

# Epistemology and Realization

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

February 16, 1969

[When William James was doing] his preparatory work for the Gifford lectures, which later became the volume *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he made a search of all the religions available at the time for the purpose of finding those features which were common to all religious outlooks as well as those features that were variable. He found only two features which were common to all religions: first, a recognition of a “wrongness” in the world; second, the offering of a solution for that wrongness.<sup>1</sup> . . . was a curing of the suffering.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Sri Shankaracharya, the problem appeared as one of ignorance—not ignorance in the ordinary sense, but spiritual ignorance; and the resolution was through the attainment of knowledge in the sense of *jnana*. In fact, this knowledge was not a means to Liberation, but was viewed as Liberation itself. And in the Christian world the wrongness is presented as the presence of a hostile or derelict will which leads man to do that which he knows he should not do; and the problem becomes one of domestication of an adverse will. The problems thus appear various, but there is agreement in the fact that there is a wrongness in this world, something that needs correction, that in some way the mankind of this world has gotten off the track of what it should be and the problem is one of correction.

A distinction that William James often made was there’s a difference between “knowledge about” and “acquaintance with.” Now, I shall not today deal much with knowledge about, for you can get that from the books. There are many sources. It’s good. But remember, concerning all knowledge about, that the rule which Buddha laid down applies. You can only say, if you know of this knowledge, thus I have heard or thus I have read. You cannot say, I know. It’s only through acquaintance with that you can say, thus I know. And when one has something to offer that is of the nature of acquaintance with, it’s far more important than any amount of knowledge about. I have certain acquaintance with. Of this I shall speak.

He who reads in this field comes across a word used a great deal by Aurobindo and the others who have pioneered the way, and a word which I used also, namely, Realization. And I propose to speak somewhat of the significance of Realization—what it may mean; what its value is. First off, Realization is the way to acquaintance with as distinct from knowledge about. The problem may appear to different people in different forms. The form of Realization may be quite various. I shall speak, however, of a

---

<sup>1</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902), 508.

<sup>2</sup> Copied from audio recording “Lectures to University Students,” part 5 to fill in the gap on this recording:

Yes, one of the answers to this question of the wrongness is given by Buddha, as he rediscovered that life as it’s predominantly experienced in the world is a state of suffering. It’s plagued by illness, poverty, and death. He found it impossible to enjoy his relative comfort, and searched for seven years to find an answer. He found it and then spent his life trying to bring that answer to men. The answer was the attainment of *Nirvana*.

particular form and a particular approach. The problem came to me in a very special way right down the path of Western philosophy. I used to be a lover of the rationalistic school of philosophy, that which was founded by Descartes, developed by Spinoza and Leibniz, who came to seed in the hands of Christian Wolff. Then there was another school that ran parallel to this in England, in the British Isles, which was a school of skepticism. It brought up the question of how far we can trust our knowledge. And it eventuated in the position proclaimed by David Hume, which in effect was there wasn't anything that we really knew. Even though we experienced the sun rising a million times, we could not know that it would rise tomorrow. That was the death of hope. And that awakened the greatest of all our philosophers from what he called his dogmatic slumbers—Immanuel Kant; and led to twelve years of thought which was written up in five months as the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The question was: how far can we trust our knowledge? The knowledge with which we are all commonly familiar is knowledge through sensation and conceptual knowledge; that is the sole concern of the secular philosophers and psychologists. I will not go into any length on this, but the conclusion reached by Immanuel Kant was this, and this seems to stand, that our conceptual knowledge gives us only possibility, and in order to give existence to the possibility, in the ordinary case, it must be supported by sensuous knowledge or experience. Thus, there's an important difference between the idea of a hundred dollars in my pocket and the having of an actual hundred dollars. I can predicate everything that may be predicated of the real hundred dollars also of the idea of a hundred dollars, but there's one thing that the idea of a hundred dollars doesn't have, and that is existence. There must be added the sensuous cognition of an actually felt and seen hundred dollars before I can predicate existence of it. Now, that happens to have been an example of the logical process by which Immanuel Kant destroyed what is known as the ontological argument for God.<sup>3</sup> The ontological argument for God ran roughly in this way. I have an idea of an absolutely absolute being and therefore since I'm able to have the idea, the being must be. That argument carried a lot of weight at one time, and here Kant slew it. Hegel was a bit disgusted. He says to put the conception of God on the same level as a hundred dollars, but the logic was just as valid with respect to the ontological argument for God as for the argument that an idea of a hundred dollars is not the same as a real hundred dollars. Well, despite the fact that Kant left us very convincingly without any means of knowing metaphysical truth through the action of conceptual cognition and sensuous perception, nonetheless, being a very religious man he tried to offer some hope of how we should be able to know certain metaphysical truths that are very important to human beings. He listed three: the reality of God, immortality, and freedom. His offering here was not too convincing.

