches such a situation by relying on the framework of the four noble truths. In practical terms this means seeing the conditions that have led to *dukkha* and those that lead out of it, as well as combining the vision of freedom from *dukkha* with an understanding of the practical path whose undertaking will make this vision come true.'

tude is not painful but rather supremely enjoyable in itself. So much so, that it is called a ‘divine abiding’ (or more properly, a Brahma-dwelling, *brahma-vihāra*). But for this attitude to be fully developed, Panaïoti argues, the sort of bleeding-heart compassion attacked by Nietzsche must also be overcome, since that attitude is itself part of the disease that the Buddhist therapy aims to heal.

In his conclusion, Panaïoti thus defends a hybrid view, based on the combination of Nietzsche and early Buddhist philosophy and aimed at ‘a perfectionist virtue ethics based on the ideal of an exalted healthy type’ (Panaïoti 2013, 218). This ideal is not aimed at asserting a substantive view of the good, but rather at ‘illness-removal,’ leaving it open how the good can be positively defined. Moreover, such an approach would not have a categorical imperative to offer as to why it should be practiced. It is rather developed as an option, a possibility, without accompanying moral obligations to implement it. This is precisely the point that emerged from the previous discussion of Schönberg. A full appreciation of the inherently conditional and relational nature of experience leads us to regard any dissonance (any potentially painful event) as just that, a dissonance, a feeling of pain. There is no *duty* to react to it in a certain way, nor any *duty* to avoid certain reactions. There are conditional relations: *if* one sustains aversion, pain will acquire the meaning of *suffering*, but if one abandons aversion, suffering will dissolve, and pain will no longer *mean* that there is a duty to face a certain problem.

Panaïoti’s interpretation is fascinating, but it reveals one blind spot: meditation practice. Not only does his account of Buddhist philosophy never mention the connection between Buddhist theory and actual Buddhist practice, but in developing his positive account he also seems to deliberately avoid the issue of *how* one can implement this hybrid Buddho-Nietzschean perfectionism in one’s own life. At one point, Panaïoti acknowledges that simply knowing the problems associated with self-view will not do, because ‘to overcome it requires a sustained effort and formidable discipline’ (Panaïoti 2013, 151). In his last pages, he also writes that ‘another element, particularly emphasized in Buddhism, is the actual analysis, in meditative practice, of one’s constructed identity’ (Panaïoti 2013, 228). This is pretty much all that he explicitly says about meditation. This systematic omission betrays a sort of embarrassment.

Panaïoti follows a quite established trend among Western philosophers who have tried to popularize Buddhist ideas among contemporary (mostly analytically oriented) academic audiences. They would admit that to understand Buddhist philosophy no particular meditation practice is needed. One reason for this attitude might be the problems we encountered in Lecture One. We briefly touched on how the very open-minded and well-disposed Varela, Thompson and Rosch struggled to actually frame what Buddhist meditation amounts to, and we saw that Thompson's reservation about today's mindfulness practice is shaped by contentious Buddhist modernist views.

It seems, therefore, that there is no straightforward, pre-digested 'Buddhist practice' that one can simply import into this discussion and implement straight away. Buddhist practice, like anything else, is also matter of interpretation and construction. Given the shape of our discussion so far, we have obtained a framework for assessing how a suitable Buddhist practice might look if it must fit the bill of Nietzsche's analysis. The two final lectures will take up this challenge and explain how this might work in detail.



# Lecture Twelve: Action

## 12.1 Introduction

Faced with uncertainty, the most obvious and natural reaction is to find a way to master it. In these lectures, we have explored some of the main strategies that can be developed for this purpose, and some of the problems that they entail. We observed how this attempt at mastering uncertainty is the source of the sense of self. The self is not a thing, something 'given' that can be pointed to. The self is something that is *done*, it is a way of acting, something that must be constantly enacted to be experienced. Since the self is a process, it also has a direction, a purpose: it aims at dealing with uncertainty and diminishing its threat, by controlling and managing insofar as that is possible. What is established as 'myself' is the result of this process: 'I am' all that has been rescued at this point from the tide of uncertainty. And depending on the strategy that one has adopted (depending on where one operates in the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self), the content that is rescued changes significantly. Perhaps it is just this fragile living body and its drives, perhaps one's embeddedness in a community, perhaps a pure intransitive awareness of nothing in particular, or perhaps something else.

However, no form of mastery can absolutely remove uncertainty. Uncertainty is the mark of conditionality, relationality, dependence. Only the Absolute (the Transcendent, Being, God, call it what you like) can be absolutely certain. But such an Absolute, being completely cut off from any sort of relation whatsoever (by definition), cannot be part of any experience either since experiencing involves being in relation with something. If the Absolute is, nobody could ever know anything about it, nor experience it, nor could the Absolute know anything or experience anything at all (as Plato's *Sophist* illustrates). If we remain faithful to relationality, if we resist the leap into imagining an escape towards an envisaged absolute reality, we are left here, on earth, amidst conditionality, in the domain of uncertainty (as Nietzsche demands). And since even mastery is a way of relating to the contents of experience, mastery too is conditional, and thus uncertain. Life on earth (and we could not really live anywhere else) is uncertain.

Uncertainty is a dissonance, a contradiction, a complexity, a dynamic. What is uncertain is not simple and static, identical to itself but is something on the



verge of becoming something else. What is present, could be absent; what exists in a certain kind of way, could be otherwise. At the most fundamental level, uncertainty is a denial of simplicity. What is simple is just in one way, it could be only *this*, it does not know difference or becoming. What is uncertain always exists in more than one way, it is *this* but it also carries within itself a promise (or a threat) of being or becoming something else. The attempt at mastering uncertainty always boils down to an attempt to defuse this complexity, either by stripping apart and keeping separate its components, or by establishing some hierarchy or order of priority among them. What is uncertain exists both in one way and in another, and is also neither. To avoid this dissonant contradiction, one needs to take a choice, to cut it in pieces, retain one and drop (or hide) the other. Mastery seeks simplicity, coherence, homogeneity, unity, consonance, certainty. But what if one drops the very endeavour of seeking mastery?

A contradiction sounds dissonant because it seems to bring together elements that repel one another, and yet neither can simply dominate or exclude the other. Mastery tries to adjudicate between them to dismiss their dissonance. What is retained will be appropriated as ‘me’ or ‘belonging to me’ and what is rejected will fall in the domain of the ‘other’ outside. Drop mastery and withstand the dissonance, look at the contradiction. It is impossible to adjudicate between one or the other pole, both are manifest, neither can be retained alone or dismissed altogether. The contradiction is meaningful, and yet its meaning is not reducible to any of its constituent elements. Withstand the contradiction as a contradiction, listen to the dissonance as a dissonance. You cannot dismiss what appears, despite its contradictory and dissonant appearing, because the effort of mastering it has been dropped. And yet you cannot identify with what appears either, you cannot be what appears, because its contradictory and dissonant appearing defies identity and identification. You are neither what appears, nor different from what appears. Not being what appears, you are something else. Not being different from what appears, you are not above, beyond, behind, elsewhere from what appears. If instead of trying to fix this paradox, you can face it, the effort of grasping at what you are will simply cease to make sense. When this happens, the problem of mastery, the problem of being oneself, vanishes. The sound of dissonance has no more struggle in it.

Over the last three lectures, we have explored Nietzsche's project of revamping a tragic culture. Tragedy can be one way of facing uncertainty without attempting to master or dissolve it. We noticed, though, that Nietzsche maintains that the dissonance and contradictoriness of life is inherently painful. The task, for him, is to find a way saying 'yes' to this pain, withstanding it without fleeing. But we also observed that a dissonance is not inherently painful. Pain and suffering are ways of experiencing contents under certain circumstances.

Nietzsche sees the contradiction of life as painful because he remains attached to a sense of duty towards a certain project; a certain way in which human beings should be. The overhuman points to how humanity *should* become, and this entails that the overhuman is at odds with other ways in which humanity could be and actually is. The overhuman is a way of solving a certain contradiction, an escape from it. Nietzsche's thought is important because it acknowledges that this attachment to duty is the problem. Nietzsche is lucid and sincere enough to tell himself that he should let go of all these '*shoulds*'. And yet, he can't, Zarathustra can't. He envisages something that he cannot reach. Why? Because he actually does not know *how* to abandon this fundamental restlessness that incessantly reminds 'you should do this, you should do that.' His best solution is the meditation on (the performative thought of) eternal recurrence. This weakens one's aversion to pain, and helps one to realize that wanting something new, inevitably sets in motion the conditions for the re-occurrence of the old, of what one was running away from. But you can't run away. Nietzsche's attitude is to bite the bullet and accept the possibility of creating *even if* what is created is something that will have to be overcome in due course. We can only give birth to someone doomed to die.

The eternal recurrence is the solution to a problem. The problem is how the will to power can genuinely create while it is also constantly determined and caged by its own past. From this perspective, the way the past conditions the will and limits its power to create is the ultimate form of uncertainty, since it is what makes any new creative act doomed to fail. Eternal recurrence is thus yet another way of mastering uncertainty, once uncertainty has been rephrased and reconceptualized from the point of view of the will to power. This is why the overhuman (the way of being human that is tempered in the understanding of eternal recurrence) remains a *should*, something that *must* be realized,

because the whole discussion is predicated on a soteriological view that seeks an escape from a certain condition (the imprisonment of the will in its own past) and thus necessarily ought to regard a certain condition as preferable against any other. For this reason, Nietzsche's project remains firmly within the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self (of mastering uncertainty) that we have mapped so far.

Nietzsche is aware of how traditional attempts to dismiss the contradictory nature of life by resorting to a metaphysical and transcendent God entail an emptying of the empirical self through some sort of anaesthetic process. He openly rejects this move, which is perhaps why he became more famous in the West as the preacher of the 'death of God.' But as we saw, Nietzsche also rejects the opposite pole of the spectrum, hard naturalism and materialism. Embracing life does not mean reducing human life to biological processes, although there is no human life without a biological ground. The sort of reductionist and materialist science that would explain the human predicament away by pointing to some physical-physiological cause plays the Socratic game of silencing dissonance or doing away with it. Nietzsche opts for the revamping of a tragic culture, which in our narrative stands in the middle of the spectrum, in the same range in which we encountered shamanism in small-scale societies, the struggles of the Vedic seers in ancient India, and the Dionysiac cults of classic Greece.

Nietzsche shared with all these and analogous instances the fascination for poietic practice, the ability to cultivate and use the power of imagination to create meaning. Leaving behind Plato's dismissal of imagination as something at best capable of creating copies of reality, Nietzsche joins the other players in the middle range of the spectrum in advocating for the use of imagination as a reality-builder, something that creates new ways of seeing, understanding, and living. But from the vantage point of our narrative, which has now explored to some extent the whole spectrum of possibilities, we can see that this solution is not a solution to the problem of selfhood as such (the paradox of mastery), but rather another way of making that problem apparent. Nietzsche rejects specific forms of enacting selfhood (the transcendent and the materialist one), but only for the sake of embracing the poietic one. And yet, all forms of selfhood are affected by the same flaw: they seek to achieve what

cannot possibly be achieved. It is thus not surprising that the over-human too shares the fate of remaining an ultimately unaccomplished project.

But why stick to a defence of selfhood at this point? If selfhood is entrenched with the mastery of uncertainty, and if mastery is foregone, selfhood can be relinquished as well. This means stepping outside of the spectrum altogether. Taking this step back is a delicate move, and it can go wrong in various ways. In Lectures One and Two we discussed how the relinquishment of selfhood can be conceived in such a way as to lead to some form of alienation from experience. This depends on conceiving of the relinquishment in ontological terms, as an issue of whether or not the self exists in its own right, if it is a genuine entity or just an illusion or epiphenomenon. Given the problems associated with this approach, a proper relinquishment of selfhood should not be conceived in terms of an ontological proof of the non-existence of the self. After all, if the self is something we *do*, the relinquishment of the self must be conceived as primarily a *practical* move, as a way of operating and dealing with experience such that selfhood is no longer needed or enacted. However, this option has dangers too. The non-enaction of selfhood can be understood as an absolute foregoing of all action, as a running away from the world towards some form of intransitive experience of the ultimate, or even just as a process of alienation of oneself from oneself. Any of these directions is problematic, not least because it fails to genuinely withstand uncertainty and dissonance. Seeing the self as a doomed project, one wants to get rid of it, *to be freed from its uncertainty*. Seeking this sort of dissolution of the self is thus still within the spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self; it comes with its own distinctive performative contradiction, but it is far from constituting a genuine relinquishing of the self (namely, a genuine overcoming of the very intention of mastering uncertainty).

In this lecture we shall explore how the early Buddhist teachings discuss the possibility of relinquishing the self. In particular, we will focus on the way this relinquishment is conceived in relation with uncertainty, and how it is rooted in a specific view of action. In the final lecture, we shall then look in greater detail at the sort of practice that is supposed to bring about this relinquishment.

But let's first begin with a few historical qualifications. Early Buddhism arises around the fifth century BCE in North-East India out of the teaching of an individual master, whose family name was Gotama. According to the tradition,

after six years of intense quest as a wandering ascetic (*samaṇa*), at the age of thirty-five, Gotama declared himself to have reached full awakening, and thus be a ‘Buddha.’ In relation to the sources discussed in Lecture Six, the Buddha was active somewhere in between the early *Upaniṣads* (which likely pre-date him) and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (which likely post-date him). As we saw, this was a period of socio-political, cultural, and intellectual effervescence, dominated by issues connected with ritualism, ascetism, and consociation, all of which are taken up and explored in original ways by the early Buddhist teachings. From the point of view of the Greek context covered in Lecture Seven, the historical Buddha might be roughly a contemporary of Parmenides and Aeschylus.

The teachings of the historical Buddha were first transmitted for three or four centuries through oral tradition only, very much like all other teachings in the Indian tradition, including the *Vēdas*. Various groups of reciters were entrusted with the duty of memorizing and preserving specific selections of discourses. It is reasonable to trust the reliability of this tradition, at least in its macroscopic dimension. Comparative studies on various surviving versions of the same discourses attributed to the Buddha show that, despite differentiations among various schools, there was a large overlap and agreement concerning the core teachings.<sup>114</sup> Controversies arose more explicitly at the level of the

•• 114 Considering the discourses themselves, see for instance Anālayo’s *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-Nikāya* (2011). Anālayo carefully collects the *Middle-length Discourses* as preserved in the Pāli canon with their parallel versions surviving in other traditions and languages, the largest part of which is preserved in Chinese translation. Anālayo stresses how the specificities of the Buddhist oral tradition (which differs from the Vedic one, for instance) naturally led to the introduction of variations, including the change in the sequential order of elements, and occasionally the osmosis between canonical and commentarial texts. Anālayo concludes (vol. 2, p. 888-891): ‘Radical changes would in fact have been difficult to implement practically, since this would have required influencing an oral tradition passed on communally by groups of reciters spread out over various parts of India. Such gradual change, reflecting changing circumstances and times, would have been nearly inevitable, given the nature of human memory and the specific characteristics of the early Buddhist oral transmission. Instances of change would at first probably have manifested in explanations given alongside the recital of a discourse. Over time, such a commentary could then have become so much a part of the oral tradition of the discourse to which it belonged that sections of it ended up becoming part of the discourse itself. [...] Discourses would have been recited with variations, with one detail becoming lost here and another detail being corrected there during a communal recitation, etc. With increasing geographical separation, the variations to be found would have increased correspondingly. [...] My comparative study of the *Majjhima-nikāya* discourses also shows that it would be a gross oversimplification if one were to side with one particular tradition as the more authentic one. [...] At the same time, rather than giving us a completely new picture of early Buddhism, what my comparative study of the parallels to the *Majjhima-nikāya* discourses yields is a reconfirmation of the essentials, with occasional divergence in details.’

scholastic commentaries developed within each school (what is known as *Abhidharma*, which flourished around the third century BCE).

The compilers of the discourses were already editing and organizing materials in a particular way. To some extent, it is possible to distinguish earlier and later aspects or elements not only among different discourses, but also within individual discourses. Moreover, memorization relied heavily on the use of standardized formulas (pericopes), and it is likely that this eventually led to the standardization of less common passages, and thus to a smoothing out of the corpus, if not to loss of information. While historians might continue to debate about the possibility of recovering the pristine teaching of the historical Buddha, we can leave aside this debate by simply taking as our interlocutor not the historical Buddha himself, but rather the literary character that is enacted in the discourses attributed to him, focusing in particular on the recension of these discourses preserved in the Pāli canon of the Theravāda tradition, which is agreed to be the most extensive surviving witness preserved in an ancient Indian language. Hence, from now on, any claim attributed to the Buddha will be attributed to the character of the Buddha that we encounter in the discourses preserved in the Pāli canon.

