Questions of knowledge

Preface

Most people think of philosophy as a strange and difficult subject. It keeps asking questions about common, ordinary assumptions upon which our knowledge is based. The problem is that these basic assumptions are somewhat like the ground on which we stand. We build upon them and depend on them; but we usually take them for granted, as we go about our affairs and carry on with our lives. When they are opened up to question, it is rather like digging the ground from beneath one's own feet. The structures that have been built upon these assumptions become undermined, and one has to find some deeper ground on which to stand.

While current assumptions are open to question, how does one go about finding some deeper and more certain basis of knowledge? The answer is not necessarily technical and intellectual. It does not essentially lie in building up complex structures of techniques and ideas. These are structures that get undermined, as their assumptions are thrown into question. What is needed instead is an attitude of open-minded enquiry, with a simple readiness to look beyond those structures and assumptions that bolster one's current sense of security.

This essay tries to ask some common philosophical questions, for an ordinary reader who might be interested to reflect independently upon them.

LEVELS OF PERSONALITY

Level of personality		Experience of world			Philosophical position	Identification of self	
Body	Physical action	EXPRESSION	REFLECTION	Sense perception	Materialism	Reacting body	EGO
Practical mind	Will			Observation	Pragmatism	Acting partnership of body & mind	
Intellectual mind	Decision			Conception	Idealism	Thinking mind	
Emotional mind	Judgement			Intuition	Ethical and religious belief	Feeling 'psyche' or 'soul'	
Understanding	Co-ordination			Comprehension	Relativism	Continuing witness	
Self		Consciousness			Non-dualism	Impersonal subject	

Who knows?

Personality and self

People identify themselves in many ways: by the places where they live and the countries to which they belong; by the kinds of work that they do and the roles that they perform; by the names that they have been given and the positions that they hold; by the families and communities into which they have been born or have been adopted; and by the cultures that they use to organize their ways of life.

Along with these different identifications go different views of the world. A New Yorker sees the world differently from an Indian villager. A general who is fighting a military campaign sees things differently from a parent who is bringing up children. And so also for different individuals and classes, for different families and communities, for different cultures and ways of life. They each have their different perspectives, which result in different views of the world.

People understand what they see by interpreting their perceptions, which they make from the particular perspectives of their differing personalities. To understand correctly, one needs to allow for one's particular point of view and the identity from which it arises. In other words, *to understand what one sees, one needs to know who one is and where one stands.*

For example, suppose that I look at a mountain and come to an understanding of its height. This understanding is reached by interpreting how the mountain looks to my eyes. The mountain may not look very high from where I stand; but if I know that I am far away from it, or if I know that I am standing under a low shoulder that is obscuring the main peak, then I will judge the mountain to be much higher than it looks.

And further, there is the question of how I rate my personal capabilities of sight and judgement. My understanding of the mountain's height will further depend on how well I think that my eyes can see, and how far I think of myself as a canny mountaineer who will not be fooled by tricks of perspective and distance and haze.

At first, this question of identity may seem to be nothing more than an irritating personal problem: to be solved by keeping one's ego under control, so that one does not get too inflated (nor too deflated) an idea of oneself.

But controlling one's ego only manages the symptoms of an underlying cause. The symptoms are a distorted idea of one's particular personality, and a correspondingly distorted interpretation of what this personality perceives. The cause lies in how one identifies what one is and where one stands.

What is the self called 'I'; and how may it be correctly identified, beneath the only too fallible self-images that our egos present to us?

This is not just a personal problem, but a philosophical question. On its answer depends our entire understanding of the world that we perceive.

Body and senses

The word 'I' is often used to describe a physical body: as for example when a person says 'I am fat', or 'I am thin', or 'I sit', or 'I walk'.

This bodily identification is usually taken for granted. It is one of those unthinking assumptions that are rarely questioned, as people get on with their lives. A Chinese immigrant to Australia is likely to think about questions of national and cultural identity: about being Chinese or Australian. But, the immigrant is not so likely to question an underlying identification: with a body that used to live in China and has now come to Australia.