It dawned upon me back in Harvard days that perhaps the problem was the non-action of a latent function of cognition that could be awakened. In other words, that when we reduce cognition to conceptual cognition and sense perception, we do not have the whole of cognition. If there is some third organ or function or faculty, whatever you want to call it, that might open the door to the Transcendent that could perhaps answer these metaphysical questions. That was the basis of a search that took twenty-four years involving study, involving trying to formulate the problem, groping a great deal of it, and

---

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (New York: Wiley Book Co., 1943), 331-337.

ultimately reached this conclusion: that there was nothing to be attained. I'll give you the logic of that in a moment. And from that moment I stopped searching since nothing was to be attained, and that was the key to the Door opening into the realm that made all the difference in the world, for at once it was the key to attainment.

Now, notice the paradox: the realization that there is nothing to be attained became the key to attainment. You've got to get used to these apparent contradictions, for we're dealing with a zone that cannot be translated into dualistic consciousness without the use of paradoxes. And on the other hand, you've got to guard against the complete chaos of thought which you would arrive at if you thought there were no order in things. There is an order, as well as the fact that a transcendent truth when projected into the dualistic order requires paradoxical statement. And one of the tasks is the resolution of such paradoxes. Usually it means that in one sense so and so is the case, and in another sense the negation of that is the case. Thus, the Buddhists will say, as for instance the Sixth Patriarch, that we, nay all creatures, are already Buddha. And yet there is a sense in which Buddhahood is attained. That one I hope to resolve before this hour is over. That one is very, very important indeed. But you can see that if one grasps the sense in which we all, together with all creatures whether human or sub-human or super-human, are Buddha already, then there is a sense in which Buddhahood cannot be attained because you cannot attain that which you already are. But there's another sense in which it is attained, and very few yet have attained it.

My approach, as you'll see was a rather technical one. Is there an organ of knowledge that will resolve the problem left to us by Immanuel Kant? Immanuel Kant proved to be the bridge from the Western mind—with me at least—over to the mind of Sri Shankaracharya, who himself was a master of criticism and combined with it a capacity for presenting actual metaphysical truth without violating the canons which were recognized by Immanuel Kant. The result is I might call my path “the epistemologic subdivision” of the yoga of knowledge. I don't think many have gone that particular way. I found it enabled me to answer questions that are rarely if ever asked, and did not enable me to ask the questions that are most common.

Now, the questions that are most common seem to deal with some very mundane matters, as how can I get well, problems of sickness, how can I get wealthy, and all that. And this didn't tell me how to answer those questions at all. I dealt with the problem of the vital nature and so forth rather trenchantly. The best way, it seemed to me, to handle the question of health was to be well. But most people don't care for that; for think, what a lot of fun is lost if you were completely well—the fun of being sick, and especially the fun of talking about it. So, oh I don't know, people would lose their main subject of conversation if they couldn't talk about their operations . . . They really love being sick when it comes to a showdown. If they would take the attitude—and this is what I'd say on the question of health—be ashamed of yourself every time that you get sick. Put it down as a bad mark against you, bad score, you failed, didn't do what you could have done. Don't be sympathetic with yourself and reject all sympathy for somebody else. That's my offering on the subject of bodily health. I think it would get rid of more than 50 percent of the illness that's around. The only drawback is that it would be kind of hard on the doctors.