Despite the superficial uniformity, heterogeneity remains an irreducible aspect of the Pāli corpus of discourses. Its range spans from a mere diversity in phrasings of the same core insight, to a proper diversity of intended meanings. Often enough (e.g., SN 41.7), we encounter discussions of whether certain elements in the Buddha's teachings should be regarded as different both in phrasing and meaning, or only in phrasing but equivalent in meaning. One discourse (AN 4.180) mentions that various teachings were circulating as attributed to the Buddha himself, but that discourse encourages followers to check whichever teaching is thus presented with the established or received body of discourses already accepted. This suggests that (unsurprisingly) the problem of sorting out original from spurious teachings arose quite early. The potential heterogeneity of the historical materials also has a number of cultural and even political overtones, since depending on how one constructs the Buddha's teachings it is possible to see them more or less at odds with this or that Buddhist sect or tradition, or even claim that certain Buddhist lineages or groups drifted away from the original message or somehow corrupted it. As we discussed in

Lecture One, for instance, Buddhist modernism represents one way of constructing the Buddhist teachings, which is markedly different from other traditional interpretations.

Interpretation is not dispensable and there is no way of presenting ‘what the Buddha taught’ as a sheer historical fact, independent from any context, agenda, or pre-comprehension on the side of the interpreter. We inevitably see also what we want to see. What follows is thus a specific interpretation of the early Buddhist teachings preserved in the Pāli discourses, which aims at illustrating how the Buddha’s insistence on the relinquishment of selfhood can be understood as a way of withstanding uncertainty without aversion towards it. This interpretation is at odds with two other rival interpretations. One is the sort of Buddhist modernism that has been already discussed in Lecture One. The other is the attempt, among both historical approaches and today’s traditions and lineages, to construct the Buddha’s teaching as moving towards the transcendent pole of the spectrum we described.<sup>115</sup> The Buddha can be presented not only as operating within the broad project opened by the *Upaniṣads* (which is, historically speaking, quite accurate), but more specifically as roughly sharing their goal of moving towards a form of ontological transcendence (which is a more debatable interpretation). As we discussed in Lecture Eleven, this is how the Buddha’s teaching was introduced to Nietzsche by nineteenth-century scholars and why he rejected it. The following interpretation shows that it is possible to construct the Buddha’s teachings otherwise.

- 115 From a historical point of view, Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002), chapter 13 and 25, presents early Buddhism in the context of Indian movements that tended to reject traditional lore and develop more naturalistic accounts. The root of these movements would be represented by the Cārvāka school, later opposed by both Jains and Buddhist for its emphasis on determinism and fatalism (hence, no room for the individual to alter the course of rebirth based on their actions or ascetic practices). McEvilley then emphasizes how the ideal of ‘imperturbability’ gains traction among these schools and offers several parallels with a similar development among Hellenistic schools, Epicureans and Stoics in particular. As discussed in lecture two, a doctrine of *karma* seems at odds with a naturalistic outlook, at least as it is conceptualized by today’s Western philosophers. However, as we shall see in the following lecture, it is possible (i) to interpret early Buddhism by presenting its soteriological goal as aimed at a form of happiness that is based on a proper emendation of action, behavior and cognition; and (ii) to consider the early Buddhist engagement with the doctrine of *karma* in *polemical* terms, as a device needed to both steer neophytes in the direction of the right way of thinking, and react against the claims of other sects with which the Buddhist apologetics was competing. For a further philosophical and comparative discussion of the ideal of ‘dispassion’ in Buddhist, Stoic, and Eastern-Christian sources, see Jeremiah Carey, ‘Dispassion as an Ethical Ideal’ (2018).

## 12.2 No master

One of the most famous canonical discourses on the topic of selfhood is the ‘Discourse on the characteristics of non-self’ (*Anattā-lakkhaṇa-sutta*, SN 22.59). The discourses are often plotted using a matrix that combines a scheme of investigation with a given topology of items. For instance, one can take a certain property or quality, and investigate how it applies to a certain domain or range of phenomena. Table 1 provides a synoptic view of how this contemplative method is instantiated in the central section of the *Anattā-lakkhaṇa-sutta*.

<b>Topology:</b> \ <b>Scheme:</b>	<b>Uncertainty</b> ( <i>anicca</i> )	<b>Unsatisfactoriness</b> ( <i>dukkha</i> )	<b>Non-self</b> ( <i>anattā</i> )
<b>Physical form</b> ( <i>rūpa</i> )	Physical form is uncertain	Physical form is unsatisfactory	Physical form is non-self
<b>Hedonic feeling</b> ( <i>vedanā</i> )	Feelings are uncertain	Feelings are unsatisfactory	Feelings are non-self
<b>Perception/Recognition</b> ( <i>sañña</i> )	Perceptions are uncertain	Perceptions are unsatisfactory	Perceptions are non-self
<b>Coactions/Intentions</b> ( <i>saṅkhara</i> )	Coactions are uncertain	Coactions are unsatisfactory	Coactions are non-self
<b>Consciousness</b> ( <i>viññāṇa</i> )	Consciousness is uncertain	Consciousness is unsatisfactory	Consciousness is non-self

Table 1. The contemplative structure of the *Anattā-lakkhaṇa-sutta*.

In this discourse, the scheme of investigation is based on three characteristics: uncertainty (*anicca*), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-self (*an-attā*, *attā* is the Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit *ātman*, Self), which are applied to a fivefold domain: physical body (*rūpa*), hedonic feelings (*vedanā*), perceptions or recognitions (*sañña*), co-actions (*saṅkhara*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). This fivefold domain (the ‘five aggregates’) is a very common and pervasive topology used throughout the discourses to break down experience in its most relevant constitutive elements.<sup>116</sup> The discourse thus proceeds by exhausting all the possible permutations, namely, by applying the three char-

•• 116 See discussion in Rupert Gettin, ‘The Five Khandas: Their Treatment in the Nikāyas and Early Abhidharma’ (1986); and Jonardon Ganeri, *The Self* (2012), chapter 7.



acteristics to each of the five domains of investigation and reaching a similar conclusion in each case.

The Buddha's discussion of non-self can be understood in two main ways. On the one hand, it can be taken as an ontological theory about what the self is or is not, or whether there is something that could be called 'self' and what that is. On the other hand, non-self can be understood as a *perception* (belonging to the aggregate of *sañña*), namely, as a way of looking at phenomena for achieving a specific soteriological purpose: freedom. The underlying idea is that, ordinarily, all the five aggregates are appropriated as 'my own' or 'belonging to me.' This appropriation is an expression of a fundamental attitude at mastery exercised over the aggregates, which nonetheless are inherently uncertain. Uncovering this uncertainty thus reveals that the attempt to master them is the condition and source for the experience of dissatisfaction; and by realizing this, one can decide to let go of that attitude of appropriation and thus be free from any concern for mastery, by simply realizing that aggregates are 'not myself' and never were. In this latter case, non-self is *not* regarded as (delivering) a theory about selfhood, but rather as a practice of training perception.

In most of today's presentations, the first ontological approach seems the most commonly shared to the extent that it is often taken for granted. In Lecture Two, we discussed some of the problems that this interpretation might engender, insofar as it can be taken either to an extreme form of (neuro) nihilism or lead into a complex dispute about how to best conceptualize selfhood (as a process, as a composite phenomenon, and so forth). In what follows, we are going to take instead the second, pragmatic approach as the most adequate to capture the meaning of non-self in the early discourses. In doing so, we follow the interpretation that is still openly advocated in some branches of today's Theravāda tradition, and particularly by the Thai Forest tradition. An important representative of this lineage, Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, in his series of talks *Selves & Not-Self: The Buddhist Teaching on Anattā* (2011), summarizes the point thus:

The path begins with discernment—the factors of right view and right resolve—and discernment begins with this basic question about which actions are really skillful: “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare

and happiness?” The Buddha’s teaching on not-self—and his teaching on self—are, in part, answers to this question. To fit into this question, perceptions of self and perceptions of not-self are best viewed as kamma or actions: actions of identification and dis-identification. In the terms of the texts, the perception of self is called an action of “I-making” and “my-making (*ahaṃkāra mamaṃkāra*).” The perception of not-self is part of an activity called the “not-self contemplation (*anattānupassanā*).” Thus the question becomes: When is the perception of self a skillful action that leads to long-term welfare and happiness, when is the perception of not self a skillful action that leads to long-term welfare and happiness?

This is the reverse of the way that the relationship between questions of kamma and not-self are usually understood. If you’ve ever taken an introductory course on Buddhism, you’ve probably heard this question: “If there is no self, who does the kamma, who receives the results of kamma?” This understanding turns the teaching on not-self into a teaching on no self, and then takes no self as the framework and the teaching on kamma as something that doesn’t fit in the framework. But in the way the Buddha taught these topics, the teaching on kamma is the framework and the teaching of not-self fits into that framework as a type of action. In other words, assuming that there really are skillful and unskillful actions, what kind of action is the perception of self? What kind of action is the perception of not-self?

So, to repeat, the issue is not, “What is my true self?” but “What kind of perception of self is skillful and when is it skillful, what kind of perception of notself is skillful and when is it skillful?” (Thānissaro, 2011, 9).

This pragmatic perspective helps better elucidate the *Discourse on the characteristics of non-self*. The discourse is articulated into three parts. The first concerns the nature of *anattā*, the second introduces the three characteristics together, and the final section presents how this investigation leads to full liberation. Often enough, commentators tend to focus on the second part (synthesized in Table 1 above) without stressing that the first part provides a working definition of how *attā* should be understood, and the third illustrates the purpose for which one should practice this teaching. The goal of the Buddha in this discourse is not simply to assert that ‘there is no self’ (an ontological statement)

but rather to guide the audience towards a certain understanding, which requires, as a means of engendering deeper understanding, a specific way of dealing with *attā*.

The first part of the discourse reads:

Mendicants, form is non-self [*anattā*]. Mendicants, if form were self [*attā*], this form would not lead to affliction [*ābādhāya*], and it would be possible to obtain [*labbhetha*] from form: ‘Let my form be this way; let my form not be that way.’ But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to obtain from form: ‘Let my form be this way; let my form not be that way.’ (SN 22.59)

The same scheme is thus applied to the other four domains of hedonic feelings, perceptions, co-actions, and consciousness. Self (*attā*) is identified as the successful mastery of uncertainty. Uncertainty is here implied by the idea of affliction, which is something that is unwelcomed and contrary to one’s will. If I were my own body (or its master), I could prevent it from becoming afflicted. Notice that this assumption entails both the certainty of the result (I am master of what I can change according to my own wishes) and the avoidance of pain (I am master because I can be successful in avoiding what I do not want). Selfhood is thus mastery, and mastery is based on aversion to affliction. Affliction, in turn, has to do with a reality that is not configured the way I want it to be. Physical pain or illness is a clear instance of affliction, but painless aging might also be counted as an affliction, or even just any physical shape or appearance (being too tall, too short, too fat, too thin, too light, too dark—the list is endless) that I do not like to have, even if it is physically within the range of normality and health. Eventually, the sheer fact of being mortal, and having no say in my fate, is the more general affliction to which all living beings are bound.

The Buddha’s point is simple: mastery is never fulfilled; it always eventually fails. I can attempt to steer the body towards the state I wish to enjoy, but even if I succeed in this attempt, the result is only provisional, and that state will change. The reason is structural: since any state arises due to certain conditions (my steering, for instance), it is also something contingent (i.e., something that is not always present) that can be lost or fail to be instantiated at all. The very

fact that I need to bring the body into a certain state (say, avoid the affliction of hunger through eating some food) presupposes that the body cannot be always in a state of fulfilment (hunger will arise again, it is not eliminated from the nature of the body once and for all by my eating of a meal). Uncertainty is thus a structurally inherent component of any conditional experience.

Often, uncertainty (*anicca*) is glossed as ‘impermanence,’ which is understood as a rapid flow of becoming and change. But becoming and change are the *result* of structural uncertainty, nor their cause.<sup>117</sup> They are the symptom of something deeper: conditionality entails that all conditioned states are inherently unstable, regardless of how long they last. Uncertainty does not primarily concern or depend on the frequency or speed of change (i.e., how fast they become something else), but on the very nature of being relational and conditional. Hence, uncertainty is present even when no change seems to be at work. My health is uncertain even when I have no manifest illness, and yet my reality is to become sick at some point; illness is an inherent real possibility that will be actualized at some point just because being healthy *means* that one is such that illness can arise and health can be lost (AN 5.57).

On the basis of these considerations, *anattā* could thus be glossed more freely as ‘non-mastery.’ This suggestion is supported by the way the same argument is expanded on in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (‘The Shorter Discourse to Saccaka,’ MN 35). In this discourse, the Buddha challenges Agivessana, who holds that the five aggregates are ‘my self.’ Before demolishing this view, the Buddha asks Agivessana whether a king would be able to exercise full power on his own kingdom to execute, fine or banish those who are guilty. Agivessana responds in the affirmative. However, the Buddha swiftly points out that such a power is exactly what one does not have on any of the five aggregates: ‘What do you think, Agivessana? When you say: ‘Material form is my self,’ do you exercise

•• 117 Sometimes impermanence is explained in terms of ‘constant flux,’ a process of becoming in which states succeeds each other extremely rapidly, without retaining any identity. But this notion of ‘constant flux’ is conceptually flawed, since no diversity can be asserted without a degree of identity, and hence no change can take place without something enduring and remaining unchanged or at rest (absolute change is thus impossible). This is the point already well argued for by Plato in his doctrine of the five great kinds expounded in the *Sophist* (Lecture Eight). Ñāṇavīra Thera argued extensively against the traditional interpretation of *anicca* as ‘constant flux.’ See discussion in his Letter 12, 4 March 1964, and Letter 14, 2 May 1964, both to Mr. Wijerama, in *Clearing the Path* (2010), 167–182.

any such power over the material form as to say: ‘let my form be this way; let my form not be that way?’” (MN 35) Agivessana cannot assert this, since one cannot exercise absolute power on any of the five aggregates.

This conclusion can be interpreted in two ways. The first is ontological: it asserts that the aggregates are not myself. On this interpretation, it states something about their nature and my nature; something about what these things *are*. The second interpretation is pragmatic: it asserts that *the attitude* of mastery entailed by selfhood is not applicable to the aggregates, it does not work in practice and is doomed to fail. Now, while the positive attempt at mastering the aggregate easily leads to an ontological view of them as belonging (somehow) to oneself, the pragmatic attitude of foregoing mastery (*anattā*) does *not* entail an ontological view about who is the owner of the aggregates, or whether they *are* self or not. Since one is not acting as though one were a master, the further ontological problem of who this master *is* becomes meaningless. Hence, it is only from the point of view of an already established attitude of mastery that the ontological interpretation appears relevant. If I want to master something, I must be real, and I must exist in some relation with what I want to master, possibly I must be what I want to master, or be the owner of it, or it must be something that I can appropriate and dominate, and so on. The Buddha’s instruction, however, points in the opposite direction: if one recognizes that mastery is idle and best avoided, it does not matter who I am, what these things are, and whether they are me or mine in some way. These concerns can arise only if selfhood (mastery) is actively at stake, but this is precisely what is foregone when one practices *anattā*.

This is a crucial point in the discourses: talk about *being* or *existence* (what things *are*) is itself dependent and conditioned by an attitude of appropriation (*upādāna*). Things exist or are singled out as this or that *being* because I want to own them somehow. ‘Existence’ (*bhava* in Pāli) is not a primary notion, and even less a neutral notion. ‘Existence’ (as a notion) has a clear agenda built in it: carving up those elements of experience that are the focus of attitudes aimed at appropriating or mastering them. Ontology is a function of appropriation. And this is one reason why the five aggregates, for an ordinary person that has no training in the Buddha’s teaching, are considered as bound up with appropriation, they are ‘the five appropriated aggregates’

(*pañc-upādāna-k-khandhā*), and *because of that appropriation* they become a source of *dukkha* (SN 56.11).<sup>118</sup>

The second part of the discourse builds on this approach and connects non-mastery with the other two characteristics of uncertainty (*anicca*) and painfulness (*dukkha*). The basic scheme applied to the physical body (physical form, *rūpa*) runs as follows:

‘Mendicants, what do you think, is form certain or uncertain?’

‘Uncertain, Venerable.’

‘Is what is uncertain suffering or happiness?’

‘Suffering, Venerable.’

‘Is it clever [*kallam*] to regard what is uncertain, suffering, and subject to change thus: “This is mine, this I am, this is my self”?’

