

Contemplation in retreat

Katalin Balog

“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.”
William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

In this paper,¹ I wish to draw attention to a connection between current changes in the concept of mind and cultural trends that disfavor the cultivation of conscious experience. There is a strain in contemporary philosophy and science that questions the very existence of consciousness. At the same time, trends in our culture, accelerated lately by technological developments, undermine the incentives and space to attend to conscious awareness. A view of the mind that denies the existence of consciousness leads us further away from engagement with consciousness at a time when our ability for such engagement has already been seriously undermined by the digitalization of our lives, social media, and AI. At the same time, these technological changes might make us more receptive to the corrosive view that we lack consciousness.

These developments are mutually reinforcing, and they are worrisome. Consciousness exists, as I will argue, and it is of central importance in our lives. Value is grounded in affective consciousness. There is a mental process, which I will call contemplation, that is more than just having conscious experience: it is the deployment of attention to the content of one's experience, for example, the color of the ocean, the sounds of a piano, or a feeling of happiness. Contemplation is essential for a life oriented toward value and meaning; it is essential in the quest to find the best way to live. Without contemplation, we will be increasingly defenseless against digital technologies setting the agenda of our lives.

In the first part, after charting its development, I explain and critique the illusionist view. In the second part, I explore the connection between value and consciousness. In the third part, I discuss the significance of contemplation as well as the obstacles to its practice.

1. The transformations of mind

The disenchantment of the world

Not so long ago, people had a very different concept of mind and human nature. Our European heritage is a view in which we are souls with a body. The soul was thought to be immortal and exempt from the laws of nature, a source of agency undetermined by anything outside its own boundaries. It was commonly held that only the soul could truly exhibit creativity and intelligence,

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which no mere mechanism could replicate. Some of this is quite intuitive, and its remnants are deeply ingrained in how we still think about ourselves. Descartes – who was also one of the founders of modern science – gave voice to many of these ideas, and his treatment of these issues is the foundation of contemporary philosophy of mind.²

During the last three hundred years, and especially in the 20th century, science has brought about monumental changes in how we think about ourselves. Brain science has shown that the mind and the brain are tied together in a systematic way. But what proved most consequential is the tremendous progress of physics, particularly the idea, generally endorsed by scientists and philosophers, that every physical event can be fully explained in terms of prior physical causes. Since physical events include the movements of our bodies through space, it follows that actions have purely physical causes. This leaves no room for the independent causal agency of the soul. Consequently, belief in an immaterial, immortal soul not determined by physical reality - and a belief in God - has declined, first among the scientifically literate public and then more widely. A gradual “disenchantment”³ of the world has taken place. Physicalism - the view that everything in the universe, including minds, is fundamentally physical, is ascendant.⁴ According to physicalism, mental processes – like feeling hungry or believing in the efficacy of vaccines – happen by virtue of complicated physical processes in the brain.

More recently, the rise of artificial intelligence calls into question the uniqueness of human creativity, the very idea of distinctly human activities such as storytelling, poetry, art, and music. Some predict that artificial intelligence, even perhaps soon, will be able to replicate every aspect of our humanity, except, arguably though controversially, conscious experience. Some techno-utopians eagerly anticipate this, as well as the development of life-like virtual worlds (Chalmers, 2022) where we will be able to spend much of our time.

In other words, there is not much about the premodern conception that has survived these changes, except the view that we are conscious beings, i.e., that there is, in Thomas Nagel’s (1974) expression, something *it is like* to be us. There is something it is like to hear the waves lapping against the shore or see water shimmering in a glass. Being a human being who perceives the world and who thinks and feels comes with a phenomenology of which we can be directly aware.

Illusionism as an account of consciousness

But recently, even this last residue of our traditional concept of mind is under attack. *Illusionism* – as its prominent proponent, Keith Frankish (2016), has started to call the view – claims that consciousness doesn’t exist. If this is right, no one has ever felt the pangs of jealousy or the thrill of first love, not at least in the sense that there would be something it is like to undergo such experiences. We have gone from a concept of mind that assigned humans a very special and central place in the universe to illusionism: an understanding of the mind stripped of just about every feature that once assured us of our unique importance and purpose, one that denies the reality of even the most intimately known, and central feature of the mind, consciousness.

² See Descartes (1985), his collected works. You can find these views in many of them, especially in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

³ For a historical and philosophical description of this process, see, for example, Taylor (2014), chapter 12.

⁴ For a fascinating history of how the causal closure principle came to be widely accepted by the middle of the 20th century, see Papineau 2001.