Now, as I found it, and this follows the pattern laid down by Shankara, that a transformation in consciousness is induced in which there is a shift from one self-center to another and an inversion in consciousness. We might say that the shift is from the ego as being myself to the true Self, perhaps in the sense Jung uses it, but better still in the sense of the *Atman*, as the center of your consciousness. Now, this is a Copernican change, to draw a figure from the history of astronomy. Just shifting your base of reference makes all the difference in the world. When you say “I” and mean this personal ego—Jung calls the center of our relative consciousness—many problems arise. And many of those problems are of such a nature that from that premise, that base, you cannot answer them. And if the shift is made to a new base, a new center, which you call the true Self or the *Atman*, many of the problems that had been just simply disappear. And if there are problems which remain, you’re in a position to deal with them more effectively. It is a familiar experience of those who have been students of mathematics that simply a shift of base can be the key to the resolution of a difficult problem. In the history of astronomy the old view was that this world is the center of the universe. It is known as the Ptolemaic system of astronomy. But if you then proceeded to calculate or picture the paths of the stellar bodies, you got into an enormous mass of complexities since the sun, all the planets, and the moon, were going around the earth, and even the stars were going around the earth; the actual observation showed that they didn’t go in circles, so you had to build up elaborate cycloids, and epicycloids, and epi-epicycloids. You got very complex movements. Now, mathematically those movements are valid and correct from the standpoint of a system of coordinates that’s fixed with respect to the earth. That was valid. But just as soon as the center was shifted from the earth to the sun, and the earth was conceived as going around the sun, and the other planets—we’re dealing only with the solar system at the moment—then there was a great simplification. The paths of these sidereal bodies became roughly circular or elliptic, or in general took the form of conic sections, which are relatively simple curves. The mathematics became very simple in handling them. Many a problem then that was well-nigh impossible before became resolvable at this moment. Now, I might liken the shift that comes in the yoga of knowledge through self-analysis as to such a Copernican shift from the ego as center to the *Atman* as center, and that your system of coordinates is established there and your world view is oriented from that position.

Now, this implies however what we call a Fundamental Realization. A Fundamental Realization is to be contrasted by fragmentary, premonitory Realizations which many people have had. But a fragmentary or premonitory Realization does not lead to your change in your base of reference. It gives you the comfort of knowing there is a Beyond, that there is a something to be attained, given really for the reason to keep up your courage and to go on. But you’ll revert back to the old position of identifying yourself with the ego, and it is not enough. It becomes a Fundamental Realization when from that moment forth you know yourself to be the *Atman*. Furthermore, whereas there are many egos, only in a certain subtle apparent sense can you ever speak of many *Atmans*. The figure often used is that of the sun that may be seen reflected in a dewdrop, that is the individual *Atman*, but the sun that’s reflected in the dewdrop is one with the sun in the sky. Thus, also, the apparently individual *Atman* is identical with *Paramatman*. There is thus, in the last analysis, but one Self. And the multitude of us who seem to reflect that Self, and do, more or less consciously, are, after all, part and

parcel with this indivisible unity of the *Paramatman*. One moving in that state of experience may have this feeling: that he's absolutely identical with every human being, with every creature that was. And a very humorous question came into my mind one time, how do I know that I'll go back and find myself in the same body? I might be in any other body for that matter equally well. But somehow or other, I happened to wake up and come back in this one; but I'm not quite sure why, because the sense of being present in all was so strong a fact.