‘No, Venerable.’ (SN 22.59)

The Buddha’s questioning presupposes an audience already acquainted with the evidence of uncertainty. In fact, if one strives at mastery, this very attempt entails (at least implicitly) an awareness of the uncertainty of what one wants to master. Mastery makes sense only in a context of uncertainty (there would be no need for mastery with respect to an absolute and unchanging reality). Moreover, if one attempts to master uncertainty, this must be because one somehow realizes that uncertainty is painful and entails affliction. This realization can again be only implicit, and yet it is vital to justify the striving towards mastery. The Buddha’s questioning makes explicit the otherwise tacit premises in the audience’s attitude and then shows that mastery is the least effective strategy given those premises. If one truly appreciates that the body is inherently uncertain, it will be impossible to genuinely strive to mastering it. What is structurally uncertain cannot be mastered. What is by nature subject to change regardless of one’s wishes and wants, cannot be appropriated, dominated, or claimed as ‘my own’ because it simply escapes and ignores any claim of ownership whatsoever. This realization does not concern ontology but prac-

•• 118 See further discussion of this point in Andrea Sangiacomo, ‘The Meaning of Existence (*bhava*) in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha’ (2022).

tice. The Buddha asks whether it is ‘smart,’ whether ‘it makes sense’ (*kalla*) to attempt to master what one knows to be uncertain. Isn’t this attempt a blatant performative contradiction? Don’t you see it? Raising these doubts, the Buddha deconstructs the ontological story about the self as *being* the body, or owning the body, and reveals its practical idleness.

However, the argument takes a crucial step further. What is identified as ‘form’ is immediately associated with one’s own body but actually, even further, encompasses *any* experience whose content has to do with physical reality. The aggregate of form encompasses a wider range of possible phenomena, and all of them could also fall within the scope of mastery and appropriation. Once the problem with this approach has been noticed, the realization can be generalized as well. As the Buddha explains:

Hence, Mendicants, any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all form should be seen according to nature and with right wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ (SN 22.59)

‘This is not mine’ is a way of dismissing mastering, conceived of as (or based on) appropriation; ‘this I am not’ is a way of dismissing mastering conceived of as (or based on) an ontological view of identification with what is mastered. They are just different ways of phrasing the same concern for distinguishing what is secured as ‘self’ from what does not belong to the ‘self’ or is not equally secure. But the difference is untenable. ‘This is not my self’ is a way of expressing a *lack of concern* for the problem of mastery. One might gloss: ‘it is not my business trying to master this uncertainty.’

In Lecture Two, we discussed Ganeri’s distinction between various layers of selfhood, including the explicit *endorsement* of contents of experience. In his argument, the Buddha does not reject any endorsement whatsoever, but he contrasts the endorsement of *uncertainty* against the endorsement of *mastery*. The endorsement of uncertainty is the acknowledgment that this reality (this living body here, for instance), does belong to ‘my’ experience, namely, it is available to this same cognitive subject who is also reflecting on it. One might say that there is some form of selfhood operative at this level, but this form of

selfhood is just a bare ability to take a stance towards contents of experience. This selfhood, if one wants to call it that, is nothing but a perspectival construction from which a first-person perspective arises, and which is integral to the functioning of consciousness. But there is no substantive core associated with this kind of self. The endorsement of mastery, on the contrary, entails a more robust sense of selfhood, which emerges as the master of what is endorsed, along the lines of the king metaphor that the Buddha evokes with Agivessana, and entails taking that perspectival construction of first-person perspective at face value, as pointing to the existence of a real entity (myself) that operates as the ground of actions and cognition, and thus as its fundamental owner and controller.

The Buddha's argument can be reconstructed as a device that uses the endorsement of uncertainty (the direct and explicit acknowledgment that what is experienced here and right now is uncertain) in order to block, dislodge or disband the endorsement of mastery. Because this body here is uncertain, it cannot be mine; because I do see that this body that appears within my experience is uncertain, it makes no sense for me to become its alleged master, because it is clear already that this attempt is doomed to fail. In this way, the first-person perspective is used to flare up and eventually relinquish selfhood as a form of mastery. Selfhood emerges at the very rudimentary and basic level of experience as the bare ability to connect contents of experience with the field in which those contents appear (or as an awareness of that same field, if you like), but the awareness of their uncertainty prevents any further endorsement of that selfhood. If ordinary selfhood is based on mastery, then this result does not amount to any enactment of ordinary selfhood (although at a more refined level and using a broader notion of selfhood one might dispute that *some* minimal form of selfhood is at play).

Again, the Buddha's argument is not meant to provide a general theory of selfhood (what the self is, how it works, that constitutes it, and so forth). It is a specific practical tool for reflection, aimed at a specific target. The target is mastery of uncertainty, and the tool is aimed at making apparent its unviability. This leaves open the possibility of debating the ontological question of what selfhood is or how it could be best defined. But the ontological debate is left open because the Buddha's project is not concerned with it, and solving this



ontological question is not regarded as necessary, or even helpful, in addressing its more specific target. It does not matter what the nature of the self is, what matters is that mastery of uncertainty is impossible, and if one sees uncertainty, one already knows it. Enacting a self as a master of uncertainty is acting in bad faith, deluding oneself. The Buddha's discussion is just meant to bring this delusion forefront, make it explicit, and let it dissolve.

However, the purpose of the argument is not *just* that of letting go of mastery. This exercise is still propaedeutic for a further development, which is introduced as follows:

Mendicants, contemplating in this way, the instructed outstanding disciple is dispassionate with [*nibbindati*] form, feelings, perceptions, coactions, and consciousness. Through dispassion, he becomes dispassionate [*virajjati*]. Through dispassion, he is liberated [*virāgā vimuccati*]. Being liberated, he knows: 'liberated.' He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the training has been accomplished, what had to be done has been done, there is nothing more to this end.' (SN 22.59)

Disenchantment (*nibbindati*) means that what was previously transparent and hence invisible has become opaque. What in ordinary life is assumed as the default attitude towards experience (namely, appropriating the aggregates and mastering uncertainty) is seen in its own right and understood as a form of self-delusion. This makes it impossible to believe in its validity anymore, to the point out that the forms of appropriations and mastery that were predicated upon that assumption collapse, having being deprived of their basis. This form of disenchantment allows things to appear 'according to nature' (Pāli *yathābhūtam*) as originally and naturally belonging to nobody. All passions, concerns, worries, troubles connected with the attempt to defend anything in them that was appropriated as 'mine' against the tide of their own uncertainty becomes meaningless, hence, one becomes 'dispassionate.' Mastering is something that one does, doing requires intentionality, and intentionality requires motives. Dispassion is the dissolution of those motives that supported grasping. A feedback circle sustains the two: grasping is fueled by passions, which in turn are re-enacted through grasping; but disenchantment breaks the grasping, which

thus stop feeding back and supporting those passions from which grasping itself emerges.

According to the Buddha, it is dispassion that brings liberation. Liberation is liberation *from* grasping and appropriation, it depends and is experienced when grasping ceases. Again, this has little to do with ontology, it does not concern the sort of reality that one is or becomes. Liberation is also something that one *does* or enacts. One ceases to be compulsively attached to the idea of having to master uncertainty.

### 12.3 A middle way

In the discourses, the attainment of liberation is the supreme soteriological goal. This is not an easy feat to realize, although the discourses provide a quite optimistic view of the possibility of achieving it in this life (unlike earlier Brahmanical views that often tended to regard their notion of liberation as something to be fully achieved only at death). Since liberation is not liberation *from life* or from the world, it can be achieved while someone is still alive and living in the world. And yet, liberation entails a radical change in one's way of living in the world. The stock phrase used in the discourses to express one's realization of ultimate freedom is 'birth is destroyed.' Several layers of meaning surround this expression. For now, the most relevant has to do with the fact that 'birth' can be understood as the very act of personification through which one is acknowledged as a self. Birth is a 'state' or a 'condition' or more broadly 'a form of existence.' Birth encompasses and defines what a certain individual is, their identity. This is what happens when one refers to one's birth to make claims about descentance, social rank, or even profession and personal skills. Enacting mastery, one enacts a self, that is, one gives birth to oneself. 'Birth is destroyed' means that this process has stopped, mastery has been dropped, and there is no longer anyone that needs to be acknowledged as the master of this or that. There is no more state or form of existence to appropriate.

This interpretation of the practice of *anattā* is at odds with two alternative interpretations. A first alternative takes the Buddha's argument as mainly directly *against* the Upaniṣadic view. Assuming that an audience instructed in the sort of soteriology defended in the *Upaniṣads* would be seeking a true Self,

the Buddha shows that none of the constituent elements of reality fulfill these expectations, and thus that the expectation itself is ill-conceived.<sup>119</sup> On this reading, the Buddha would not reject selfhood in toto, but only the more specific and metaphysical view of the ‘true Self’ defended by Upaniṣadic sages, leaving for instance untouched the ‘empirical’ or ‘ordinary’ sense of self. The concern that seems to motivate this interpretation is twofold: acknowledging the contrast between the Buddha’s teaching and the rival teaching of the *Upaniṣads*,<sup>120</sup> but also avoiding the threat of alienation, depersonalization and nihilism that seem to follow from a full-scale denial of any form of selfhood altogether.

However, the problem is that no Upaniṣadic sage would seek the ‘true Self’ among what the Buddha presents as the five aggregates. It would be obvious to them that the physical form, for instance, is not the ‘true Self.’<sup>121</sup> More importantly, this interpretation makes the Buddha’s teaching quite limited in its validity and scope, since it presupposes that its main target is only a transcendent conception of selfhood. What goes under the rubric of an ‘ordinary’ or ‘empirical’ self is thus seen as unproblematic. And yet, it is precisely in this domain that mastery of uncertainty is more relevant and widespread. The discourses witness that the Buddha was equally concerned with materialist and hard naturalist views of the self that would reduce it to just the physical body, or to any specific life-form (cf. SN 56.11, Ud 3.10). After all, the first part of the discourse on non-self we discussed concerns bodily ‘afflictions’ that can well be understood and experienced in an entirely ordinary and non-transcend-

•• 119 See e.g. Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (2009), chapter 5.

120 For a more detailed historical discussion, see Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (2007). In his more recent article ‘Sariṭputta or Kāccana? A preliminary study of two early Buddhist philosophy of mind and meditation’ (2018), Wynne distinguishes between two trends in the philosophy of mind and meditation that surface in the discourses, one arguably connected with a more original teaching, the other with Upaniṣadic influences. The former trend would stress the importance of ‘bare attention’ or the ability to stop conceptualizing and to rest with experience as it simply manifests, while the latter is more concerned with reaching a state of intransitive consciousness via meditative absorption, or else knowing a pre-established object of insight.

121 Although this does not mean that the Buddha’s teaching did not also target explicitly the Upaniṣadic account of selfhood, most likely it did. The point at stake here is rather that a purely contextual explanation seems to miss an important part of the Buddha’s teaching. Concerning how the doctrine of the five aggregates might have been developed *also* in an attempt at countering Upaniṣadic views, see Alexander Wynne, ‘The Buddha’s ‘skill in means’ and the genesis of the five aggregate teaching’ (2010).

ent context—and it is in this context too that selfhood is enacted. If the Buddha's argument aims at countering the enaction of selfhood in *any* context of experience, it is hard to believe that he would see no problems with 'ordinary' or 'empirical' ways of enacting selfhood. They operate on another segment of the spectrum, but they are still part of the same project of mastery.

The second alternative is more radical and takes the Buddha's argument as an ontological claim about the fact that the self does not exist in any form. Not only there is no 'true Self' that transcends the aggregates, but there is also no 'immanent' self within them. The ordinary or empirical self is just an illusion.<sup>122</sup> This is the sort of view already encountered in Lectures One and Two. The problem with this interpretation is that it assumes that the Buddha's argument is an argument about *ontology*, about what is or is not there. In making this assumption, the interpretation also takes for granted that questions about being and existence are somehow more fundamental than any other questions. However, as we already noted, the ontological issues surrounding the self make sense only if the self is enacted—i.e., if a 'doing' is taking place. Without this doing, there is no point in asking whether the self exists or not, since its being *depends* on what is enacted. In other words, the Buddha's pragmatic approach reverses the relation between being and agency, by taking agency as more fundamental than being. Accordingly, ontological issues can only be derivative on pragmatic issues.

To sum up, the early Buddhist teaching on non-self can be interpreted as a pragmatic injunction to drop the attitude of mastery towards experience, as ultimately ill-conceived and eventually doomed to fail. When this attitude is

•• 122 Alexander Wynne, 'Early evidence for the 'no self' doctrine?' (2009) analyses SN 22.59 and its parallel versions from other traditions to establish a difference between an original pre-sectarian teaching of 'non-self' (none of the aggregates is 'self') and an ancient, yet later canonical development of a stronger reductionist view of 'no self' (the self as such does not exist). This shows that a certain tendency to interpret this teaching in a nihilist way (as a statement on the non-existence of the self) is as old as the Buddhist tradition. In a more extensive study ('The ātman and its negation. A conceptual and chronological analysis of early Buddhist thought,' 2010-2011), Wynne reviews most of the relevant discourses covering the issue of selfhood and personal identity, concluding that the earliest teachings in the discourses develop a 'philosophy of epistemological conditioning' according to which the very notions of existence and space-time need to be understood as constructed from the point of view of self-consciousness. Hence, the relinquishment of self-consciousness would lead one to transcend the very use of these *notions*, without this entailing any ontological statement because the very notion of 'existence' upon which any ontology rests is transcended as well.

dropped, the whole of experience undergoes a profound transformation. Grasping and appropriation are released, the loop of passions that supported them is disrupted, and the compulsion to be concerned with uncertainty ceases. One is freed. This scheme presupposes that selfhood and mastery are *actions*, and thus that the actual process of relinquishing selfhood depends on a different way of acting.<sup>123</sup> There must be conditions in virtue of which actions lead to enacting the self ('I-making'), but also conditions in virtue of which the self is no longer enacted, nor even needed. Distinguishing the two is at the core of the Buddha's teaching on action (*kamma*).

### 12.4 Action and rebirth

Although perhaps less famous than the claim of 'non-self,' a crucial tenet of the Buddha's teaching is that action (*kamma*) is based on intention (*cetanā*). This teaching has a clear and polemical historical context. From the Vedic period onwards, as discussed in Lecture Five, action (Sanskrit *karma*) was paradigmatically identified with the sacrifice. In the Brahmanical culture, the validity of a sacrifice came to be associated with a form of orthopraxis. A successful and effective sacrifice is one that is performed according to the right prescriptions in the right way. Since sacrifice is a physical operation, its validity might eventually be somehow dissociated from the intentions or the understanding of the performers (although ideally the two would go together). Against this tendency, the older *Upaniṣads* witness (as observed in Lecture Six) a sort of internalization and spiritualization of the sacrifice. The true sacrifice is performed 'within' one's own consciousness or understanding, and hence one's thoughts and attitude (including intention) becomes crucial. One output of this process surfaces in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, in which intentions become paramount for freedom.

The Buddha's teaching emerged during this evolution and likely contributed to it. On the one hand, the Buddha generalizes the notion of action, extending it to all sorts of doings and ways agency is expressed. Ritual sacri-

•• 123 For a further discussion of how the sense of self emerges from, and is related to, the process of appropriation (and how the extinguishment of appropriation is related to the experience of *nibbāna*), see Charles Fink, 'Clinging to Nothing: The Phenomenology and Metaphysics of *Upādāna* in Early Buddhism' (2015).

fices, for their part, become dispensable, as the Buddha does not formally recognize the authority of the *Vēdas* (hence Buddhism is considered ‘heretical’ from a traditionalist Brahminic point of view). At the same time, the Buddha counters both the traditional emphasis on orthopraxis and also the attention to physical actions paid by rival sects, like the Jains. For the Jains all actions harm other living beings, and this harm defiles the mind, even if the harm is unintentional. By contending that actions are primarily *intentions*, the Buddha seeks to establish a hierarchy among three main domains of actions: thoughts, speech, and body. Bodily actions are the more external and the more derivative, speech actions directly depend on thoughts, and thoughts define the core domain in which intentions arise. Unintentional harm caused by physical actions does not count as a defiling action, but all thoughts based on intentions of harm do count even if they do not result in physical actions. In this hierarchy, thoughts (and not physical actions) are the most important domain, since it is there that all forms of actions find their source.<sup>124</sup>

Historically speaking, the doctrine of action becomes associated with the idea of rebirth. As already mentioned in previous lectures, Gananath Obeyesekere, in his *Imagining Karma* (2002) has provided a comparative study of rebirth beliefs in various cultures and periods. He observed that rebirth doctrines are common in small-scale societies. At death, one travels back to the world of the forefather, where one stays for some time, and eventually is reborn again. Often there is a strong tendency to conceive of rebirth as happening within one’s own kinship, although rebirth in other animal realms is also possible. Although there is little textual evidence, it is plausible to admit that it was endorsed in the Vedic culture, as we discussed in Lecture Five. This basic rebirth structure can be further complexified through what Obeyesekere calls ‘ethicization.’ A first step of ethicization occurs when the afterlife destiny is determined by the moral quality of one’s actions during life. This often entails moving to a place of reward or punishment after death, where one stays for a certain time, which depends on the quality of one’s deeds. When this period is exhausted, one is ready to take a new birth, which provides one with a fresh start. Hence, the

•• 124 For a more detailed historical discussion of the Buddhist doctrine of *kamma* in its context, see Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (2009), chapters 3-4.

moral quality of one's actions during life has a direct impact on one's afterlife, but it is not directly linked with one's subsequent rebirth. Plato, for instance, endorsed this view. However, ethicization can be pushed a step further, and the very nature of one's rebirth can become dependent upon the quality of one's past actions. This presupposes that one's moral account is not periodically emptied after death or in the immediate afterlife period but affects one's journeying from one rebirth to the next.