A person's body is only one among many objects in the world. Why does a person identify with it? What is so special about this particular body that a person should single it out from the rest of the world, by thinking of it as 'I'?

There is one obvious way in which a person's body is different from other objects. It sees. It hears. It smells, tastes and feels. Other objects are seen, heard, smelled, tasted and felt. Whatever a person sees is seen by the body's eyes; whatever a person hears, smells or tastes is sensed by the body's ears, nose or tongue; and whatever a person physically feels is felt by the body's hands and feet and other parts. By contrast, objects outside a person's body are not thus directly involved in the knowing part of this person's experience. They belong, instead, to that part of experience which is known.

In each person's experience of the physical world, the body called 'I' is what knows, and other objects are known. *When identifying with a body, a person takes that particular body to be the knowing subject of experience, and the world is taken to be what is known.*

This leads to a philosophical position called 'materialism'. Here, the knowing subject of a person's experience is identified as a physical body, whose five senses know a material world outside. The senses bring information from the outside world into the body, in the form of electrochemical signals that are transmitted along the nerves to the brain. The brain is an electrochemical computer, which processes incoming signals so as to organize and store information that represents the outside world. On the basis of its information, the brain sends out signals that direct and co-ordinate the actions of the body, so as to express a person's knowledge of the world.

The body is thus a complex instrument that receives perceptions, organizes information and expresses knowledge. It is, in short, an instrument of knowledge. But this raises a question. If the body is an instrument, whose instrument is it? Who uses the body as an instrument, to receive and express knowledge in the world?

When it comes to predicting and controlling physical events, the materialist view is often useful. However, it has an inherent limitation. It does not describe our perceptions, thoughts and feelings as we directly experience them. It only describes them as physical events, which is not how they appear in our experience. For example, the colour red may be physically described as electromagnetic radiation of a particular wavelength. This description is technologically useful, for detecting and reproducing the colour by machine; but it does not describe the sensation of red that we directly experience. The sensation is not a physical event, in an outside world described by physical science. Instead, it is a mental appearance, in the stream of appearances that come and go in a person's mind.

Practical mind: observation and will

As seen from a person's mind, the body is an external instrument: which the mind uses to observe objects and to carry out its intentions in the world. This implies a further identification of self, which occurs for example when a person says 'I see' or 'I will'. The body is now seen as an external object, outside an observing and intending mind. The mind is

thus the inner part of a practical self that acts through a physical body, as knowledge is received and expressed.

This leads to a philosophical position called 'pragmatism'. Here, the self is identified as a working partnership of body and mind. Through the body, the mind knows an outer world that contains both physical objects and the minds of living creatures. Physical objects are known by interpreting sensations; and the minds of living creatures are known by interpreting their behaviour. Thus knowledge is a mixture of sensation and interpretation: which we somehow use to guide our own actions, and which we see expressed in the actions of other people and other living creatures.

This pragmatic view is usually taken for granted, as plain common sense. In the normal course of life, it is part of the common sense basis upon which we observe what happens and act towards what we want. When it is examined, however, an inherent question shows up. How do body and mind relate together, so as to form the working partnership that is identified as a person's self?

The question can be divided into two parts: first, by asking what happens when knowledge is taken into the mind, through perception and observation; and second, by asking what happens when knowledge is expressed in the outside world, through action and will.

As knowledge is taken in, how are sensations interpreted by the mind, so as to know objects that the body perceives in the outside world? Suppose, for example, that I am observing a tree. As I look at the tree, I see green and brown colours and swaying movements and branching shapes. As I listen, I hear rustling sounds. If the tree is in blossom, I may smell a delicate fragrance. If I pluck a fruit and bite into it, I may taste a sweet or sour or bitter flavour. If I go up to the trunk and put my hand on it, I may feel a rough or smooth or prickly sensation. As I interpret these raw sensations, I form an idea of the tree, in relation to other objects that I know. In other words, I interpret my observations of the tree by thinking about it, and by fitting this in with my thoughts about other things in the world.