As far as I know, no one has questioned the existence of consciousness before the twentieth century, at least in the Western tradition.⁵ In the early twentieth century, however, the scientific developments leading to the dominance of physicalism, paired with a scientific critique of existing theories in psychology, led philosophical behaviorists like Gilbert Ryle (2002) to start broaching the possibility that consciousness is a mirage. Ryle eschewed the first-person perspective so prominent in Cartesianism and made the third person the cornerstone of all knowledge and meaning. According to him, there is nothing more to consciousness than certain dispositions for behavior, such as discrimination, verbal response, etc. The inner state we are aware of when we look inside is a myth.

While behaviorism in its original form has been discredited, the late twentieth century has seen a revival of consciousness denial.⁶ Here is a prominent denier of consciousness, Daniel Dennett (2018, p. 359):

It is your ability to describe ‘the red stripe,’ your judgment, your willingness to make the assertions you just made, and your emotional reactions (if any) to ‘the red stripe’ that is the source of your conviction that there is a subjective red stripe.

The neuroscientist Michael Graziano (2014) puts the idea this way:

We have an awareness of information we process. What is this mysterious aspect of ourselves? Many theories have been proposed, but none have passed scientific muster. I believe a major change in our perspective on consciousness may be necessary, a shift from a credulous and egocentric viewpoint to a skeptical and slightly disconcerting one: namely, that we don’t actually have inner feelings in the way most of us think we do.

Their claims collide with common sense and a long tradition in philosophy. It seems quite obvious that we are conscious. Descartes’ Cogito is based on the idea that when we become aware of our thinking (by which Descartes means any conscious state), its reality is the one thing we cannot be deluded about, even if we are deluded about everything else, even if there is no world at all outside of our minds. Reflection on what is involved in awareness of our thinking reveals why this is so.

It is a crucial fact about self-awareness that when we introspect our perceptions, feelings, etc., we form phenomenal concepts *through* attending to them. Attention latches on to these states and *turns them* into concepts of themselves by exemplification. Consequently, phenomenal concepts leave no distance, so to speak, between themselves and the experience they represent. When I reflect on my feeling angry, I know for sure that I do have feelings (that I am not, as philosophers like to put it, a “zombie”) and that I am feeling angry (and not, e.g., languid). This is a priori knowledge in a loose sense, in the sense that no further empirical evidence – e.g., evidence from the neurosciences – could dislodge it. It is an example of what Descartes calls “clear and distinct” understanding.

⁵ But see Chaturvedi (2024), who argues, not entirely convincingly, that at least one school of Indian Buddhist philosophy was already skeptical about consciousness thousands of years ago.

⁶ Illusionist views have recently been proposed by Dennett (1988, 1991, 2018); Rey (1995); Perebrom (2011, 2019); Kammerer (2016, 2021); Frankish (2016); Blackmore (2016); in neuroscience, see Graziano (2014, 2016, 2019), Rosenberg (2016).

Of course, one can deny this – in the way one can deny knowledge of mathematical truths as well – by calling into question clear and distinct ideas. Illusionists would have us believe that consciousness is a giant hoax, something like the hoax of Descartes’ Evil Demon conjuring up the illusion of a world, only worse. They claim that while our beliefs about our own mind *seem* secure, even if an Evil Demon tries to deceive us about every other aspect of the world, they really aren’t. According to them, these beliefs – about what it is like to see, feel, imagine, etc. - are, in fact – and not merely in possibility – illusory. This is a very strange and counterintuitive view. Establishing it would require more than merely pointing at the possibility of a causal breakdown between representations and what they represent, as illusionists usually do. Recent literature on the unreliability of introspection in general – while raising reasonable doubts about issues such as, e.g. the knowledge of our motives (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), the quality of peripheral vision (Dennett, 1991), or imageless thought (Kusch, 1999) – simply does not apply to the case of presently attended experience.

There is an interesting move – a bait and switch of sorts - illusionists make about consciousness. Frankish (2024) suggests that we have a core conception of conscious experience that is *neutral* about whether there is really something it is like to have them. According to this core conception, he agrees that we are conscious. Similarly, Dennett (2018), the Ur-illusionist:

I don’t deny the existence of consciousness; of course, consciousness exists; it just isn’t what most people think it is, as I have said many times.

Illusionists agree that most people think about consciousness in exactly the way that they reject. But they are unbothered by it as they think it is science’s job to refine our everyday concepts, which is exactly what they see themselves as doing. When biologists at the beginning of the twentieth century denied that life is a vital force, this was not to deny that anyone is alive. Frankish’s (2024) proposal is that conscious states are response patterns in the brain, very complex functional states, which somehow (erroneously) create the belief that we have a subjective inner life. What is really going on is that

[e]ach stimulus produces a huge wave of neural adjustments to systems controlling attention, expectation, motivation, emotion, and many other functions, adjusting the organism’s global state and orientation to the world. p.5