The discourses of the Buddha witness this more elaborate account of rebirth as dependent upon the moral quality of actions. They also show that this doctrine was a matter of contention and various other sects disagreed about rebirth and its dependence on action. Today, the belief in rebirth is sometimes glossed over as something that the Buddha just inherited from his cultural context (entailing that it is not essential to his teaching and can be dropped without damage). But this seems historically misleading because the discourses of the Buddha are one of the oldest sources in which such a view receives a full-blown articulation. Even the oldest *Upaniṣads* provide only relatively scattered references to rebirth, and do not seem to support the two-step ethicized view defended by the Buddha. Moreover, the doctrine of rebirth is presented in the discourses themselves as surrounded by a wide range of alternative views and disputes (e.g., DN 2). As Ajahn Ṭhānissaro observes:

it's important to understand that, in teaching rebirth, the Buddha was not just adopting a cultural assumption from his time. Rebirth was a hot topic in ancient India. Some people argued that it did happen, others argued very strongly that it didn't, with the argument centering around how you defined what a person was, and then showing how what you were could or couldn't take birth.<sup>125</sup>

So when the Buddha was teaching rebirth, he was consciously taking sides on the issue. But he did it in a novel way. Instead of trying to define what does or doesn't take rebirth—things you can't even see—he talked

•• 125 Jonardon Ganeri, in his *The Concealed Art of the Soul* (2007), appendix B (pp. 223-228) provides a synthetic map of the relevant historical debate and how the Buddhist proposal would fit it.

about rebirth as a process that happens through clinging and craving: mental actions you can observe and can exert some control over.

Now, the Buddha never said that he could prove rebirth, but he did say that it's a useful working hypothesis—and for two reasons. One is that the practice will ultimately confirm that it is true; and, second, that it's useful for fostering skillful attitudes that help in developing the path. (Thānissaro 2011, 39)

Rebirth and its association with *kamma* are best understood as an essential *pedagogical* component of the Buddha's teaching. Here is how this intuition could be spelled out further.

In presenting his own key discovery, the Buddha often phrases it in terms of a middle path (Pāli *magga*) between two extremes. The 'Discourse on setting in motion the wheel of reality' (*Dhamma-cakka-pavattana-sutta*, SN 56.11) is regarded by the tradition as the first public speech of the Buddha and one of the most important canonical sources for the presentation of the Buddha's core insights, which are presented according to the scheme of the 'four noble truths.' Here, the middle path is framed as moving between indulgence in sensual pleasures (which is considered one extreme), and ascetic self-mortification (which is considered the opposite extreme). Sensual pleasures are commonly associated with the ordinary way of life, in which people mostly seek to maximize enjoyment for the sake of minimizing suffering and covering it up. Ascetic self-mortification encompasses a wide range of practices that were common among *samaṇā* at the time (Jains provide an instance) and that the Buddha himself tried out for some time in his quest for awakening. Both these extremes are *prima facie* concerned with ways of living this current life, but they are also associated with rebirth beliefs. The way of sensual pleasures can be connected with two attitudes: one is to seek a pleasant form of existence, in this life or in the next; the other is to maximize pleasure in this life, since there will be nothing else afterwards. The first option can be considered a more traditional view of rebirth, while the second might be associated with a form of naturalism (to use the terminology from Lecture Two), in which the person is reduced to the living body and is believed to be annihilated at death. The way of ascetic self-mortification is



instead aimed at gaining freedom from rebirth altogether through some form of purification (Jains consider that painful practices could support this goal), but also by ultimately stopping or switching off experience and ordinary selfhood. This includes the range of practices we discussed in Lecture Six, and which were connected with anesthetic trance.

The middle path presented by the Buddha is thus also a middle path between not just alternative ways of living, but alternative eschatological views about the afterlife. Seeking pleasure is consistent with both a belief in the survival of the self after death (traditional rebirth) and its annihilation at death (naturalism); while seeking self-mortification is consistent with both the idea of reaching a state of liberation in which the self is still present, but utterly purified (the Jain view, for instance), and one where it is ultimately extinguished in the intransitive experience of the true Self or ultimate reality (the Upaniṣadic view). Given this complexity, the Buddha sometimes rephrases the extremes between which his path travels not in terms of sensuality and self-mortification, but rather as the extremes of *existence* and *nonexistence* (SN 12.15, Ud 3.10). Seeking existence is the attitude of those who try to appropriate any state, condition, or life-form (material or immaterial), for the sake of maximizing pleasure and minimizing suffering. This attitude is built on an implicit commitment to the ontological reality of the self that performs this appropriation and its survival after death. Traditional believers in rebirth, as well as ascetics seeking purification through suffering, would fall in this category. Seeking nonexistence is built instead on the view that the self is either identical with the body, and hence is annihilated at death (materialism), or that the ordinary self should be dissolved in order to reach the true Self (*Upaniṣads*).

In his discourse on the four noble truths (SN 56.11), the Buddha clearly unifies the attitudes of seeking pleasures, seeking existence, or seeking nonexistence under the common force of *thirst* (Pāli *taṇhā*), which is also identified as the force that sustains rebirth. In this context, the doctrine of rebirth has a *debunking* function with respect to the opposite extremes that the Buddha is targeting. On the one hand, against those who seek to acquire or appropriate a definite state of being or a life-form, the view of rebirth shows that no state whatsoever (including the most sublime and divine states) is genuinely certain or permanent. Since the only way of entering a state of existence is by *taking*

*birth* in it, any state of existence is something that arises at some point, and hence, is structurally doomed to cease as well. This is the most fundamental insight into the nature of uncertainty (*anicca*), which the same discourse spells out thus: ‘whatever has the reality of originating, all of that has the reality of ceasing’ (*yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbam taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ*, SN 56.11). On the other hand, against those who believe in annihilation or who seek to extinguish (annihilate) the ordinary self, rebirth shows that death or cessation of biological life is never ultimate and as long as thirst is active there is no escape from the round of rebirth.

This is why the Buddha can present thirst as both a conditioning condition for the origination of suffering and a conditioned condition that arises out of suffering. Thirst feeds back on itself. Any state of existence in which one has taken birth is subject to uncertainty, it is subject to change, to decay, and to death. This is the structural dissonance inherent in life. On the one hand, the Buddha goes along with a more widespread belief that thirst is the reason why one takes birth in the first place, and hence thirst can be regarded as the origin (the conditioning condition) of suffering (first noble truth).<sup>126</sup> On the other hand, though, thirst itself is a conative attitude aimed at reacting against suffering and escaping from it, seeking something better, or at least seeking distraction and anaesthesia. In this sense, thirst is thus also something that originates from that same structural suffering that always resonates in the background of any experience. Thirst and suffering co-condition each other and are co-originated.

The Buddha’s injunction is to *shift the focus of attention*. Instead of seeking the perfect form of existence, maximizing pleasure in this current life-form (under the assumption that there will be nothing after), or trying to annihilate the self instead, one should let go of thirst itself, stop it, abandon it. Faced with

•• 126 Already in the Vedic creation hymns discussed in Lecture Five there is a hint towards the idea that sensual desire (*kāma*) is the pivotal principle that leads to birth, differentiation, and eventually to death. In the Buddha’s presentation, thirst for sensual pleasures is only *one* facet of thirst, which is complemented by the more fundamental thirst for existence (any form of existence or experience whatsoever) and thirst for nonexistence (thirst for extinguishing experience completely). Hence, in the Buddhist perspective, the idea of practicing for the sake of extinguishing the empirical self falls in the scope of thirst for nonexistence, while practicing for the sake of recovering an eternal Self falls in the scope of thirst for existence.

suffering, one should become able to withstand that suffering without the need, urgency, or even duty of escaping from it. By not fostering thirst, suffering itself will eventually fade away. A problem is such only because it is felt painfully, but if there is no aversion to this painful feeling, the feeling itself cannot be a problem. Hence the real problem is aversion (thirst), not feeling (suffering). That is the Buddha's stroke of genius. Don't look at what is in front of you, look rather at the pull that forces you to do what you do. And how can one achieve this cessation of thirst? This is the noble path (*maggā*) discovered by the Buddha. In developing this view, the Buddha also relativizes the opposite extremes of sensuality and self-mortification, existence and nonexistence. Ultimately, it does not matter which one is preferred, since they are all underpinned by the same structure based on thirst, and they are all relinquished when this structure is relinquished.

The Buddha's discovery is not just about the relation between thirst and suffering, but also about *how* one can break that relation. His discovery is the discovery not only of a truth (or a state of affairs, a fact), but also of a *path*, of a *practice*, of a way of living. In the discourse on the four noble truths, the path is articulated in its canonical form, which encompasses eight ingredients or factors. We shall discuss this in detail in the next lecture. For now, it is sufficient to remark that the path is both what originates in the cessation of thirst, and what fully realizes and deepens that same cessation. Again, we are confronted with a feedback loop: insofar as one manages to observe how the reduction of thirst leads to a reduction of suffering, in that same measure one is already practicing the Buddha's path; however, the more this practice becomes systematic, deliberate, profound, and well-articulated, the more that cessation of thirst and suffering will become equally profound and irreversible. Someone with musical talent might be naturally able to make some steps in learning music, but that natural talent can be taken to an entirely further level when cultivated methodically. The same applies to the Buddha's teachings.

Concerning the issue of rebirth, the Buddha exploits this view to block opposite extremes, which actually share a common root in thirst. First accepting a view about rebirth is strategically and pedagogically *necessary* for practicing the Buddha's teaching, because that view is necessary to counter one of the two alternative views that are most likely to be present: an annihilationist view,

or an eternalist view.<sup>127</sup> Providing a metaphysical explanation of why and how rebirth works is beside the point, although this did not prevent almost all Buddhist traditions and schools from developing their own accounts. Metaphysical speculations and schisms between different schools about this issue are only to be expected, as they occurred throughout the history of Buddhism.<sup>128</sup> However, for someone that is fully free from appropriation and mastery, there is no meaning in trying to say ‘this is mine, this I am’ and without this sort of appropriation any questions about what will happen to that person after the death of their body is meaningless. Freedom from rebirth is not achieved by reaching towards some state that will last forever, but rather by fully exploiting the transformative potential of this view, until it will be no longer needed and it is pos-

- • 127 In contemporary Western Buddhism, a growing trend consists in offering a ‘secularized’ version of the Buddha’s teaching, which dispenses completely with any references to the doctrine of *kamma* and rebirth. Stephen Batchelor, in his *Secular Buddhism. Imagining the Dharma in an Uncertain World* (2017) provides a good instance of how this can be developed. However, this approach has three main problems. First, hermeneutically or methodologically speaking, this form of secularization consists in distinguishing in the Pāli canon between an original core of teachings that are unique of the Buddha, from a broader background of views that the Buddha shared with his contemporaries. Secularism thus advocates for retaining the former while dropping the latter, and it happens that *kamma* and rebirth belong to what can be left behind. While one might try to distinguish elements that become apparent in the Buddhist teachings and that are absent or significantly different in their historical context, the idea of neatly detaching and separating the former from the latter is unwarranted. Ideas, views, and practices, cannot be carved up in such a way that they could survive independently from their shared background of meaning. We already discussed in Lecture Five an instance in which a tension might arise between commonality and emancipation, but it can be easily realized that no alleged ‘unique’ doctrine can be separated from its background without entirely losing its meaning. Second, from a historical point of view, as already pointed out, the doctrine of rebirth was far from an accepted and uncontroversial issue, it was rather a matter of enduring debate and dispute. Hence, in positioning himself in this debate, the Buddha could not be taken to simply endorse a received view, but rather he deliberately used it for his own purposes. Third, from a soteriological point of view, Batchelor still argues that awakening has to do with the extinction of greed, aversion, and ignorance, while this task is now undertaken for the sake of improving one’s current life on earth, without any concerns for what happens after death. The explicit assumption in this approach is that one *knows* (has a view) about what happens after death, namely, annihilation. But if one does not see the connection between the annihilationist view and the workings of greed, aversion, and ignorance, one is not seeing the essential point of the Buddha’s teaching, hence there is no practice for the purpose of awakening. This is why the belief in *kamma* and rebirth is presented as part of the *mundane right view* that is a necessary prerequisite for embarking in practice. Buddhist secularism seems blind to the way in which the annihilationist view supports those same attitudes of greed, aversion, and ignorance that practice aims at uprooting.

128 One relatively standard option defended already in the early *Abhidharma* is that there is no enduring subject that moves from one life to the next (no ‘soul’ or substantial self), but rather a continuation of the same stream of moments of consciousness that from one life ‘leaps’ into another, mostly based on the dominant impulses that are present at the moment of physical death.

sible to simply drop it. This is why freedom from ownership is also freedom from rebirth.

However, from a pedagogic point of view, the focus on rebirth draws attention to the domain of actions as the playground where everything else is decided. Thirst, after all, is a root of action. Rebirth thus serves also an immediate and pragmatic role: it serves to point out where actual practice genuinely begins, namely, in the careful observation and handling of intentions and actions.

### 12.5 Intentions and their basis

Intentions are not free-floating or spontaneously generated phenomena. Intentions are conditioned and depend on something else to arise. But instead of positing a unified and underpinning subject as the ground of intentionality, the Buddha distinguishes several conative attitudes that give rise to different forms of intentionality and thus of action and agency. In a standard account, recurrent across the discourses (e.g., AN 3.34), the Buddha distinguishes between two groups, each composed of three bases for action. On the one hand, we have greed (roughly synonymous for desire or lust for what is pleasant), aversion (the attitude of pushing back or get rid of what is unpleasant), and ignorance (the attempt at non-seeing or seeking distraction), while on the other hand, non-greed, non-aversion, and non-ignorance.

An intention is a drive aimed at bringing about a change, and this change results from the action that is performed. However, to bring about a change, it is necessary to acknowledge a certain state of affairs as present, judge it, and envisage an alternative state of affairs that the ensuing action aims to realize. The bases for action provide basic schemes for judging what is present and then envisioning what to do with it. This scheme integrates all the five aggregates we discussed above. Actions and intentions fit in the aggregate of co-actions (actions depend on conditions, they are co-acted). But their bases require consciousness and recognition (perception) of what is present, which in turn require a functioning sentient body living in a world of conscious experience. In this context, the hedonic feeling associated with experience is what determines the basic judgment about what is present.

Desire, aversion, and ignorance all anticipate a *pleasant* feeling as the result of the intentions they support. Desire directly aims at actualizing pleasant feelings. Aversion indirectly aims at the pleasant feeling that depends on the removal of an unpleasant feeling. Ignorance indirectly aims at the pleasant feeling that arises from the ability of ignoring what is neutral, and engage rather in what is desirable, or at least get rid of what is undesirable.

However, they also always engender a present *unpleasant* feeling at the time they elicit intention for something else. The very fact of desiring something pleasant entails that this pleasantness is currently felt as absent, and so desire entails the belief that something pleasant and desirable is lacking. Lacking a good is always experienced unpleasantly, and this experience is more intense in proportion to the intensity of the desire. The more one desires something, the more one feels the pain of not having what one desires. This unpleasantness is the primary fuel of desire itself. Similarly, the very fact of nurturing aversion for some currently present state one wants to get rid of entails that one must experience that content as unpleasant. Aversion magnifies the currently present unpleasant feelings and uses this as its own fuel for propelling actions aimed at removing those feelings via the removal of the contents associated with them. The stronger the aversion, the stronger the experience of currently present unpleasant feelings is amplified. Ignorance too has its own way of generating an unpleasant experience in the present, since it creates the need to filter out and ignoring all those contents that do not seem to be directly relevant for the pursuit of pleasure (desire) or the removal of unpleasantness (aversion). Since most contents in one's experience will be felt as neutral, most contents will have to be filtered out. Ignorance creates a pressure for sustaining a sort of tunnel vision focused only on what can generate pleasure or avoid pain, engendering a constant effort of ignoring the great majority of other contents of experience. This pressure and effort are themselves experienced unpleasantly, and it is because of this unpleasantness that the work of ignorance receives urgency and support.