As knowledge is expressed, how are the body's actions directed by the intentions of mind? Suppose I am going on a shopping trip into town. I think of what I want and where to get it; I go off with some idea of where to park and which shops to visit; and as I shop I go on thinking about what remains to be got, so that I can change my plans accordingly. In other words, I direct my actions by deciding on particular goals, by

planning how to achieve them, and by rethinking these plans in response to the results that are achieved.

In either case, the relationship between body and mind is not just a matter of observation and will. It implies an underlying level of mind, which includes thought.

Intellectual mind: conception and decision

As seen from the thinking mind or intellect, observation and will are outward instruments: which the intellect uses to conceive objects and to implement decisions in the world. Again, this implies a further identification of self: which occurs for example when a person says 'I think' or 'I decide'. The practical mind is now seen as an external object, outside of a conceiving and instructing mind. The intellect is thus an inner core of thinking self: which acts, through an outer layer of observation and will, in a physical body.

This leads to a philosophical position called 'idealism'. Here, the self is identified as a mind that conceives ideas and decides instructions. As perceptions are received from the outside world, the mind conceives ideas that are supposed to represent what has been perceived. From these ideas, it constructs descriptions of the world; and it forms prescriptions that instruct action and its objectives. Through further perception and enquiry, the mind can test its descriptions and prescriptions, in order to determine how far they are right or wrong. By deciding on where they are true and where they are false, it can progressively correct them, as it refines its fallible ideas into truer knowledge of the world.

Such an idealist view underlies most theoretical science. But, in its turn, it raises an inherent question. How does the mind conceive and decide? In particular, how does it create conceptions that usefully represent the world? And how does it tell right from wrong?

For example, suppose that I am stuck with a problem that I can't figure out. I have tried the usual ways of thinking about it, but they lead nowhere. How do I find with a new conception that will make things clearer? I can try talking the problem over with someone else; I can try brain-storming it by intense, repeated attention; I can try giving it up for a while and coming back to it later; I can try relaxing a bit and letting my mind range over other, related things; I can try sleeping on it and waiting for my mind to come up with fresh ideas. Any of these or other such methods might work, but they all depend on something in common.

They all depend on some kind of insight or inspiration or hunch, which comes up from within the mind and presents new ideas for thought.

Or, for a second example, suppose that I remember an incident differently from a friend, with whom I was at the time. In what I remember, there is something that just did not happen, according to my friend. Which one of us is wrong? Did I really see everything that I now remember? Is there something perhaps that I saw wrongly at the time, or something that I am misremembering now? Am I mixing up this incident with something that happened at another time or with something that I have merely dreamed or imagined? Or could my friend be lying, or have blotted a part of the incident from memory? To settle the issue, we might perhaps find further evidence and carry on with further analysis; but these too would be subject to interpretation. In telling right from wrong, or truth from falsity, the final decision is a matter of judgement: which implies an underlying sense of discriminating value, beneath the superficial appearances of thought.

Emotional mind: intuition and judgement

As seen from underlying feeling, the intellect is an external instrument: which feeling uses to clarify insight and to judge value. Once again, this implies a further identification of self: which occurs for example when a person says 'I feel' or 'I like' or 'I dislike'. The intellect is now seen as an external object, outside an intuitive and judging mind. The emotional mind is thus identified as an inner core of feeling self: which acts, through outer layers of intellectual and practical mind, in the physical body.

This leads to a philosophical position that is associated with ethics and religion. Here, the self is identified as a personal 'psyche' or 'soul', which undergoes good and bad experiences. As perceptions are received from the outside world, and as ideas are conceived by thought, the 'psyche' or 'soul' experiences feelings of like and dislike, hope and fear, enjoyment and suffering. Such feelings transform the raw sensations of perception and the symbolic representations of thought into experiences of living value. And, along with this transformation, these feelings spontaneously motivate the intuitive conceptions of thought and the intended aims of will.

In the course of a person's life, the 'psyche' or 'soul' experiences the results of past feelings, thoughts and actions. By correcting those false

motivations that lead to unwanted results, it can purify its character; and it can thus clarify its judgements and intuitions into truer knowledge of living experience and the world.