Now, this is a Realization that in principle could be attained by self-induced effort and self-devised means without the aid of a guru, though in general it does require the aid of a guru. It is however in principle possible. I wish, however, to direct your attention to something a good deal more profound than what I have spoken about where it would be quite impossible by self-induced effort and self-devised means to attain. One's merit does not count. There can only be the *induction* of this state by him who has it already. This will take us on to a stage beyond that of the Copernican shift from the world as the center of the universe to the sun, to the systems of coordinates that are used today by the astronomers for the larger problems of the great systems beyond our galaxies. In that case they use the Milky Way, the plane of the Milky Way as the base of their coordinates. And now notice very particularly, it's not now a center like the sun, but something more abstract—the plane of the Milky Way. Now, that's precisely what we'll be getting into. What I've said so far will give you the essence of the Realization of Shankara, but there are deeps beyond Shankara.

I'd been following the discipline of *The Voice of the Silence*. I had been impressed with its instruction that beyond the way to *Nirvana* there was a greater way, the way to the renunciation of *Nirvana* until such day as all creatures shall be taken in. The formula for this is given as in the words of *Kwan-Yin*: "Never will I seek nor receive private, individual salvation; never will I enter into final peace alone; but forever, and everywhere, will I strive for the redemption of all creatures throughout the world." It seems to a philosopher as well as to those of sympathetic heart that the release of one unit is not enough, and that I am not wholly free while these bound remain travailing—indeed, parts of myself. Well, it seemed like turning down a wonderful state of consciousness, perhaps for a million years. I don't know how long. It seemed a little depressing too. But thirty-three days—and I was told to watch for the cycle thirty-three—after that 7th of August 1936, something walked in on me—and Aurobindo said *Nirvana* walked in on him—something very strange.

First there was a sense of enormous satisfaction in every possible direction which gradually transformed into a state of *indifference*, which has a meaning similar to Aurobindo's equality—equality of attitude in all directions, no preferences anywhere, no preference even between transcendental bliss and pain. One could enter, as it were, with equal attitude into a hell world as well as into a highly transcendent domain far above the heavens that can't be ordinarily imagined. This was a strange sort of consciousness. It was not colored by a quality of great delight. I had known states that had been colored by a quality of such great delight that the organism couldn't take it. You had to hold it down, gentle it. There's a portion of these delights, there's an amount that these physical organisms can take in only a tiny fraction. Otherwise, if you overload it, it's strained and there's some evidence they can even be burned out. But here was a state truly superior

because I saw delight below—*Nirvana* there, *Sangsara* here. It changed my whole philosophy. I already had the philosophy of Shankara. I accepted it on intellectual grounds. The first Realization did not lead to any change of that. It had been true, as Leuba maintained, that the philosophy I brought out was the same as the philosophy I took into the state, but not this case. My whole conception of the relationship of *Sangsara* and *Nirvana*—*Sangsara* is the universe of objects, and so forth; *Nirvana* is the state of quiescence that is unimaginable, withdrawn—I saw them as supplementary, as one implying the other. Neither one was self-existent by itself. They were the great pair of opposites. This state of the “High Indifference” was actually the integration of inconceivable bliss with also equally inconceivable pain. It doesn’t mean you feel that, or feel it as pain either, but it is to the relative consciousness.

Well, I never heard of such a thing in the literature anywhere. And I had to write with the best language I could use at the time to explain. It was only later, and in fact in one part only within the last two or three months, I’ve recognized some writing that points to the same consciousness. At any rate, it’s very rare. At that time the Tibetan books that were edited by Evans-Wentz had not been published or at least I had not—no I hadn’t contacted them; some of them were published. And also the *Buddhist Bible* that came out under Dr. Goddard we had not yet seen. I don’t think it was published. There were some things in there that made a correlation.