Desire, aversion, and ignorance (directly or indirectly) seek the actualization of future pleasant feelings, but they engender the experience of unpleasant feelings in the present. Worse than this, they are structurally unable to obtain what they aim to obtain. Not only actions based on desire, but also aversion

and ignorance might simply fail to obtain the contents they wish to experience, but even when they formally succeed in obtaining that, their result is *not* a pleasant feeling. This is due to the very structure of intentionality.

Any content of intentionality is experienced as absent when the intention is elicited. Hence, the (direct or indirect) pleasantness associated with a certain content at the moment when the intention is elicited is nothing but an anticipation of pleasantness due to the basis of action (desire, aversion, ignorance). The pleasant feeling is currently absent, but it is promised by the basis as the (future) result of seeking a certain content. This means that the intended content itself is interpreted as being capable of bringing about pleasure *because* it is taken up by a certain basis of action and thus colored with its expectations. However, when the action is achieved and fulfilled, the expectation ceases, and hence the main motivation for interpreting that content as pleasant ceases as well. The content will then remain open to natural fluctuations in the feeling tones it might engender, but the specific pleasantness that was expected vanishes, since that pleasantness was never really inherent in the content, but only in the expectation that the basis of action induced towards that content. That envisaged pleasantness was always just that; something imagined, a fancy. The cessation of a pleasant feeling is always something unpleasant, hence the achievement of any action based on desire, aversion and ignorance entails an unpleasant feeling as its result (due to the cessation of the pleasantness associated with the expectation of fulfilling the action once that action is fulfilled). Not only does this threefold basis generate unpleasant feelings in the present, but even when the actions it supports are fully accomplished, the feeling associated with that result turns out to be unpleasant too.

Desire, aversion, and ignorance constitute the default basis for actions. However, they work by creating an unpleasant feeling in the present, and they result in another unpleasant feeling (even when they formally succeed in what they aim to obtain). One might wonder, then, how it is possible for living beings to remain locked in these bases for action without realizing their inherent unpleasantness. The solution is quite simple, and it is due to the perspective one takes, or rather to the transparency of the whole process.

If one does not realize what the structure of action is, it is hard to see that desire, aversion, and ignorance naturally create an unpleasant feeling in the

present and use it as fuel for propelling action. Without realizing the presence of this unpleasant feeling, the whole of experience remains focused on the expectation of the intended pleasant content. However, when the achievement of the intended action produces its inevitable unpleasant feeling, this unpleasant feeling is experienced as the presence of more fuel to push action further, repeat it, and strengthen it. In other words, the threefold basis creates a feedback loop based on unpleasantness. On the one hand, it sustains the expectation of getting a pleasant feeling, while on the other hand it actually generates unpleasant feelings that fuel the whole process. As the unpleasantness of desire, aversion, and ignorance remains transparent to one engaged with them (mostly due to the tunnel vision created by these attitudes), the unpleasantness of their results is also misinterpreted as simply the presence of more fuel for reinforcing the same attitudes further. One does not experience the achievement of what one desired as directly unpleasant, but rather feels the unpleasantness of having achieved one's desire as a motive for desiring even more, or something else.

Realizing that the mechanism of desire, aversion, and ignorance is fueled by unpleasant feelings shows how non-desire, non-aversion, and non-ignorance can provide an escape.<sup>129</sup> The principle at the core of this insight is again quite simple. Feelings are an interpretation of certain contents of experience. Feelings are not inherently attached to contents as intrinsic qualities. They arise out of the way contents are experienced and understood. Experience and its contents are dynamic, they unfold and change. Feelings often arise as an interpretation of how these changes in experience affect one's situation. The cessation of a painful feeling is usually experienced pleasantly, even if the content that is currently present might otherwise be neutral. The cessation of a pleasant feeling is usually experienced as painful, even if it might otherwise be experienced as pleasant or neutral. Any movement from neutral to more pleasant is itself pleasant, while any movement from neutral towards slightly painful is itself painful. This entails that any reduction of unpleasant feelings will be experienced as a relief and this relief will be interpreted (felt) as pleasant. This insight

•• 129 The focus of the present discussion is on the soteriological dimensions of the early Buddhist theory of action. For a discussion of how this theory can be interpreted from the point of view of today's Western philosophy category (especially in relation to virtue ethics vs. deontic ethics), see Charles Fink, 'The Cultivation of Virtue in Buddhist Ethics' (2013).



opens a new perspective for seeking happiness, since it envisages not only specific positive contents as potential sources for pleasant feelings, but also encompasses the *absence* of unpleasant feelings as a potential reservoir for generating pleasure born from relief.

As an alternative to the threefold basis of desire, aversion, and ignorance, the Buddha thus introduces another threefold basis for action, which is constituted by non-desire, non-aversion, and non-ignorance. This is still a basis for action in the sense that it provides the grounds for intentions to arise and be carried over. However, it functions in a way that leads to a progressive reduction of the currently default tendencies of desire, aversion, and ignorance. The key point here is to fully understand how a seemingly negative state like non-desire can produce anything positive like pleasantness.

As mentioned, the ordinary threefold basis both provides a criterion to determine the reasons why certain contents should be intentionally pursued or not, and it anticipates the currently absent feeling that should be actualized as result of action. The alternative threefold basis fulfills both these functions, but in a different way. The criteria for deciding which contents to pursue or not remains based on feelings of pleasures or neutrality as preferable to feelings of pain. However, this pleasure is interpreted as resulting from a relief from currently present unpleasant feelings. The anticipation concerns the fact that the future absence of currently present unpleasant feelings will be experienced as pleasant. Instead of anticipating something that is currently absent (a future pleasant feeling), the alternative threefold basis anticipates the absence of something that is currently present (a currently enduring unpleasant feeling) and interprets that absence as pleasant because of the relief it engenders. Moreover, the present unpleasant feeling is discerned within the ordinary threefold basis of desire, aversion, and ignorance, hence the anticipation of the absence of the current unpleasant feelings is perceived as the cessation of this threefold basis itself. Relief is entailed in the very perspective of not having to desire anything (in contrast with the habitual condition of being constantly pushed by craving for this or that), or the perspective of not having to get rid or counter anything (against the habitual irritability for anything that appears unpleasant), or the perspective of not having to filter out what is neutral in order to focus and hunt potential sources of pleasure (against the habitual

deliberate effort of ignoring anything that is not directly perceived as pleasant or unpleasant).

This alternative threefold basis (non-desire, non-aversion, non-ignorance) thus orients actions towards the actualization of relief from the workings of the ordinary threefold basis (desire, aversion, ignorance). In this way, the alternative threefold basis takes a step back from a direct engagement with particular contents (which are the main direct target of the ordinary threefold basis) and instead focuses on the way intentionality works, namely, it directly engages the habitual intentional patterns that shape one's habitual reactivity towards experience in general. The goal of action is no longer to actualize this or that content, but rather to actualize a lessening (at least) of the force of desire, aversion, and ignorance.<sup>130</sup>

The alternative threefold basis advocated by the Buddha entails a radical change of perspective and priorities. The working of intentionality itself comes to the fore and it is no longer assumed to be running automatically in the background of one's experience. Since desire, aversion, and ignorance become the direct target of this new form of intentionality, the main thrust of this approach relies on finding out ways of disempowering the habits and attitudes based on desire, aversion, and ignorance. These habits are ultimately the basis of intentional actions, but in their simplest form they can be conceived as ways of channeling and shaping attention, which in turn result in different perceptions. Attention can be understood as direct manifestation of the work of consciousness, which brings a certain content to the fore of one's experience. Attention (as consciousness) is conditioned by the structure of intentionality. When desire, aversion, and ignorance shape intentionality, contents become object of attention because of those characteristics that are attributed to them and that are interpreted as able to satisfy the attitudes of desire, aversion, and ignorance. Desire directs attention towards the pleasant characteristics of a certain object, aversion towards the unpleasant characteristics, ignorance turns away attention from the neutral characteristics. Hence, attention shapes perception.

•• 130 For further discussion of how this account of intentionality entails a reassessment of ordinary conceptions of happiness and how they relate to the problem of defining a good life, see Charles Fink, 'Better to Be a Renunciant: Buddhism, Happiness, and the Good Life,' *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 3, no. 2 (2013): 127-144.

A certain object is seen to be beautiful *because* it is an object of desire. It might seem that one desires something because that object is inherently beautiful. However, beauty is valuable only insofar as it is accompanied by pleasant feelings, since desire seeks pleasant feelings and understands beauty to be an occasion upon which experiences them or even a source of them. Beauty is desirable only because of the pleasantness that it is imputed to it. This imputation, however, could not take place outside of a basis of desire, since if one does not seek pleasure, then beauty is not necessarily a relevant characteristic to pay attention to. The same applies to aversion and ignorance.

The upshot is that, in its most fundamental expression, intentionality results in movements of attention and these movements shape how one perceives the contents of experience. Due to the ordinary threefold basis, perception is thus entirely shaped by the assumptions engrained in desire, aversion, and ignorance. One literally perceives what one's desire, aversion, and ignorance want them to perceive. The alternative threefold basis recommended by the Buddha seeks new ways of using attention that can disempower the ordinary threefold basis, and which will lead to a different way of perceiving what would be otherwise considered to be the same contents of experience. In practice, acting on the basis of non-desire, non-aversion, and non-ignorance means using attention in such a way as to promote perceptions that will lessen currently established patterns of desire, aversion, and ignorance. Clearly, this is not reducible to simply breaking certain habitual patterns (even if refraining and restraint might be part of this strategy), but actively encourage other alternative patterns that result in a lessening of unpleasant feelings generated by the ordinary threefold basis.

The discourses present multiple illustrations of how this process unfolds. On some occasions, the Buddha stresses the role of cultivating specific perceptions aimed at countering the ordinary threefold basis. For instance, deliberately seeing the 'repulsive in the non-repulsive' is a way of countering desire, while deliberately seeing the 'non-repulsive in the repulsive' is a way of countering aversion (e.g., AN 7.49). This working with perceptions is coupled with the cultivation of 'boundless thoughts,' usually encompassed by the standard fourfold practice of the 'divine dwellings.' Among the four divine dwellings, two (friendliness, *mettā*, and compassion, *karuṇā*) are directly aimed at countering

aversion, although they all work more or less indirectly against the three ordinary bases. The reason for focusing this practice on the countering of aversion first relates to the appreciation of how desire for enjoyment arises as a strategy for coping with the vicious circle created by unpleasantness and the further unpleasantness that arises out of aversion to unpleasantness (SN 36.6). For present purposes it is not necessary to get into the practical details of how these practices are carried out.<sup>131</sup> We shall consider some of the most salient points in the next Lecture.

We began this exploration of the Buddha's teaching on 'non-self' by drawing attention to its practical nature. The 'self' is something that is *done*, and is enacted for the sake of mastering uncertainty (*anicca*), which is experienced as painful. But this attempt is ultimately doomed to fail, since what is uncertain cannot be fully mastered. Now we can see that any attempt at mastering uncertainty is based on forms of desire, aversion, and ignorance. This means that the self emerges as a necessary byproduct of these intentional structures. But realizing the problems inherent in this approach, it is also possible to practice for the sake of relinquishing it, by abandoning desire, aversion, and ignorance for their opposite, namely, non-desire, non-aversion, and non-ignorance. This alternative threefold basis for action opens up the possibility of finding relief in the cessation of that particular form of painfulness and inflammation created by the structure of desire, aversion, and ignorance. As a result, the enactment of the self will also cease or its meaning be radically transformed. Instead of being a non-lucid dream or nightmare in which one is constantly struggling against the uncertainty of their own condition, it is possible to wake up and regard selfhood as a mask, as the character of a tragedy, but knowing that the mask is just that and that freedom lies in the ability of putting it down.

•• 131 About friendliness, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *An Introduction to Friendliness (mettā). Emotional Intelligence and Freedom in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha* (2022); about the malleability of perception, see Rob Burbea, *Seeing that Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising* (2014), chapter 19.

# Lecture Thirteen: Development

## 13.1 Introduction

Withstand uncertainty, listen to its dissonance, without trying to master it. Embracing uncertainty, one is confronted with a strange paradox. Since uncertainty is, by definition, unstable and contradictory, one cannot fully identify with it, nor claim ownership over it. And yet, by endorsing uncertainty, one is not alienated from it either. Uncertainty cannot bound or yoke anything, it creates no obligation, it makes no promises. In its contingency, uncertainty reveals how anything in experience is completely gratuitous, and valuable, since it could well not have been there at all. This is the bright side of uncertainty, which discloses a profound meaningfulness, an open-endedness that surrounds what appears like an aura of value, dignity, depth. Too concerned with mastering or managing uncertainty, the construction of selfhood misses this aura and covers it up. However, there is really nothing to fear in what is uncertain.

In the last lecture, we saw how a core aspect of early Buddhist teaching turns on the issue of selfhood, or rather of ‘non-mastery.’ The point is not ontological, it does not concern whether or not the self exists, or what its true nature is. The Buddha’s teaching is pragmatic, it points to the need to face uncertainty upfront, it helps us to acknowledge that any attempt at mastery is doomed to fail and end in frustration. Behind this strategy, there is a sophisticated account of action. Action depends on intentionality, but intentionality in turn is conditioned by different bases. The Buddha’s analysis distinguishes mainly between two sets of bases: desire, aversion, and ignorance constitute a triplet that gives rise to the struggle for mastery and the sense of self, while their negatives (non-desire, non-aversion, non-ignorance) lead to the opposite result. In a nutshell, the sort of training and practice that the Buddha recommends in the discourses is very much about substituting the first threefold basis with the second. As a result, one eventually ceases to enact selfhood, which means refraining from any attempt at mastering uncertainty.

Relinquishing this attempt does not entail that one is overwhelmed by uncertainty. On the contrary, Buddhist training aims at a condition of needlessness, patience, resistance, tolerance, contentment, self-sufficiency, and autonomy. Ultimately, it aims at unshakable freedom. One who tries to master uncertainty will never achieve this goal. In fact, they will never become a

master of anything. One who foregoes the attempt to master uncertainty can achieve this goal, they can reach fulfilment and constancy. As should be clear by now, this sort of training does not aim at reaching any particular state or content of experience. Unlike poetic practice, it does not aim at producing visions. Unlike anaesthetic trance, it does not aim at shutting down perception to generate an intransitive experience. Since both these aspects are elements of experience, they might be integrated in the training. However, the focus of practice remains on intentionality and its bases.

Here another paradox appears. Mastering uncertainty (enacting selfhood) is an attempt at exercising control over one's condition. One acknowledges uncertainty, sees the threat in it, and tries to defuse that threat. The problem is that what is uncertain is structurally unsuitable for being fully mastered. The Buddha's teaching is aimed at dissolving and letting go of the very attempt to master uncertainty. The training he presents does not consist in simply accepting things as they are, but requires a profound reshaping of intentionality at all levels of action (thought, speech, body). But isn't this yet another form of mastery?

To make this paradox more apparent, we could say that the Buddha's training aims at mastering the uncertainty of intentionality for the sake of (and in a way that leads to) eventually abandoning all mastery. This paradox has two consequences. The first is that, in the process of training, by attempting to master the uncertainty of intentionality, one will in fact enact a certain kind of selfhood. This is a strategic selfhood needed by practice, and its value is entirely instrumental. The fact that something is uncertain does not entail that it does not exist at all, and so uncertainty does not exclude some degree of limited control on events or conditions. The sort of selfhood enacted through practice takes stock of this limited degree of control and exploits it for the sake of relinquishing the need for control as such. The second consequence is that this attempt at mastering uncertainty is not aimed at actually achieving full mastery, but rather at exposing in its whole breadth and depth the impossibility of any mastery, and thus allowing a complete relinquishing of that very attempt.<sup>132</sup>

•• 132 Both these points are well discussed by Ajahn Thānissaro, *Selves & Nonselves* (2011), especially talks 5 and 7.