If this moral or religious view is reflected upon, it raises, in its turn, an underlying question. How does the 'psyche' or the 'soul' relate the different experiences of life? In particular, how does it put particular perceptions and ideas together, in a more general insight or intuition that somehow includes them all? And how does it compare the qualities of different things, as it comes to a judgement of value?

For example, suppose that I meet an old friend, whom I have not seen for many years. She has changed quite a bit; her hair has been cut short; and she is dressed quite differently from the girl I knew. At first I do not recognize her; but then I notice something familiar about the cut of her face, the way she speaks, and her manner of expression. She may have changed, but she is the same old friend: with essentially the same interests and convictions that I remember. How do my past and present perceptions come together, as I recognize who she is and get to know her again? Evidently, my past perceptions are somehow understood at the background of my experience, as I perceive my friend in the present. And as I take in my present perceptions, they too get assimilated into my understanding, which carries on into the future. Thus past and present perceptions are assimilated together into understanding, which comes to bear on future perceptions, in the course of continuing experience.

Or, for a second example, suppose I am interviewing applicants for a job. How do I judge each applicant, in relation to others? As I focus attention on each particular applicant, my impressions and expectations of other applicants are understood at the background of my experience, thus providing a standard of comparison. Without such a background of understanding, I would not be able to focus attention on any particular thing, while taking other experience into account.

Understanding: comprehension and co-ordination

As seen from understanding, the emotional mind is an external instrument, which understanding uses to assimilate perceptions and to co-ordinate mental and physical activity. Yet again, this implies a further identification of self: which occurs for example when a person says 'I realize' or 'I continue'. The emotional mind is now seen as an external object: outside a quietly knowing background of understanding that con-

tinues behind the scenes, while a passing parade of perceptions, thoughts and feelings takes up attention at the changing surface of a person's mind. The understanding is thus identified as an inner core of background self: which acts, through outer layers of mind and body, in a physical and mental world.

This leads to a philosophical position called 'relativism'. Here, the self is identified as a continuing witness, at the subjective background of experience. It knows the world through a person's body, senses and mind: which bring it a succession of perceptions, thoughts and feelings that appear and disappear at the surface of mental attention. Thus, in the course of each person's experience, it knows the world through a stream of passing appearances, perceived from different points of view.

These different views of the world are partial and relative. Since our bodies, our senses and our minds are limited instruments of perception, they do not see everything at once. Each of their limited views shows only part of the truth. It cannot show everything, but only something more or something less than other views. It has to be understood as relative to its own point of view, so that it may be related to other views. Through such a relative understanding, we can put our different views together, into a more complete and truer knowledge of the world.

This relativist position is essentially a compromise. It is a compromise that has to be made in all our knowledge of the world that we perceive through our bodies, our senses and our minds. The physical and mental world is unavoidably relative. It can only be known relatively, with a degree of ignorance always mixed into our knowledge of it.

Unfortunately, such a mixture of ignorance necessarily creates a confused appearance, which hides part of what it shows. But our relative knowledge can do no better than this. All that we can ever know of the world is a changing stream of confused appearances. It is futile to look for any continuing and definite reality in them.

The same applies to our bodies and minds, which are just parts of the world. They too are known only as confused appearances, which come and go in our experience. There is no fixed and permanent body, apart from its changing actions and reactions. No enduring mind persists through experience, independent of its changing thoughts and feelings. When thoughts and feelings disappear, so too does the mind. In the course of a person's life, it is futile to look for any continuing 'psyche' or 'soul' that enjoys good times and suffers ill.

But, even when the world has thus been reduced to a changing stream of relative appearances, a further question arises. How is change known? As each state of experience gives way to other states, what consciousness continues through these changing states, so as to know the change that has taken place?

There is a dilemma here. This continuing consciousness cannot be any particular object, nor any limited activity, in the world perceived by body, senses and mind. Unlike such objects and activities, it does not appear and disappear in the course of experience. It does not come into experience through perception, and it does not go away again when attention turns elsewhere. Instead, it is always present, throughout experience, knowing all the appearances that come and go.

But, if it cannot be any object or activity in the world, and if it cannot be perceived by our bodies, nor by our senses, nor by our minds; then just what could it be and how can it be known?