Now, there was a deeper stage. It went in three stages before the relative consciousness that was acting as a witness and recording was unable to follow any further. At this point, there was a disappearance of the Self, a disappearance of the Divinity, and their absorption into something still more ultimate which I called the Eternal. And at that point, I knew what Buddha meant when he taught the doctrine of *Anatman* and *Nastikata*. The Self and the Divinity are valid up to a point, but they inhere in and are derived from something more ultimate. And the statement of Buddha, or the Realization of Buddha, is known to me as more profound than that of Shankara.

Now, what is this consciousness? All pairs of opposites were united. Here for our conceptual consciousness we know through contrast. We know north by its contrast with south. We know up by its contrast with down. We know good by its contrast with evil. And let me interject at this point, there is no such thing as an entity entering this plane who can be predicated as only good for he also has the shadow that is essentially a part of him. The total reality of Christ is Christ-Satan. Only to find the right relationship, the domestication of the Satanic power—not the destruction of it, for that is impossible in a dualistic order—that is the achievement and that’s what Christ accomplished in the temptation. Get thee behind me Satan. Not destroying, driving the Satanic power into nonexistence, but get thee behind me and makes of Christ, not merely a lovely but ineffective ideal, but an actually effective power, for the domesticated evil gets transformed from its evilness into the principle of power, of potency, a three-dimensional actuality, if you please, rather than a two-dimensional ideal that’s ineffective. These are deep things and they are painful things. They may be painful for you because we like to see good as all good, but you can’t get it that way in this dualistic world. There is a shadow always where there is a light.

I have to come to a close and I’m just getting started. I’ll come to the crucial word, what is this High Indifference—this consciousness which I call Consciousness-

without-an-object-and-without-a-subject? Here is a conception hard to grasp because ordinarily we think of consciousness as a function of a being. Now you must think, to grasp this, of Consciousness as being self-existent, original, and constitutive of all things, and that the being who knows and the object that is known is derivative from That. This is not then Consciousness in the ordinary sense of the word. It's extending it to a meaning beyond its ordinary sense. It's approaching the universal unconsciousness from the positive standpoint of being conscious. Now, in that state of no objects where it's the Pure Consciousness, the universal container of all that is, and from which all things are derived, and where everything whatsoever eternally abides so that you know there is no such thing as suffering anywhere but only the imagined suffering of one wink of sleep of That, if you please, but none can be destroyed, none can be lost, so that even the office of compassion seems meaningless. But there was also something else there and that was the power to be conscious of that Consciousness. Ordinarily we are not conscious unless we have objects before us. Objects may be ideas, to be sure, but some content there. But consciousness can be so subtilized that it can be conscious of Consciousness without content. All right, I found on p. 96 of the first edition of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in a footnote a reference to just this sort of thing.<sup>4</sup> There is that which they call *Rig-pa*, which is this pure, supermundane Consciousness, which you might call substantive Consciousness because it is that of which all things are composed; and then a second consciousness *shes-rig*, which is the cognitive function of consciousness and which when combined with *Rig-pa* becomes the *Dharmakaya*. That's only in the last few months I found that correlation, and it also made clear what I'm dealing with in the High Indifference, that it is a *Dharmakayic* consciousness, and I've proved that despite the texts you can return and be in this world. And that's what I'm saying that is new, for the literature that I've seen always says that either that or *Nirmanakaya*, but not both. And I found that it is possible; and it may have happened very rarely, but if it happens once, it's proven possible. It is possible to know the *Dharmakayic* consciousness, to know that you abide in it eternally, and function here in the world of relativity at the same time.

I took this occasion to put forth this rather radical idea based upon a Realization, for in it is the seed of a new religious orientation in which suffering is transcended, sacrifice and renunciation are no more, but it is possible to abide in the highest and function here knowing no pain though dealing with those who imagine they are suffering. And that will have to bring this to a close. I will, I think, conduct a meditation later that bears right on this Consciousness of which I have been speaking. Thank you.

---

<sup>4</sup> W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 96.