The ordinary attitude of mastery is mostly built on the assumption that uncertainty *can* be mastered, and hence that a self can be really established. In the Buddha's training, this attitude is reversed. A certain sense of self is enacted for the sake of exploring in a controlled, methodical, and deliberate way, the impossibility of genuinely obtaining full mastery over uncertainty, and thus realizing that mastery should be entirely abandoned. The Buddha's approach exposes the deluded presumption that is nestled in the ordinary way of confronting mastery as something that could or should be achieved. This presumption is one of the most profound problems in the whole issue of mastery, since it entails that the project of full mastery is something genuinely achievable. Only when this presumption is abandoned, because its impossibility becomes overwhelmingly apparent, can ultimate freedom from the project of mastery be gained. While mastery is a practical attitude (something one *does*), it inevitably relies on views and assumptions about what can be done. The Buddha's training aims at engaging in certain forms of acting for the sake of progressively clarifying the underpinning views that shape the understanding of action, by thus enabling the practitioner to expose those views that are ungrounded or untenable and to leave them behind.

How does one move in this direction? In the short *Nibbāna-pañhā-sutta* ('Question on Extinction,' SN 38.1), Sariputta, one of the foremost disciples of the Buddha, is asked precisely this question.

On one occasion, the excellent Sariputta was dwelling in the country of Magadha, near a village called Nalaka. Then, the renunciant Jambukhadako went to the excellent Sariputta. Having arrived, he exchanged greetings with him and then he set to one side. Once seated, the renunciant Jambukhadako said this to the excellent Sariputta:

'Friend Sariputta, they say: *extinction, extinction (nibbānam)*! Friend Sariputta, but what is this *extinction*?'

'My friend, the destruction of lust (*rāga*), aversion (*dosa*), and confusion (*moha*): this is called extinction.'

'Friend Sariputta, and is there a path (*maggo*), is there a way leading to (*paṭipadā*) the realization of this extinction?'

'My friend, there is a path indeed, there is a way leading to the realization of extinction!'



‘Friend Sariputta, and what is this path, what is this way leading to the realization of extinction?’

‘My friend, behold, this noble eightfold path (*ariyo atthangiko maggo*) is for the realization of extinction, that is: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right recollectedness, right composure. My friend, this is the path, this is the way leading to the realization of extinction.’

‘My friend, this is an excellent path, this is an excellent way leading to the realization of extinction! Friend Sariputta, this is enough for non-intoxication (*appamādāyā*)!’ (SN 38.1)

Extinction (Pāli *nibbāna*, Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*) is a soteriological ideal shared among ancient Indian seekers.<sup>133</sup> It plays with the metaphor of a fire going out. Insofar as fire is burning some fuel, it is attached to that fuel and bound to it. But when the burning ends, the fire itself is not annihilated, but rather reverts to a state of non-findability (according to the Indian view). That is, it cannot be located anywhere because it is simply unbound, free.<sup>134</sup> The first question that Jambukhadako asks Sariputta concerns how *nibbāna* is specifically understood by the disciples of the Buddha. Sariputta then replies that *nibbāna* does not concern a particular content of experience, but the overall context in which any experience unfolds, namely, a context in which the threefold basis of desire (lust), aversion, and ignorance (confusion) has been extinguished. These three are also interpreted metaphorically as ‘three fires’ in other discourses (e.g. SN 35.28, Ud 3.10). Next, Jambukhadako asks whether Sariputta knows a method, a path that leads to this condition. Notice, the issue is not whether some experience of freedom can arise spontaneously. On the contrary, the issue is how can one deliberately train oneself to reach the envisaged goal of extinction. Is there a *method*, is there a path that leads one to extinguish greed, aversion, and ignorance? The answer is positive, the path to freedom is the noble eightfold path.

•• 133 For instance, it is mentioned in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* 2.72 (transl. Feuerstein 2014, 117): ‘This is the brahmic state, O son-of-Prithā. Attaining this, [a person] is no [longer] deluded. Abiding therein also at the end-time [i.e. at death], he attains extinction in the world-ground (*brahma-nirvāṇa*).’

134 For a detailed examination of this metaphorical background, see Ajahn Ṭhāṇissaro, *The Mind like Fire Unbound. An Image in the Early Buddhist Discourses* (1993).

### 13.2 The noble eightfold path

The discourses offer several templates for articulating the basic practice they commend. One of the most canonical is the ‘noble eightfold path’ (*ariya atthaṅgika magga*), which will be the focus of the present discussion. In Lecture Twelve, we encountered the scheme of the eightfold path in the ‘Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of Reality’ (SN 56.11), as both the middle path between the opposite extremes of sensuality and self-mortification, and as the fourth noble truth. Note that the eightfold path is articulated into eight factors, the first of which is right view, which is usually spelled out as (some degree of) knowledge and understanding of the four noble truths. Hence, the two formulas (noble eightfold path, and four noble truths) are in fact contained in one another. The specific task associated with the fourth noble truth (and hence with the path) is to *develop* it. This involves practicing, deepening, and exploring whatever it potentially entails. In the discourses, the idea of development (Pāli *bhāvanā*) indicates what today would be translated as ‘meditation,’ although it will become immediately clear that the understanding of ‘meditation’ in the discourses encompasses all dimensions of lived experience and action.<sup>135</sup>

- 135 Often, development is associated with the development of *citta*. The Pāli words *citta* and *cetanā* derive from the same verb, *cinteti*, which means ‘to think, to understand.’ While *cetanā* can be rendered with ‘intention’ or ‘volition,’ *citta* is usually translated with ‘mind’ or even ‘heart,’ although it might be best interpreted as ‘understanding.’ There is an important connection between intentionality and understanding since one’s intentions are strictly linked with the way in which one understands and interprets experience. Vice versa, one’s current understanding shape one’s intentionality. For instance, on one occasion, the Buddha states: ‘Mendicants, this understanding (*cittam*) is bright (*pabhassaram*). And it is freed from adventitious intoxicants (*upakkilesehi*). A well-instructed noble disciple knows that according to nature. Hence, I say ‘for a well-instructed noble disciple there is development of the understanding (*cittabhāvanā*).’ (AN 1.51) ‘Development of the understanding’ is the way in which the discourses refer to the sort of practice taught by the Buddha. In Lecture One, we saw that that Buddhist practice does not consist in gaining some access to an inward theatre, and does not take for granted that introspective observation is reliable. In fact, the departing assumption in the discourses is that an ordinary person does *not* have an unbiased understanding of their own condition. The understanding is defiled by a number of factors that stain and hinder its ability to function and distort its vision. Training is thus conceived as a progressive uncovering and removal of these defilements. These are both cognitive and pragmatic factors, since they entail both a certain way of conceiving and regarding experience (a certain way of interpreting it), and specific ways of acting or intending. Cognitive and pragmatic dimensions are not just two separate sides of the same issue, but form an integrated and inextricable feedback loop. This becomes apparent in the unfolding and development of the eightfold path, in which epistemic and pragmatic dimensions are interwoven.

One way the process of development is spelled out in greater details is in the presentation of the ‘gradual training’ (e.g. DN 9, MN 27, 39 and 51), which is a scheme that illustrates how a disciple progresses from an initial act of conversion and resolve (usually expressed as a decision of abandoning the household life and becoming a mendicant) to final liberation.<sup>136</sup> However, it is important to appreciate that the noble eightfold path is a formula that expresses the essential ingredients of the Buddha’s recipe for freedom. The eightfold path is akin to a blueprint (or to use a more anachronistic metaphor, to the DNA) of Buddhist practice. *How* this is carried out, enacted, and instantiated is subject to several variations and adaptations. Yet, the formula of the eightfold path has a normative value, insofar as it allows one to assess any possible ways of practicing with respect to whether, and to what extent, they can genuinely be taken as moving in the direction of true freedom pointed out by the Buddha in the discourses.

In principle, any practice that allows one to develop the whole eightfold path, even if it is not explicitly discussed in the discourses, would still qualify as a way of practicing the Buddha’s path. The scheme of the gradual training, for instance, illustrates one way in which this development can be spelled out in greater detail. By contrast, any specific practice or technique that might have some form of (textual, traditional, or cultural) support in the Buddhist canon, and yet falls short of developing the whole path on its own, will have to be regarded as incomplete at best and misleading at worst. In focusing the present discussion on the eightfold path, we shall thus concentrate primarily on the essential core of early Buddhist practice, more than on its actual implementation.

It is very common in the discourses to express their teaching by playing with the heuristic potential of similes. This is glaring in the case of the noble eightfold *path*. The description of a *path* is a metaphor that has two main dimensions. On the one hand, it indicates a journey between two different locations or points, from the ordinary condition of the uninstructed worldling (this shore) to the ultimate liberation of a fully awakened being (the other shore). On the

•• 136 For a survey of how the scheme of the gradual training is presented in the discourses and in later commentarial tradition, see Rupert Gethin, ‘On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pāli Nikāyas and Exegetical Sources’ (2004). For an overview of the most common methods and approaches developed by various strands of the Theravāda tradition, see Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism. Teachings, History and Practices* (2013), chapter 11 (especially pp. 318-344).

other hand, this linear progression is made into a recursive cultivation of the eight factors of the path. The eight factors are not eight milestones, which one encounters by travelling from one to the next and by leaving the previous behind as one reaches farther. On the contrary, it is only by cultivating all of the eight factors simultaneously (to some extent at least) that one can travel the path from the near to the far shore. The eight factors are like the different positions that one's feet and legs need to take up as one takes subsequent steps and walks from the beginning to the end of the path. If one or more of these positions are skipped or unstable walking will become difficult or even impossible.

The metaphor of walking on a path has yet another soteriological overtone. The goal of the Buddha's teaching is to identify a dimension of 'unagitated' or 'unshakable' (Pāli *akuppa*) freedom (MN 30). This might be understood as the complete absence of any sense of duty. Instead of being concerned with having to take care of this or that, worrying about circumstances, or seeking to obtain or avoid specific contents or conditions, one is left with no duty and no work to do. For someone used to being constantly busy with tasks and concerns, this ideal of freedom might look identical to sheer inactivity. Here, once again, the scheme of the four noble truths helps dispel this worry. Assume that the third noble truth, the cessation of thirst, defines the goal that one should realize. How do you get there? By developing the eightfold path (fourth noble truth). *Prima facie*, the path is thus just a means of achieving a certain goal. But why does the eightfold path lead one to realizing the cessation of thirst? Because by walking the path (by practicing its eight factors), present thirst is countered, and future thirst is prevented from arising again. Walking the path actively leads to the cessation of thirst, and walking the path is an experience of how this cessation feels. The goal of cessation, therefore, is not outside of the path, somewhere else, so that it can be achieved only by stepping outside of the path. The goal of cessation is realized *within* the path itself, by walking on it. This might be one reason why the Buddha, in the 'Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of Reality' (SN 56.11) presents the path itself as his most important discovery, because it is *there* that true liberation takes place.

The simile of the path thus suggests that Buddhist practice is not carried out for the sake of achieving some definite state, in which one will be able to rest

eternally. Instead, it aims at delineating a *way of life*, a way of traversing this world in complete freedom, being entirely unconcerned, unpreoccupied, unagitated, and therefore at peace. As it is put in the discourses, the wise person is ‘one who walks the world in the right way / not longing for anything there’ (*sammā so loke iriyāno, na pīhetīdha kassaci*, Sn 4.15). The metaphor of the eightfold path explains how one can walk in this way. The path is also the goal of itself, insofar as it illustrates how a life free from duty and concern could unfold.

An analytical presentation of the eightfold path and its factors is the following:

Mendicants, and what is right view [1]? Mendicants, it is knowing that this is suffering, knowing the origin of suffering, knowing the cessation of suffering, knowing the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. Mendicants, this is called right view.

Mendicants, and what is right thought [2]? Mendicants, it is the thought of non-sensuality, the thought of non-ill-will, the thought of non-violence. Mendicants, this is called right thought.

Mendicants, and what is right speech [3]? Mendicants, it is refraining from false speech, refraining from malicious speech, refraining from frivolous speech. Mendicants, this is called right speech.

Mendicants, and what is right action [4]? Mendicants, it is refraining from killing, refraining from stealing, refraining from non-celibacy. Mendicants, this is called right action.

Mendicants, and what is right livelihood [5]? Here, Mendicants, a noble disciple having abandoned wrong livelihood, resolves to live a right livelihood. Mendicants, this is called right livelihood.

Mendicants, and what is right effort [6]? Here, Mendicants, a mendicant strives, supports the understanding, arouses energy, endeavours, generates desire for the non-arising of unarisen non-virtuous, bad realities, ... for the abandoning of arisen non-virtuous, bad realities, ... for the arising of unarisen virtuous realities, ... for the staying, non-confusion, growth, fructification, development, fulfilment of arisen virtuous realities.

Mendicants, and what is right recollection [7]? Here, Mendicants, a mendicant dwells observing the body as just a body; ardent, metacognitively

aware, endowed with recollection, having abandoned desire and discontent for the world; he dwells observing feelings as just feelings ... understanding as just understanding ... realities as just realities, ardent, meta-cognitively aware, endowed with recollection, having abandoned desire and discontent for the world. Mendicants, this is called right recollection.

Mendicants, and what is right composure [8]? Here, Mendicants, a mendicant, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from non-virtuous realities, having entered upon it, dwells in the first contemplation, which is accompanied by ascertainment and investigation, and by an enthusiastic pleasantness born from seclusion.

With the pacification of ascertainment and investigation, having entered upon it, he dwells in the second contemplation, with an enthusiastic pleasantness born from composure, without ascertainment and without investigation, with internal confidence and unification of the understanding.

With dispassion towards enthusiasm, having entered upon it, he dwells in the third contemplation, he dwells equanimous, recollecting and metacognitively aware, and he feels pleasure with the body, as the noble ones describe: ‘one who is equanimous and recollects dwells in pleasure.’

With the abandoning of both pleasure and pain, with the previous disappearance of joy and sadness, having entered upon it, he dwells in the fourth contemplation, without pain and pleasure, with recollection purified by equanimity. Mendicants, this is called right composure. (SN 45.8)

This text is a good example of how the discourses can move across different levels of complexity. One topic (the eightfold path) is articulated in eight factors (in the quote above, numbered from 1 to 8 in brackets), each of these factors is in turn articulated into other factors, which might be further analysed (often again in sets of four: [1] four truths, [6] four efforts, [7] four recollections, [8] four contemplations). For the sake of the current presentation, this structure will be unpacked in three stages, which correspond to another macro-formula that the tradition has superimposed on the eightfold path, namely, the threefold division of wisdom or right view (factor 1), moral virtue (factors 2-5), and composure (factors 6-8).

### 13.3 Right view

The first factor of the path, right view, can be spelled out in various ways. In one sense, right view can be defined with respect to its opposite, namely, wrong view. The latter is explained as follows:

Mendicants, and what is wrong view (*micchādiṭṭhī*)?

‘There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; there is neither this world, nor the other world; there is no mother, no father; no beings who are reborn spontaneously; in this world there are no fully accomplished renunciants and brahmins, who practice rightly, and who, having realized it for themselves through direct knowledge, declare this world and the other world.’ Mendicants, this is wrong view. (MN 117)

Wrong view is here presented as an ideology that denies any moral value, any idea of moral responsibility, and any acknowledgment that there might be human individuals who explored alternative ways of living and knowing, and more generally any possibility of transcending one’s current condition. In contemporary Western jargon, we could associate wrong view with what Nietzsche called ‘nihilism.’ Notice: wrong view includes a denial of the belief in *kamma* and rebirth. Holding on to wrong view, one would never have any reason to even think about giving an alternative shape to one’s life. Wrong view dismisses as meaningless the whole soteriological concern for finding an escape from ordinary life. This view is wrong, according to the discourses, because it denies what is actually the case: that there are moral values and a principle of moral responsibility, and that it is possible to transcend one’s current condition. For adherents of wrong view, their way of looking at life and reality is too far away from the Buddha’s teachings to make room for any fruitful discussion.

Within worldly views, however, there is also a *mundane right view*, which is the opposite of the wrong view just mentioned. Mundane right view affirms that there are moral values and responsibility, it acknowledges that certain individuals have explored alternative ways of living, and that transcending one’s condition is possible. A belief in *kamma* and rebirth constitutes an essen-

tial ingredient of mundane right view. As discussed in Lecture Twelve, this sort of ideology is propaedeutic for undertaking the Buddhist training, most likely because it brings attention to the importance of moral action, which entails some sensitivity to the problems engendered by desire and aversion.

But mundane right view is still affected by limitations. As the Buddha puts it: ‘Mendicants, this [mundane] right view has intoxicants (*āsava*), is concerned with meritorious deeds, results in appropriation’ (MN 117). The intoxicants are one of the ways that the discourses refer to the underlying factors that bias the worldly common attitude towards the world and reality. Mundane right view acknowledges the right set of values and is open for improvement, but the adherent to it is mostly concerned with getting something out of this, namely, performing something meritorious in order to gain a better form of existence, in this life or in future lives to come. Mundane right view remains blind to the fact that no form of existence, regardless of how lofty and divine it might be, escapes the basic problem that concerns all forms of existence, namely, their inherent dissonance and uncertainty.

