

# Is Metaphysical Knowledge Possible?

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As I look back and review this life of nearly eighty-eight years, I find that it has been dedicated to three questions or propositions, and these three are: Is metaphysical knowledge possible?; second, If so, how may it become known?; and third, If the answer to the first two questions is positive, how may it be communicated, or to what extent may it be communicated to others who seek also in this way? All other concerns, activities, thoughts of the personal life are to be regarded as only incidental, as simply concerning occasion and objective need, but these three questions are central. After a twenty-four year search subsequent to the academic period, I emerged with a positive answer to the first two questions, and have ever since struggled with the problem of communication.

Now, the question may be raised, what is the practical use of a positive determination with respect to these questions? The answer is essentially very simple. Three fundamental questions that have immense importance in the life of man are given a definite answer, and these questions are: is there such a thing as a numen, or a supreme entity or principle, and is it possible to set up a personal relationship with this numen; second, is there a continuation of consciousness beyond the event which is commonly called death, in other words, is there something like persistence beyond this cataclysmic transition; and third, is there in fact such a thing as authentic freedom, the existence of which is essential if man is truly a morally responsible being? I will say at this moment, that I found a positive answer to all these questions, and that that was a more than adequate justification of the search.

When I ask is metaphysical knowledge possible, I do so in the context of the thought of the most proficient Western minds that have so far left their thought with us. It is not the popular approach to the problem of metaphysics that we find in the case of many people of little sophistication. The problem is one of the greatest difficulty, and this point must not be disregarded. I will review briefly again, as I have in the past, the situation.

When philosophic thought burst forth in the modern period the first expression of it was in a form known as rationalism, which involved an application of mathematical method to a philosophic subject matter and also characteristically assumed that there were innate ideas carried in the mind of man. But this assumption was submitted to critical analysis by the representatives of the school of philosophy known as the English School consisting of John Locke, Bishop Berkeley, and David Hume. It eventuated in a keen analysis by David Hume which resulted in a state of complete skepticism or nescience—a conclusion that if all our source of knowledge is through experience, there cannot be any such thing as a metaphysical knowledge, as a pure mathematics, or even an empiric science, which involves, necessarily, a knowledge of some interrelationship between sensible events.

As a result of this, a great thinker in Germany was aroused to profound meditation and came up with an answer to the effect that indeed there was a way in which scientific

knowledge was in principle possible; and, as he thought, he established that a pure mathematical knowledge was possible, although there is some question as to whether his answer in this respect was adequate; but third, he concurred with the position of David Hume that metaphysical knowledge was impossible and that there was no such thing as an innate idea carried in the mind of man, that indeed all our knowledge arises on the occasion of experience, but not all of it is derived from experience, and that because of certain forms carried by the cognizer a determination of an order or relationship in the events of experience could be established, but all of our conceptions were empty if they were isolated from sensuous perceptions, and also that sensuous perceptions without conceptual cognition were blind and therefore meaningless. This opened a door for certain positive development, but it concurred in the closing of the door to metaphysical knowledge. In a word, if our cognition is restricted to sense perception and conceptual cognition, a metaphysical knowledge is impossible.

It is in this context that I faced the problem and sought an answer in positive terms, for it appeared to me that if the answer to the great metaphysical questions could not be attained, there was no meaning whatsoever in life, and no reason why one should continue with life.

There followed a search covering twenty-four years—most of the time simply groping, but in the end there was a successful outcome. The problem was resolved to my complete satisfaction and took this schematic form: that while it is true that with sense perception and conceptual cognition alone a metaphysical knowledge is impossible, yet those two organs of cognition are not the sole organs by which man can know, that there is at least a third organ latent in his psychical constitution whereby a metaphysical knowledge is attainable. As I've said repeatedly before, the characteristic form of this cognition is a *knowledge through identity*, namely, an identity between the knower and the known.