Granted, science and philosophy can and have gone against deeply held common-sense views. Prominent examples concern the nature of physical objects (containing mostly empty space), causation (not an inner, unobservable force), and, more controversially, the self (not a mental substance), free will (not incompatible with determinism), and life (not a life force). But the case of experience is not like that. The problem with this approach is that the concept of consciousness is very much *unlike* the concept of life – a functional notion, even if for a long time it was theorized to be driven by *elan vital*. There is no reason to think, and illusionists haven’t supplied such reasons either, that our concept of consciousness is topic-neutral in the required sense. Their idea is that “consciousness” is a cipher, a mere disguise that can be filled in by science (or erroneous common sense, as the case might be), but it itself cannot be analyzed to reveal its meaning. But “consciousness” has a meaning that is immediately revealed in introspection of experience, and we are all intimately familiar with it from our own case. There is no room to argue, like in the case of life, that what seemed plausible as an explanation of the phenomenon turned out to be false. For

that move to work, our idea of consciousness would have to be just a theory of what fills a certain role, but our notion of consciousness is not a functional one. Illusionists attempt to have it both ways: they deny the existence of what everyone else thinks consciousness is, but at the same time want to maintain that we are conscious. This doesn't work.

As Strawson (2019, p. 33) points out:

when Dennett says that consciousness exists he reversifies or looking-glasses the ordinary meaning of the word “consciousness”. That is, he uses the word in such a way that what he means by it excludes what the word actually means. More moderately: he uses the word in such a way that what he means by it excludes what it is standardly (almost universally) used to mean —especially in discussions of this sort.

However, despite the implausibility of their view, illusionists persist. They pride themselves on doing away with the last remnants of our premodern view of ourselves. Just as it turned out to be untenable that we are immaterial souls capable of influencing matter independently or that we have libertarian free will, so it goes that consciousness is a fiction as well. Its adherents take themselves to be hardnosed thinkers following reason wherever it leads. They find illusionism exciting in the way some atheists found Darwinism exciting in the nineteenth century, partly *because* it unseated traditional views about creation. The difference is that illusionists lack real scientific reasons for denying consciousness. But they operate on the scientific assumption that whatever can't be demonstrated or understood from the objective perspective of the physical sciences – which include the cognitive neurosciences – doesn't exist. Since consciousness as such is beyond the grasp of third-person scientific methods and concepts, it is on the chopping block. They think that science is on their side, while those who insist on common sense about consciousness and introspection are mere reactionaries.

Their reasons for this conviction are indirect, short of actual scientific discoveries that would prove the inexistence of consciousness – as the discovery of oxygen proved the inexistence of phlogiston. Some illusionists (e.g., Frankish 2016) appeal to a family of philosophical arguments – the conceivability arguments⁷ – that purport to show that the existence of consciousness is not compatible with physicalism, and since physicalism – as the scientifically supported causal closure principle suggests⁸ – is true, illusionism follows. Though this is a complicated and much-debated philosophical question, one can reasonably argue that a purely physical universe can contain conscious minds is tenable.⁹ This takes the wind out of the conceivability arguments as a way to support illusionism by appealing to physicalism.¹⁰

⁷ See, e.g., Kripke 1972, Nagel, 1974, Jackson 1982 and Chalmers 1996.

⁸ See Papineau (2001).

⁹ There is a physicalist answer to these arguments, based on what Stoljar (2005) calls the “phenomenal concept strategy”. The phenomenal concept strategy was first articulated by Brian Loar (1990, 1997), who argued that the epistemic, conceptual, and explanatory gaps between phenomenal and physical descriptions can be explained by an appeal to the nature of phenomenal concepts and not by real metaphysical gaps between the physical and the phenomenal. For developments of his view, see Block (2006), Papineau (2006), and Balog (1999, 2012a, 2012b, 2023).

¹⁰ But even if it turned out, as Chalmers (1996) argues, that subjective experience cannot exist in a purely physical universe, it would be more reasonable to give up belief in the universe being purely physical than give up the belief in consciousness.

2. Value and experience

“All *primordial* comportment toward the world...is a *primordial emotional* comportment of *value-ception*.” (Max Scheler 1916)

While the mind was cut to size during the Enlightenment, the subjective side of the account, the felt sense of perceiving, imagining, and feeling, has taken on a greater role in accounting for value.¹¹ Conscious experience has become more central than it was in our premodern, objectivist conception of value. The key idea is twofold: that value is primarily *grasped* in phenomenal experience and that value itself is *grounded* in such experience.

In perception, our experience represents affective as well as strictly perceptual properties. More is presented in a visual experience than standard perceptual properties, such as color, shape, illumination, motion, etc. The flower appears pale blue and fragrant, its shape sharply defined; if I pay proper attention, it also appears delicate, refreshing, and delightful. Such sensuous, affective features give the world its significance at the most fundamental level. Freshness or beauty is as much part of the content of my experience of the flower as is its color and shape. In experience, things can appear beautiful, kitschy, sublime, horrific, appealing, or repulsive. Perhaps all normal experience is affective – things don’t tend to be experienced as entirely neutral.