Nonetheless, while wrong view makes it impossible to even hear the Buddha’s teaching, mundane right view makes one open to it. If one is seeking one’s genuine welfare and happiness, possibly in a long-term perspective (and even not just this present life, but also in lives to come), then the Buddha has something crucial to say: one’s true happiness and welfare cannot be found in moving from one existence to another, but rather in letting go of any appropriation of any form of existence and overcoming the very structure of selfhood and mastery that goes with appropriation. To take this further step, one needs to develop what is sometimes called *supramundane* (Pāli *lokuttara*) right view. While mundane right view is presented as shared by several other teachers and sects, and is not necessarily connected with the Buddha’s teachings, supramundane right view is based on a distinctive insight provided by the Buddha, which in turn sparks the actual training.

In the discourses, there are two common ways of presenting how an ordinary person can approach the teaching and develop supramundane right view: by faith or by investigation. One kind of person will be moved by faith, trust, inspiration, they might not fully understand the reasons why the Buddha teaches what he teaches, but they will decide to become followers out of faith



in him. Another kind of person, instead, will be able to grasp that the teaching put one's own experience in a new perspective, and that this perspective makes sense on its own. This is not because the Buddha says it, but because one can see that there is some inherent problem with the quest for always better forms of existence, and one begins to realize the impossibility for the ordinary way of life to leave behind the dissonance and unsatisfactoriness that any form of existence always entails. Despite this difference, faith and investigation are mutually supportive, and most likely one will need to develop both to some degree, sooner or later on the path. Nonetheless, they represent two different starting points for different character-types.

As previously mentioned, a standard formulation of supramundane right view is spelled out in terms of understanding the four noble truths: (i) suffering (*dukkha*); (ii) thirst (*taṇhā*), which is the originating condition of suffering, (iii) the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering which is entailed by the abandonment of thirst, and (iv) the eightfold path (*magga*) which leads to the cessation of suffering. These four 'truths' are perhaps better interpreted as 'things' since what they present is not propositional content or information that ought to accept. Their function is rather to direct attention to certain constitutive features of reality, certain states of affairs, or 'things' that one should carefully investigate. In turn, each of the four truths or 'things' is articulated into three phases (SN 56.11): (a) initial grasp, (b) development; (c) complete fruition. This threefold scheme thus needs to be applied to the topology of the four things, so that each of them can be explored fully: the first thing (*dukkha*) needs to be understood, the second thing (*taṇhā*) needs to be abandoned, the third thing (*nirodha*) needs to be realized, and the fourth thing (*magga*) needs to be developed. This suggests that supramundane right view is not something acquired at the beginning of the practice and then left unchanged. One might even see the whole path as nothing but a means of bringing right view from an initial grasp to its complete fruition. In any case, until this complete fruition is reached, one's understanding of right view will necessarily remain to some extent incomplete. Right view is a teaching about how one *learns* to see things rightly, step by step. It is the unfolding and deepening of understanding supported by a devoted training.

The four noble truths can be characterised as pointing out a fundamental alternative: if one cultivates thirsting for sensual pleasures and existence (second noble truth), one is bound to experience the dissatisfaction of existence (first noble truth); *but* if one relinquishes any thirsting for sensual pleasures and existence (third noble truth), one is freed from that same dissatisfaction. This reveals that at the very core of the four noble truths there is an implicit assumption: one is free to make a fundamental choice regarding how to handle intentionality, by deciding whether to go with the grain of thirst, or rather going against it. Freedom is the pivot around which the teaching turns, and also the ultimate goal that the teaching aims at disclosing.

The alternative between thirst and its cessation runs against the assumption that underpins mundane right view (and even more mundane wrong view), which dictates that, by craving for better existence (often spelled out as a more pleasurable existence), one will gain that better existence. The initial grasp of this alternative consists in taking it as a working hypothesis (because of faith or understanding) and genuinely try to test whether experience can confirm it or not. This means that one put effort into practicing the eightfold noble path (fourth noble truth), which runs against the mundane assumption, and one checks what the results are. The eightfold path is entirely centred on the attitudes of letting go, dispassion, renunciation, which are directly opposite to thirst and craving. If the mundane assumption is correct, then cultivating this path should be experienced as painful and depressing. If the Buddha is correct, then the cultivation of the path should result in increased tranquillity, ease, contentment, and freedom. If one experiences this latter result, then the initial working hypothesis is confirmed, at least to some extent, and one can begin to deepen one's own understanding of why and how it works.

The testing of the working hypothesis is not left to individual preferences. The eightfold path itself sets the method prescribed for conducting this test. This means that the first domain in which one should apply one's understanding of the four noble truths is the domain of moral conduct, covered by the next four factors of the path.

### 13.4 Establishing moral conduct

As mentioned in the previous lecture, the discourses distinguish between actions performed by thought, speech, and body. This threefold division is also applied to moral conduct. This order entails a hierarchy: actions by thought are more fundamental than actions by speech and body, since the latter are grounded in the former. Moral conduct extends into the grosser domain of physical acts, and the relatively subtler domain of speech acts, but they are both rooted in thought acts and intentions. By contrast, purifying intentionality leads naturally to a purification of speech and physical acts. In pedagogical terms, though, training usually begins from (or, at least, with a strong emphasis on) external physical acts, namely, with the grosser domain, easier to observe, but also the one more explicitly exposed to social interactions and feedback (which might be normatively essential, especially when training is taken up within a community).

The cultivation of moral conduct reveals some of the more apparent biases that affect ordinary behaviours and render an untrained understanding epistemically unreliable. The factor of right intention encompasses three attitudes: (i) non-sensuality, (ii) non-ill will, and (iii) non-violence. Their opposites are (i') the craving for acquiring objects or experiences for the sake of enjoying the sensual pleasure they might give; (ii') the attitude of malevolence towards others or oneself (like aversion, hatred, but also sadness, grief, depression); and (iii') the intention of deliberately harming other living beings or oneself. Right intention thus encapsulates the project of replacing the threefold basis of desire-aversion-ignorance with its opposite, as discussed in Lecture Twelve, but gives a stronger emphasis on the more explicit and apparent components of (non-)desire and (non-)aversion (the basis of ignorance is somehow already tackled by right view, which is the prerequisite for right intention).

The factor of right speech and right (physical) action move in the same direction. Stealing, killing, and malicious speech are necessarily based on intentions of aversion and greed. Cultivating these attitudes reinforces these bases for action, while having established the intention of foregoing these bases for action inevitably undermines any intention to act in these ways. In the context of the eightfold path, frivolous speech and non-celibacy also have a problem-

atic status since they are seen as an unnecessary form of indulgence into distraction and sensuality.

Right livelihood takes this practice to a more systematic level, shifting attention from individual actions to the whole framework or fabric in which these actions are interwoven. While occasional wrong actions might inevitably occur, certain ways of living (including killing animals, working as a soldier, or trading in drugs) are inherently bound to rely on *wrong* intentions, and hence they inevitably have to be abandoned if one is committed to travelling the eightfold path.<sup>137</sup>

The cultivation of moral conduct consists, to a significant degree, in restraining or refraining from intentionally acting in certain ways by thought, speech, and body. This practice entails a purely negative component, in which one simply drops certain acts or habits, but it also reveals a more positive component, in which one develops new ways of acting and intending. For instance, non-sensuality opens up the possibility of cultivating the wholesome pleasure of composure, while non-ill will and non-violence are the spark that leads one to develop attitudes of friendliness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), which are two of the four divine abidings, thus called for the exquisite experience they offer. From a worldly perspective, the cultivation of moral conduct might appear as leading to a life of deprivation, grief and sadness. However, in actual practice, moral conduct is an immense resource of brightness and joy, and for this reason the discourses recommend, praise, and encourage it.

This can offer a first positive testing of right view. The result of relinquishing the grosser forms of thirst and craving at the level of moral conduct results in an increase in ease and contentment, which is the opposite of what any mundane view would expect. To take this test one step further, one needs then to focus more directly on the thought processes that shape one's way of understanding and experiencing reality. This is covered by the last three factors of the eightfold path. Notice, however, that this progression consists in a sort of

•• 137 MN 117 provides only a few suggestions about what a wrong livelihood might entail, dealing mostly with the point of view of an ordained disciple who seeks the wrong means for obtaining their requisites. AN 5.177 illustrates wrong livelihood with any profession that entails having to deal with weapons, meat (i.e. killing animals), and intoxicating substances. In general, wrong livelihood is any form of livelihood that will lead one to break moral precepts.

internalization of a cognitive and pragmatic pattern that is first instantiated in the domain of external (and thus socialized) actions. As mentioned in Lecture One, ancient Buddhist training is far from private and solitary introspection, but rather a deliberate development and interiorization of certain schemes of actions and intentionality.<sup>138</sup>

### 13.5 Composure

Among the last three factors of the eightfold path, *sati* (‘recollection,’ more commonly translated as ‘mindfulness’) and *samādhi* (‘composure,’ more commonly translated as ‘concentration’) are probably the best known among today’s meditation practitioners, especially in the West, and perhaps they are those which are most commonly associated with how formal meditation practice is imagined. But the last three factors of the eightfold path (including the oft-neglected right effort) work in tandem. Composure indicates both the eighth factor of the path and the broader division that encompasses the last three factors together (including right effort and right recollection). This terminological stretch of the term signals that composure cannot be developed in isolation from recollection and effort, and when the latter two are properly developed they naturally result in composure. The following discussion aims at clarifying how this threefold articulation works in practice.

Right effort is the intentional and deliberate action of discriminating between two different kinds of realities: virtuous and non-virtuous. Here ‘virtuous’ is used as a translation of *kusala*, which has the double meaning of ‘wholesome’ (morally praiseworthy) and ‘skillful’ (in the sense of having mastery and being capable of performing something). This distinction illustrates how the internalization of moral practice (already established by the factors of right intention, speech, action, and livelihood) is carried within the interpretation of mental life (and this, in turn, gives a deeper meaning to outward moral practice).

•• 138 For a more detailed survey of how the discussion of moral conduct is interwoven in the whole gradual training, see Giuliano Giustarini, ‘The Interaction of Morality (*sīla*) with Cognitive Factors in the Pali Nikāyas’ (2017).

The discourses provide different lists for identifying virtuous realities and non-virtuous realities. One of the most common is the distinction (discussed in the previous Lecture) between actions based on desire or greed (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*), and ignorance or confusion (*moha*), and those rooted in attitudes of non-greed, non-aversion, non-ignorance. In the context of the eightfold path, a more elaborate classification opposes two sets of attitudes: the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening (e.g. SN 46.2), which are understood as the ‘heap of the unwholesome’ and the ‘heap of the wholesome’ respectively.

The hindrances are five forces that shape and distort intentionality and understanding, by hindering a clear and unbiased vision, but also imposing coactions. They are (i) sensual desire, (ii) ill-will, (iii) sloth and torpor, (iv) restlessness and worry, and (v) doubt. It is not difficult to see how the five hindrances are rooted in one or more of the three bases of desire, aversion, and ignorance. Half of the cultivation of right effort consists in discerning which hindrance is present and trying to abandon it, or (inclusively) discern which hindrances are not present and make an effort to prevent them from arising.

The seven factors of awakening, in their most developed form, are what leads to and then constitute a fully awakened understanding. They are (i) recollection, (ii) investigation of realities, (iii) energy, (iv) enthusiasm, (v) tranquility, (vi) composure, and (vii) equanimity. Notice the overlap between this list of awakening factors and other aspects mentioned in the eightfold path. Recollection and composure are both awakening factors (i and vi) and path factors (vii and viii). The awakening factor of energy (iii) is a component of path factor of right effort (vi). The awakening factor of investigation of realities (ii) is often spelled out as the ability to discern virtuous from non-virtuous realities, and thus would be part of right effort too, but it would also underpin the part of the path focusing on moral conduct (path factors ii-v). The awakening factor of enthusiasm (iv) appears among the factors of the first two contemplations in which right composure as a path-factor (viii) is spelled out. The awakening factor of equanimity (vii) is a feature of the third and fourth contemplation (path factor of composure, viii). This overlap is not unusual in the discourses and suggests different perspectives for looking at the same phenomena.

The second half of right effort involves the arising of previously absent awakening factors or the strengthening and full development of those that have

arisen. In this way, right effort might be summarized as the effort of replacing hindrances with awakening factors. Note again the scheme: (a) initial grasp, (b) development; (c) complete fruition. This pattern is key to the presentation of the four noble truths and recurs, with due mutations, in the presentation of the awakening factors.

*How* this cultivation of the awakening factors is performed is spelled out by the next two path factors: right recollection and right composure. The primary goal of right recollection is to recognize and remove the hindrances, while supporting the arising and development of the awakening factors. Recollection is often illustrated in the discourses through the metaphor of a gatekeeper (AN 7.67 and 10.95). Imagine a city surrounded by a wall, with only one entrance gate. The gatekeeper surveils the gate, keeps out those who are not welcome (the hindrances), and allows in those who are (the awakening factors). In actual practice, this entails four domains to which one needs to pay attention. The discourses (e.g., SN 45.8 quoted above) present them in the most natural order for practice (body, feeling, understanding, realities), but here it might be helpful to present them in the reverse order, which provides a better perspective from which to see the rationale behind the practice.

First, one has to recollect the kind of realities one is watching for. In the most extensive discourse on recollection practice, the ‘Discourse on the Establishments of Recollection’ (*Satipatthāna-sutta*, MN 10 and slightly longer in DN 22), there are several sets of realities that are mentioned, which include canonical ways of analyzing experience (including the five aggregates, the six sense bases, the four noble truths). However, these are all different ways of tackling the same issue, namely, the presence of non-virtuous realities and how to make them subside, coupled with attention to the seven awakening factors, and how to make them arise.

For this reason, the two most crucial sets are those focused on hindrances and awakening factors. One needs to know what they are, how they arise, what nourishes (or starves) them, and how to act in order to support the awakening factors instead of the hindrances. A common feature of all hindrances is that they manipulate attention in such a way to create a sort of tunnel-vision aimed at engaging with a certain object in a certain way (pursuing it, avoiding it, drifting away, worrying, and so forth). Further, the more this tunnel-vision

effect is established, the more the whole experience takes up a very personal flavor. This latter point means that any experience of sensual desire, for instance, is not the experience of an objective, impersonal, and neutral phenomenon happening somewhere and simply registered by an impartial observer. Watching hindrances is not like going on a safari in the savanna to watch lions, it is more like being dropped without protection in the lion's feeding ground. Sensual desire, for instance, is a call for 'me' to step into the drama of life, full of concern and struggle for what is lacking and I want. The stronger this identification with the hindrance, the stronger the sense of self as the main character of the unfolding tragedy becomes. But *this* process of identification is precisely what makes a hindrance a *hindrance*, since it hinders one's ability of recognizing the entirely gratuitous way in which this or that content of experience is appropriated and taken as a target for desire, for the sake of ultimately controlling it. Observing hindrances (realities) *as just* hindrances thus means learning how to step outside of this identification, recognizing its constructed and misleading nature, and seeing through it that what one is trying to attain or manipulate belongs to nobody and is naturally impersonal.

Since hindrances feed on attention (SN 46.2), resisting the hindrances and working to rescue resources they might have taken up means, in practice, regaining control over one's attention by withdrawing its unfolding from the pressure exercised by the hindrances and redirecting it in wholesome ways. By tackling attention, rather than the hindrances themselves, one can simultaneously de-personalize the hindrances and intervene at their root, without having to assume an overly adversarial attitude towards them. This practice clearly requires a subtle balancing between open observation and skilful intervention, which operates at the metacognitive level of one's awareness of how one's own attention works (or could work otherwise).

In turn, this approach reveals that the key for countering the hindrances without fuelling them as a side-effect, consists in recognizing that hindrances thrive primarily in the domain of intentionality (action and intention), rather than in the domain of feelings and perceptions. Hindrances arise with respect to a certain content of experience (which is perceived) as a way of engaging further with that content (and most often they contribute to shape its perception in turn). Countering the hindrances means first discerning the difference



between the experience of perceiving, *versus* the experience of reacting to (or being called into action by) what is perceived. When this discernment is sharp enough, one can thus counter the reflex to react to what is experienced (the hindrances themselves), without having to be bothered with the actual content that is experienced (perception).