This is simply the abstract statement concerning this metapsychological fact. But the precise experience of it involves a great deal more than the simple cognition. It is a state of consciousness in which the different modes of our awareness are blended together. It is cognition plus the various affections and the conative principle. The state involved affections such as an experience of a well-nigh inconceivable delight, an experience of an utter sweetness and of beauty, and an assurance that all is well within and beyond the transition known as death, and then, also, the principle of a great inner power transcending, ultimately, all the outer powers of the mundane world. But these values in terms of their immediate experienced *quale* are not communicable to others by any ordinary means. They must be immediately experienced, or rather “imperienced.”<sup>1</sup> However, I can communicate the valuation which I give to them in some measure. I would not exchange this imperience for any of the values that can be given or can be attained in the mundane world. This means everything of position, status, or fame—not the highest offices in the political sense, or the highest military command, or the greatest

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<sup>1</sup> For the definition of ‘imperience’, see the audio recordings “General Discourse on the Subject of My Philosophy,” part 10, and “Extemporaneous Statement of My Philosophy.” In speaking of introceptual knowledge, Wolff says, “The third function therefore gives you imperience, not experience. It is akin to sense perception in the sense of being immediate, but is not sensuous.”

wealth, or formal religious authority. For none of these things, or all of them together, would I exchange this value. Not that I despise these mundane potencies or positions, but that the value of the Realization is so great that there is nothing in the gift of the mundane order that begins to have similar worth. Greater than anything I have named so far in the field of the mundane values as I see it is the achievement of a Sir Isaac Newton and an Albert Einstein, but I would not exchange this Realization for attainment of a similar importance. This should give some idea of the valuation which the one who experienced these values places upon them.

Along with all that I have designated so far, there is the sense of Presence, the sense of a supernal Other which relates to one as a kind of Companion. This is persistent in the sense that it is almost always immediately available or descends upon the consciousness spontaneously. In part it seems like an inner function in consciousness, and I have called it the “transcendental function.” But there is also a sense of entityhood connected with it with which a communion is possible. And there is this quality about it: that the production in the writing and the tapes is like a joint work. I am not merely writing down a dictation from the other side, but from the other side there comes the quality of insight, and from this side the language by which that insight is reflected.

Perhaps it would be of interest to consider the conditions under which this transcendental function operates best. First of all, the ideal condition would be a sense of infinite leisure, no pressure whatsoever, no sense of a driving duty to produce, no sense of any strain whatsoever, a sense of inner happiness, peace, and contentment; and the production at its best is a kind of play, not a serious or grim task to be performed. This is quite other than the condition which seems to be the most favorable for ordinary production with many individuals. I have been told that there are those who produce most when they are in a state, as it were, of battle, of struggle with something opposing them. I’ve been told that even in the dealing with mathematical problems some individuals achieve best when they feel as though they were in a struggle with something resisting them. In other words, such individuals seem to produce best under competitive conditions, under conditions that call for much will and drive. That is not so in this case. As I know the action of this function, the conditions that I have described where the quality of peace is dominant is the most favorable condition for production; yet, that which is produced may be of the very highest value for the groping individual in the mundane world.

And this may lead us to certain considerations that have been brought out by Sri Aurobindo in his essay on *Heraclitus*.<sup>2</sup> As developed in this essay, it is pointed out that the fundamental or root principle underlying the universe is the principle of fire, but fire in this sense is not restricted to the ordinary vulgar conception of fire as a process of oxidation. It is fire conceived as a process of transformation—a process of everlastingly becoming other than what was. It leads to the conclusion that never for one moment to the next is this universe the same. One can never step into the same stream twice, for between one step and the second the stream becomes other than what it was. And then Heraclitus propounds the thesis consistent with this that the first principle governing in the universe and in the history of creatures, including man, is the

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<sup>2</sup> Aurobindo Ghose, *Heraclitus*, in vol. 16 of the *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centennial Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, 1970), 335-371.