Consciousness

What is meant by the word 'consciousness'? Essentially, consciousness is that which knows, in all our experiences of knowledge. It is the knowing principle that is shared in common by our different perceptions, thoughts and feelings. In this sense, each perception, thought or feeling is an appearance of underlying consciousness. As perceptions, thoughts and feelings come and go at the surface of mental attention, they are changing appearances of this common, knowing principle: which underlies each moment of experience. As its appearances change at the limited surface of mental attention, it continues at the background of experience, through every moment that we know.

For example, suppose that I come out of a warm house on a cold day, and previous perceptions of relaxing warmth give way to rather different perceptions of invigorating or numbing cold. How do I know this change and variation of differing perceptions? Clearly, I do so on the basis of an underlying consciousness that continues through the change, thus enabling differing perceptions of cold and warmth to be compared and co-ordinated into a coherent knowledge of temperature. Without such an underlying basis of consciousness, knowledge could not continue through time; and different perceptions, thoughts and feelings could not be put together in coherent knowledge. Nor could there be any kind

of relative knowledge; for there would be no comparison of differences and no possible sense of 'more' or 'less'.

At the limited surface of mental attention, consciousness appears mixed with objects. It appears as a changing activity, directed towards objects that a person perceives or thinks about or feels. Through personal faculties of perception, thought and feeling, consciousness seems to act towards particular objects, so as to make them known. Thus it appears as a personal 'consciousness of objects': which keeps on changing, as attention turns towards differing objects and perceives them from different points of view.

But this personal 'consciousness of objects' is a mixture of two different things: of mental activity and knowing consciousness. On the one hand, perceptions, thoughts and feelings act in our minds so as to create appearances of objects. On the other hand, as these appearances are formed, they are known by consciousness, without which they could not appear. And as they change at the limited forefront of the mind, consciousness continues at the background of experience; for otherwise there could be no knowledge of the change that has taken place.

How are appearances known by consciousness? They are known only when they are contained in it. No appearance can ever be known apart from consciousness. Anything that has not come into consciousness cannot appear. Nor can anything that has left consciousness. So all appearances are known at the background of experience: where consciousness remains, as it continues through time.

At first, there seems a bit of a paradox here, because no mind can see its own underlying basis of consciousness. As the mind forms appearances, it cannot see the consciousness that illuminates them. What appears in our minds is only a changing mental activity that gets mistaken for consciousness. Thus our minds get to think that appearances are known at the changing surface of mental attention. But such thoughts of surface knowledge are not really knowledge at all. They are only thoughts, and misleading thoughts at that. In fact, no appearance can be known unless it is taken into underlying consciousness: which continues at the back ground of experience, beneath the superficial changes that take place at the limited forefront of our minds.

There really is no knowledge at the surface of the mind, where consciousness appears conditioned by physical and mental objects. The seemingly conditioned consciousness of perception, thought and feeling is

only a false appearance: created by a mistaken confusion of mental activity with illuminating consciousness.

Because of this confusion, our minds seem to be 'conscious' at the surface, and they seem 'unconscious' below. In fact, the very opposite is true. Though our minds seem lit at the surface, the light actually comes from below. It is at the surface of the mind that consciousness gets obscured: by the mixed-up, mental perception that is called 'consciousness of objects'. At the underlying depth of the mind, there are no objects, there is no mixed-up perception and no seeming 'consciousness of objects'. There is only consciousness itself: which we often call 'the unconscious', because our minds are unable to see it. But whether we call it 'consciousness', or whether we think of it paradoxically as 'the unconscious' (because it is 'unconscious' of objects), it is always here, always the same: as that which lights all appearances.

Since no appearances can exist apart from consciousness, none of them have any existence independent of it. No appearances can be anything other than consciousness. Accordingly, they cannot mix consciousness with any physical or mental objects other than itself. *As consciousness continues at the background of experience, it remains unmixed with any physical or mental objects that could condition it. It is thus pure consciousness, unconditioned by anything that happens in the changing world.*

A person's body, senses and mind are instruments of knowledge. Each of them acts between an inner self that knows and an outer world that is known. By contrast, consciousness is not an instrument. Its knowledge is not an action that some instrument carries out towards an object. As appearances of the world are perceived by the actions of body, senses and mind, consciousness does not act at all. It just remains as it is, through all the changing appearances of world.