The crucial focus of right recollection as a path-factor is not the domain of speech and physical actions (covered already by other path factors), but that of thought, or understanding (*citta*). Hindrances and awakening factors need to be recognized and dealt with for how they manifest at the level of thought, namely, for how they affect, perturb, or improve the quality of one's understanding. For this reason, the third domain of right recollection is 'observation of the understanding as just understanding.' Again, while ordinarily one fully identifies with one's understanding (especially when this is steered by greed, aversion, and ignorance), right recollection consists in remembering that even in this understanding there is nothing inherently personal. It is just the ability to understand experience. However, one cannot observe one's own understanding as if it were an object that one could find at display in an objective, external space. The understanding does not stay in front of one's eyes like an apple on a table. One's own experience of reality is already a product of one's understanding, which is thus operating in the background. For this reason, observing one's own understanding requires a more indirect approach; it requires observing how one's experience is coloured and shaped by specific attitudes. Among these, the discourses often focus on the presence or absence of greed, aversion, and ignorance, or to the degree of composure that one experiences. These are signs that certain hindrances are present or absent, or that certain awakening factors are absent or present. By recollecting these distinctions and applying them to one's current experience, one can thus monitor whether, and to what extent, hindrances or awakening factors are present or absent.

In turn, to discern these qualities of one's understanding, one cannot relate to them only through theory, since one is not dealing with something that is essentially different or separate from one's own way of looking at experience. The discourses then encourage us to observe how the present experience *feels*; how it is immediately perceived in terms of three fundamental hedonic tones: feeling pleasantly, feeling unpleasantly, feeling neutral. Hindrances always

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manifest in connection with some degree of unpleasant feeling (since they share the same mechanism of desire, aversion, and ignorance we discussed in Lecture Twelve), while awakening factors are free from unpleasant feelings (and therefore entail a degree of pleasantness). The feeling tone of one's experience is thus another immediate object of recollection because feelings provide the best marker to identify what kind of processes are taking place.

Eventually, most feelings, especially when hindrances are concerned, relate to the body in a way or another. Not only they are felt in the body, but they often are associated with how the body is experienced or perceived. Sensual desire is often associated with bodily images or other sensory stimulations. Ill-will often arises in connection with feelings of pain in the body. Sloth-and-torpor is heaviness in the body, while restlessness might manifest as the inability to keep the body at rest. Even doubt can have several bodily correlates, for instance the fact that one is no longer sure how to observe one's own body, or whether this whole practice makes sense anymore, and these states might manifest as contractions in the body or be felt by it. For this reason, the first domain of right recollection is the observation of the body. This is spelled out in different ways, each of which might be more appropriate or helpful in different circumstances, at different times, or for different people. Examples include recollecting the breath, or one's posture, observing how the body is composed of several parts, or reducing the experience of the body to the four great elements (earth-heaviness, water-density, fire-heat, air-motion). The discourses never take a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to developing understanding. In any of these cases, the body is taken as the broader context within which any other layer of experience unfolds. This context is both the most immediately and easily accessible, and the one in which one can discern the effects of the other layers (feelings, understanding, and realities).

To put together the practice of right recollection, one begins with the body, which works as a bait for the hindrances. If hindrances are going to manifest, their effects will be first reflected in one's experience of the body. The body is like the bait of a fisherman, sensitive to the way in which the fishes approach. Discerning feelings and the overall condition of the understanding, one can recollect whether what is going on is concerned with hindrances or awakening factors and take action accordingly.

When right recollection is practiced correctly, right composure is its natural result. Right composure is commonly spelled out in the discourses as the cultivation of four contemplations (Pāli *jhānā*). The first contemplation is established by enjoying and getting absorbed by the condition of the understanding when this is free from the hindrances (non-virtuous states) and aloof from sensuality. There is a sense of enthusiasm for the exquisite well-being that is felt when one experiences this condition. For this reason, accessing and dwelling in the first contemplation is an even more profound, and even life-changing, proof that the initial working hypothesis set out by right view is confirmed. One has moved a long way against the grain of the world, and what one discovers is not grief or depression, but the most wonderful experience one could have ever imagined. Right composure thus illustrates the broader principle that underpins much of what is presented in the discourses, namely, the *absence* of anything unwholesome (e.g., the hindrances) is positively felt as a present sense of freedom, pleasantness, and bliss (the joy of composure, for instance).<sup>139</sup>

Reaching the fourth contemplation involves a transition from a dynamic form of discriminative recollection (born of *sati* and *dhamma vicaya*, the first two awakening factors) that is practiced through examination and ascertainment of realities (*vitakka* and *vicara*), towards a non-discriminative form, which is the ‘purity of recollection through equanimity (*upekkhā-sati-pārisuddhiṃ*).’ The latter arises as the result of a verging of the whole of experience towards a feeling tone of neutrality, in which there is no longer any need to chase the pleasant or avoid the unpleasant.<sup>140</sup> This state of non-discrimination is not

•• 139 The four contemplations are a manifestation of the seven awakening factors. The first contemplation is mostly based on the most energetic factors (recollection, investigation, energy, joy), while the others shift gradually to the more peaceful ones (tranquillity, composure, equanimity). For a fuller discussion of this point see Karen Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation. The Four Jhāna as the Actualization of Insight* (2017).

140 MN 19 provides a particularly helpful account of this transition. Here, the Buddha presents his own practice as initially aimed at discriminating between ‘certitudes’ that are worth cultivating, and those worth abandoning. Having achieved that end, he then relinquishes active discrimination and enters the contemplations. The fourth contemplation can thus be compared with the end state mentioned in MN 10: ‘the recollection ‘there is body’ is established in him; only in the measure sufficient for knowledge and recollection, and he dwells unestablished, not appropriating anything in the world.’ One could push this reflection further and understand the progression of the four contemplations from the point of view of this end-state. In this way, the fourth contemplation is actually the goal that the practice of composure aims at realizing (and this goal coincides also with the goal of the factor of recollection), while the other three contemplations are an analytical articulation of in-

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opposed to the former discriminative attitude, but is its upshot, the signal that discrimination has done the work that needed to be done, and that it can thus be set aside for the time being.

The fourth contemplation is an ideal standpoint from which to observe the nature of the five aggregates: there is consciousness (*viññāṇa*) of the body (*rūpa*), which is perceived (*saññā*) and suffused by attention (*saṅkhāra*) with a neutral feeling (*vedanā*). None of these aggregates poses a problem, none of them causes *dukkha* by itself. There is no problem with the constituent features of the world of experience, problems can only arise from the *attitude* (appropriation, thirst, craving) towards them. Since the aggregates are unsuitable for being appropriated (due to their structural uncertainty, Lecture Twelve), when one tries to grasp them, suffering and scorn will necessarily follow. But if there is no grasping, there cannot be any suffering.

Realizing that the genuine issue is appropriation (and not what is appropriated) is the central point of the teaching of the four noble truths. It is thus not surprising that in the standard accounts of the gradual training leading to awakening, the full understanding of the four noble truths is achieved from the point of view of the fourth contemplation (e.g., MN 51).

The condition reached in the fourth contemplation is characterized by a marked equipoise, a state of relative rest, stillness, and equilibrium. In this sense, the fourth contemplation can be interpreted as a crossroads of experience. On the one hand, one can choose to follow the attitude of indulging, grasping, and appropriating the aggregates, but on the other is the alternative of not doing so. Being at this crossroad, one realizes that there is freedom to choose, and responsibility to take for this choice.

.....  
intermediary steps needed to get there. The first contemplation is the point where active discriminative recollection allows one to abandon the hindrances and enjoy the pleasure of relief that follows from this condition. This pleasure is the basis for the arising of composure proper in the second contemplation, which can now support itself based on the momentum that has been created, and without any further need of actively applying discrimination. In turn, the happiness of the second contemplation is the basis for the emerging of the third, in which experience verges towards serenity. Drenched with happiness, one can reflect on this condition and simply acknowledge that there is nothing more to do or to desire, there is just peace and contentment for where one is. On the basis of this serenity, one can let go of any residual concern for happiness itself, and rest in the state of perfect equipoise that has been created, being fully satisfied and nourished by stillness (fourth contemplation).

Seeking delight and remaining stuck in the attempt at grasping any of the aggregates *is not necessary*, there is no real duty or obligation to do that. One can decide *not* to grasp, *not* to appropriate, *not* to crave anything. Without delight and appropriation, there is no need to seek any particular form of existence, and hence there is no need to be identified as this or that (no need to be born); without being born, death does not apply. When grasping (delight, thirst, craving appropriation) is relinquished, one no longer ‘stands’ on any of the aggregates. In this sense, one is ‘unestablished’ (*amissito*) in the whole world, unbound to any part of it, free, as the formula of right recollection also states: one ‘dwells unestablished, not appropriating anything in the world’ (MN 10).

Against all common and worldly expectations, one finds genuine peace and freedom from dissatisfaction by deliberately deciding *not* to indulge, enjoy, or appropriate experience. The point is not that there will no longer be anything to enjoy. The discourses often stress that reaching the goal of the path is the most enjoyable experience one might ever imagine, albeit in its own way (e.g., AN 9.34 and 9.41). The point is that *the intention* to enjoy entails a desire to take root, to get established, to appropriate the content that is targeted. This intention overlooks the fact that the ground upon which any experience emerges and unfolds (the five aggregates) are structurally uncertain and thus unsuitable for providing any possibility of full establishment or rooting. Trying to grasp what is inherently uncertain can only leave one with an empty hand. The ordinary attitude is thus that of chasing after the sought joy that keeps escaping, while the advanced practitioner can see that the problem lies in this very hunt for what is essentially unsuitable for appropriation. Dropping the intention of appropriating and being established, the uncertainty of experience is no longer a problem, and being unestablished in any reality becomes an unexpected horizon of profound freedom, beauty, and peace.

The noble eightfold path progresses by creating a virtuous circle, in which an initial understanding of right view leads towards the cultivation of moral conduct and composure, and the cultivation of these factors (and especially of composure) feeds back to right view, by ascertaining, deepening, and broadening one’s understanding of it.

### 13.6 Letting go

The eightfold path is the blueprint for a certain kind of self. By acquiring right view, one aims at mastering intentionality in a certain way, by letting go of thirsting. By cultivating right intention and the factors of morality (right speech, right action, right livelihood), one creates a certain persona, a moral character devoted to not causing harm to other living beings, to creating a sense of safety for those around, and possibly contributing to relieve some of their discomfort wherever the occasion arises. By developing composure, one constructs a whole domain of experience in which it is possible to dwell peacefully, in full contentment. The commentarial tradition came to regard the states of composure in cosmological terms, as realms of existence in which beings can be reborn and spend long and happy lives.

However, this selfhood constructed through the practice of the eightfold path is only instrumental or strategic. The path is not only a tool for building this specific form of self, but also for undermining it. Whoever has right view will have to realize that one particularly profound form of thirsting is thirst for views, attachment to beliefs, and doctrines, Buddhist doctrines included. Hence, fully realizing right view (the letting go of all thirsting) will eventually confront the practitioner with the need to relinquish their own thirst for right view itself.<sup>141</sup> The same applies to moral practice. One builds a moral persona, entirely devoted to rightfulness. And yet, living amongst other living beings, it is inevitable that one will have to make some compromise at some point. Either leave them to their own destiny and prioritize one's own practice (by undermining the attitudes of compassion and friendliness prescribed by right intention), or accept that one might have to concede something to the way other untrained beings live (which means accepting exceptions to one's ideals of righteousness, while still trying to abide by right livelihood).<sup>142</sup> The same applies

•• 141 The emphasis on not holding to any fixed view is particularly prominent in what is regarded as perhaps one of the oldest parts of the Pāli canon of discourses, the *Atthakavagga* ('Collections of Eights' or 'Collections on the Goal', depending on how one reads *Attha*) included in Sutta Nipata. For a fuller exploration of this point see, Paul Fuller, *The Notion of Dīḥi in Theravāda Buddhism. The Point of View* (2005).

142 This trend is detectable even in the way monastic practices developed at different periods in different countries. The ordained disciples of the Buddha described in the discourses are wandering mendi-

to composure. One will have to spend thousands of hours developing the four contemplations to a degree of proficiency (this is no surprise; the same is necessary for developing proficiency in any more mundane skill, like speaking a language or playing a musical instrument). But the pinnacle of this proficiency is nothing but the ability to seeing the entirely constructed, fabricated, concocted, uncertain nature of those states of composure, and learn how to let go of them.

The sort of undermining of the path that arises within the path is completely different from the undermining of the path that simply prevents it from working. For someone without right view, there is no question of the need to relinquish right view. For someone who is not established in moral conduct, there is no issue about considering ad hoc exceptions in one's way of life in order to accommodate one's living among others. And for one without any skill in composure, the idea of building a blissful experience for the sake of relinquishing it would not even make sense in the first place.

Mastery of the path leads one to appreciate that the path is also a training in mastery. What the path aims to train (intentionality) is uncertain, and thus this form of mastery also cannot entirely succeed, it cannot be fully and definitively established. But at this point, one has enacted a certain selfhood ('me, the one who practices the path') that prevents any possibility from simply going back, or reverting to the ordinary untrained condition ('I can no longer pretend that I do not know or value right view, moral conduct, or composure'), while also recognizing that such a selfhood can neither be fully established, preserved, or secured ('this me wanting to be the perfect practitioner is nothing but conceit, it is itself a defilement that needs to be abandoned'). I cannot go back (to ordinary life), I cannot move forward (to full mastery), and I cannot stand still, because I'm still walking the path (cf. SN 1.1). I am both this self

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 cants without any particularly settled infrastructure. Later monastic orders, while preserving a more or less strict adherence to the monastic rules set in the *Vinaya*, present a different way of life, usually centered around a fixed residence (the monastery), which in many cases can also become a cultural center for the local population, it can eventually possess lands and administrate money, and its resident monks might not always be dedicated primarily to meditation practice (which is most central among so-called 'forest' monks and monasteries). One might interpret these compromises as a form of 'corruption' of the original ideal presented by the discourses, but perhaps it is better to see it as one way in which the inevitable compromise between the guiding ideals of the eightfold path and the actual historical circumstances with which practice must be matched and adjusted.

that is enacted through the practice of the path, and the collapse of this same self. I am both a master, and someone who has failed in achieving full mastery. I am both, I am neither. In this dissonance, in this contradiction, the path dissolves selfhood and reveals the freedom that lies beyond. Having built your sandcastle, you watch the tide dismantling it, and by the time the castle is gone, the shore is gone too: you have now arrived at the other shore.

On one occasion (MN 37), the Buddha is asked by Sakka, the king of deities, to explain his teaching in brief. The Buddha replies that there is only one thing that one needs to learn, understand, and practice: ‘all realities are unsuitable for fully settling in’ (*sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyā*). On another occasion (MN 62), he instructs his son, Rahula, to develop his meditation in a way that makes it like the element of space, which ‘does not stand steadily somewhere’ (*na katthaci patiṭṭhito*). And in his instructions on the establishment of recollection (MN 10), a central quality of the practitioner is to be ‘unestablished’ (*anissito*). These references all point to a state in which one is present but not yoked, still but not rooted, free to move anywhere but without having to run away from anything. The instability that comes with uncertainty is no longer a threat, but something that can be welcomed with relief. What is uncertain is something that cannot bind, chain, or constrict. Perhaps the oldest monument in which this ideal has been encoded and ‘written down’ is in the very lifestyle of the Buddhist practitioner, the wandering mendicant, the homeless, the one who deliberately decide to be unattached to any place. This is a story written on sands and grounds, step by step, by feet rather than hands. Those who have walked the lands of history have impressed on it a soft trace, a reminder: the sage is someone who is at ‘peace, free from misery, / neither takes, nor rejects’ (Sn 4.15).



# Theme

The self is a constitutively relational hermeneutic construction aimed at mastering, in one way or another, the uncertainty that is inherent in its conditionality. But uncertainty cannot be mastered, and regarding it otherwise makes interpretations of experience (any construction of the self) tragically dissonant, painful, stressful. Uncertainty cannot be mastered: it will not be mastered. In relinquishing this concern, this duty, one is freed by stepping out of the stage of one's tragedy.



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Why do human beings interpret their overall experience in terms of selfhood? How was the notion and sense of self shaped at different times and in different cultures? What sort of problems or paradoxes did these constructions face? These lectures address these and related questions by sketching a roadmap of possible theoretical avenues for conceiving of the self, bringing to the foreground its soteriological implications, while also testing this theoretical outlook against insights offered by various disciplines. Exploring the cross-cultural spectrum of possible ways of conceiving of the self invites the more existential question of whether any of these possibilities might offer resources for dealing with the tragedies of today's world, or maybe even saving it from some of them.



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