principle of force, the principle of a balance of forces working upon each other through compulsion; and this in its turn implies war as the fundamental relationship between creatures and between human beings. But in the process of time this principle of compulsion or force becomes transformed into a second and higher principle, the principle of reason, which operates by means of adjudicating relationships rather than by determining relationships through force. It replaces compulsion, as it were, by calculation. At this point Heraclitus' vision stops, as Aurobindo describes it, and there is a failure, as Aurobindo says, to see a third principle which ultimately becomes the governing principle throughout the universe, and this is the principle of a divine delight or *ananda*—a principle that brings about coordination of interrelationship in a spirit of fundamental happiness. I might add that this third principle could be enlarged to include the Buddhistic principle of compassion conceived of as a force which tends towards bringing about harmony in all things so that the final state would be like a profound harmonious music in which there is no longer conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Now, the point I'd like to make here is that granting the validity of these three steps, as we look across the world today, in the sense of the state of the human portion of that world, the principle of force or war still remains the dominant principle. To be sure, the principle of reason is emerging, as is evident in all our science, and in some measure the principle of compassion and the delight intertwined within it is sensed, but far too largely the dominant principle among men and governing men is the principle of conflict. If not actually present in a kinetic form, it is there potentially and viewed far too much as the ultimate determinant. War is the fundamental relationship between nations; even though war is not actively present, there is preparation for war. Every extension of our knowledge with respect to the resources of nature is at once investigated for the potential with respect to the exercise of power in the relationships of nation to nation. But in more detail, the relationship of man to man in the practical everyday events is one of competition. In fact, even those who in their productive effort have seen the possibility of cooperation as a higher relationship are coerced by the law to fight each other. The producer of goods is required by law to take an attitude towards his brother producer of trying to force him to bankruptcy even though he has emerged morally to the point of recognizing that cooperation is better. Our relationships or determinations in the judicial level are based upon the principle of adversaryism. Truth is sought by battle in the courtroom. And then in our games we encourage conflict, battle, the seeking of success at the necessary price of producing defeat for the other fellow. In other words, dominant in this world still today is the principle of adversaryism, competition, or in other words, war.

And what I wish to suggest is that while this may well be in conformity with Heraclitus' idea, a stage that was necessary in the beginning, we have reached a stage of knowledge where it is totally improper. The time has come when the second principle of reason should rule in this world; where the conflicts are settled not by conflict but by rational calculation—an infinitely higher principle than the principle of conflict, a principle which is really oriented to justice as the principle of conflict can never be. Beyond lies the higher possibility of the divine *ananda* and *lila* and the divine compassion, but the point I would emphasize is that we need now to take that second step

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<sup>3</sup> See audio recording "Yoga of Love" for Sri Aurobindo's treatment of this subject.

of enthroning the principle of rational determination as replacing the principle of conflict. We should be ashamed of ourselves at our present state of knowledge in that we encourage this essentially primitive principle. Because we do that, we have no right to view ourselves as civilized. We are only intellectually developed barbarians. We have failed to achieve anything like a decent morality so long as the principle of adversaryism is so enthroned in our culture.<sup>4</sup>

Somewhere within *The Mahatma Letters* the one who is known to us as Koot Hoomi has said that love and hate are the two immortal qualities.<sup>5</sup> These two qualities have the potency of driving us to the most supreme efforts. Through hate one may be aroused to the most intense activity, but love is an even greater power in which we are not coerced but led to an even higher achievement. Now, the principle which governs conflict, war, adversaryism, competition in all forms, where one seeks to win by causing the destruction of the other fellow, the ruling principle here is the principle of hate. When one succeeds only by the principle of conflict with the other, he is accepting hate as his god. But all that is accomplished by such means can be more than achieved by the leading of the principle of love. The principle of love acts as a guiding force, leads to discovery and creativeness by the principle of guidance, not the principle of coercion. So long as this world is dominated in its activities by the principle of adversaryism, just so long is the god of this humanity the principle of hate. And that's why this world is in immanent danger of ultimate disaster. We are in need of enthroning as our supreme deity the principle of love to create and discover because of the delight in the creation and the discovery, not through an attitude of adversaryism in trying to accomplish knowledge, but by the gentle leading through love for that knowledge and for the attainment of all other positive values.

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<sup>4</sup> See audio recording "Case Against Adversaryism" for a further discussion of this subject.

<sup>5</sup> A. T. Barker, ed., *The Mahatma Letters*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, 1923, p. 124:

Letter No. 20c: *Love* and *Hatred* are the only *immortal* feelings, the only survivors from the wreck of *Ye-damma*, or the phenomenal world.