As appearances come and go, they depend entirely on consciousness for their illumination. But they are not illuminated by any *act* of consciousness. An act is something 'put on': something that may or may not be done, that may be done well or badly, to a greater or lesser extent. Consciousness does not put on any act. It does not *do* anything to light appearances. They are illuminated by what consciousness *is*. Its very being is to know.

Since appearances are illuminated only when they come into consciousness, they cannot be known as other than consciousness. As consciousness lights appearances, it only knows itself. All appearances and the

entire world are lit by this self-knowledge, which is the very being of consciousness. In everyone's experience, it is the self that knows.

When a person identifies with a body, then this body is taken to know a world of physical objects. However, when the body is seen as an instrument that carries knowing senses, then these senses are identified as a perceiving self within the body. And further, when the senses are seen as instruments of knowing mind, then this mind is identified as a thinking and feeling self within both senses and body. Finally, when mind is seen as an instrument of underlying consciousness, then it is this underlying consciousness that is identified as a purely knowing self: within outer layers of mental, sensual and physical personality.

In all these differing identifications, one thing is common. *The self is that which knows. It is the knowing subject of a person's experience.* When body is identified as self, a physical consciousness is attributed to its actions. Similarly, when senses or mind are identified as self, a sensual or mental consciousness is attributed to their activities.

However, there is something essentially wrong with this attribution of consciousness to physical or sensual or mental actions. The body is an object of knowledge. It is something that is known, not something that knows. The body's actions are also objects of knowledge. They too are things that are known; and they cannot constitute the consciousness that knows them. The body's actions cannot *be* consciousness. They can only *express* a consciousness of which they are superficial and incomplete appearances. Exactly the same argument applies to the activities of our senses and our minds. When body or senses or mind are supposed to have some kind of physical or sensual or mental consciousness, this supposedly qualified consciousness is just a mistaken confusion. It is just a false appearance that results from confusing underlying consciousness with its superficial expressions in physical and sensual and mental action.

Accordingly, there is something essentially wrong with the identification of self as body, or senses, or mind. They are only objects, which act upon other objects in the world. Their supposedly qualified consciousness is only a false confusion of underlying consciousness with its superficial expression in their actions. In themselves, they do not know anything; but are only instruments that express consciousness. They are part of the world in which they act, as distinct from the self that knows this world's appearances. But they are falsely identified as self; along

with the false assumption that they somehow know experience, through a conditioned consciousness of the world.

This false identification of self is called 'ego'. It creates an impression of personal self: made up of body, senses and mind, whose conditioned actions somehow bring changing experience of a perceived world. Thus, a limited and conditioned personality is made to seem the centre of living experience, as each person perceives the world. The result is an inevitable distortion of personal experience: with undue importance attached to a limited body, a limited set of senses and a limited mind, in an uncertain world imperfectly perceived by their own limited capabilities.

When a person's ego is inflated, it overrates its personal capabilities of action, perception, thought and feeling. When the ego is deflated, it underrates these personal capabilities. In either case, it gives them undue importance: by supposing that they affect the consciousness of knowing self, when in fact they only affect what happens to the conditioned personality that is falsely identified with self.

As consciousness continues through experience, the knowing self is always there as well. Both self and consciousness are always present together. They have no existence independent of each other; for neither is ever there without the other. They are one and the same thing.

Through all the changes of apparent experience, the real self is consciousness, unmixed with anything else. It is impersonal: unconditioned and unaffected by changing personality. It is identified when a person says 'I know' or 'I am conscious', after removing all confusion of knowledge with its expression in personal or instrumental action towards limited objects.

This leads to a philosophical position called 'non-dualism'. Here, there is no duality between what knows and what is known. There is only non-dual consciousness, which knows all things as nothing other than self.

True self is what one knows only by being it. In search of it, the mind enquires back within, through thought and feeling, towards the source from which all feelings and thoughts arise. This source is unmixed consciousness, where knowing and being are identical.