Not only is it the case that value is apprehended primarily in affective experience, but it is also grounded in it. Things have value in virtue of their resonating in the affective experience of conscious beings.¹² Furthermore, it can be argued that *only* affective experience grounds value.¹³ This might seem an overly bold claim. To see if it is right, imagine a person, let us call her, in a twist on Frank Jackson’s (1982) Knowledge Argument, Insensate Mary.¹⁴ Though she perceives things much like normal people – for example, colors, shapes, textures, etc. – she lacks the sensuous appreciation of value. The thought experiment relies on the idea that perceptual and affective content can come apart. It seems likely that they can vary somewhat independently. We all experienced walking the same streets or looking at the same objects, experiencing them wildly differently depending on our mood or general state of mind. What was drab and uninspiring one day might be exciting another day. To take an example that is more directly relevant, consider the way morphine affects pain: it apparently leaves sensory content intact but entirely removes the affective component, the awfulness of pain.

Insensate Mary, then, when she sees a roadside accident, has no “gut reaction” to it: she feels no aversion, no horror, no sadness, or, as the case might be, no morbid curiosity. When she is with her loved ones, she feels no love or joy from their presence. She has never experienced the myriad ways of suffering and joy. It should be clear that Insensate Mary does not only lack an understanding of suffering and joy but also of the *badness* of suffering and the *goodness* of joy. It is rather obvious that these and other value concepts can only be had by creatures with affectively valenced experiences

¹¹ For a critical discussion see Lewis (1947).

¹² It is a further question that I cannot be discussed here how moral value arises from a world of significance through experience.

¹³ See, e.g., Brentano 1952; Kriegel 2018, Ch. 9; and Siewert 2013. It is hard to find philosophers who deny that consciousness grounds experience, even if they believe other things could also ground it. Even Kammerer (2019) allows that consciousness *would* ground value if it existed (he argues it does not).

¹⁴ Siewert 1998 was the first to present a zombie argument for this conclusion.

that reveal them. Insensate Mary, then, is blind to value.¹⁵

But could it turn out that these values are not “inherently” sensuous, in other words, that, even in the absence of relevant experience, she could still form some other, objective conception of them? And more importantly, that she could still value things? Illusionists think so.¹⁶

The illusionist account of value

Frankish argues, in response to my criticism (Balog, 2023) about the value nihilism of illusionism that pain’s badness – like its consciousness - *can* be explained in terms of its functional role.¹⁷

When in severe pain, we have a powerful sense that some region of our body is being harmed. This sense obtrudes itself upon us, seizing our attention, disturbing our patterns of thought and activity, and creating an overwhelming desire for relief. In pain, we are passive, helpless, restless, anxious, and fearful. It is a highly aversive state, which we fear, strive to avoid, and are concerned to witness in others. Pain’s badness lies precisely in such reactions.

Notice that he uses many words that themselves refer to conscious states, such as “fear,” “anxiety,” “desire,” etc. Of course, Frankish would understand these terms to similarly refer to complex response patterns in the brain.

But this is deeply counterintuitive, for the same reasons we have discussed in the context of the functional account of conscious states. Frankish’s account of the badness of pain has any plausibility at all because it appeals to many other conscious states we understand from our own experience (distress, fear, etc.). In any case, considered as a topic-neutral explanation that appeals strictly to response patterns in the brain, one is at a loss how it actually proposes to account for the *badness* of what is experienced. It seems that whatever it accounts for is *not* the human concept of the badness of pain; it is an alternative, surrogate concept that doesn’t capture what we “standardly (almost universally)” mean. If our standard meaning were defective, it would be reasonable to propose that we revise the meaning. But I contend that there is nothing defective in the notion of consciousness and value as standardly used, and illusionist accounts of them merely succeed in changing the topic.

Illusionists have not embraced these conclusions. Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the thought that, if illusionists are right, value is illusory.

3. The importance of contemplation

¹⁵ Kammerer (2019) calls this the “normative challenge”. But he thinks illusionists might be able to answer it.

¹⁶ And not only illusionists. Chalmers, for example, in talks and conversations, has asserted that a world of Vulcans (creatures with conscious experiences who nevertheless lack any affectively colored ones – like Insensate Mary) can sustain value and significance. There are other philosophers who do not deny the existence of consciousness but question its relevance for value. Papineau (in this volume) argues that consciousness is indeterminate and so not an appropriate ground for value. For an answer to this argument, see Balog (2019). Lee (2018) suggests that if physicalism is true, consciousness cannot have the special significance people attach to it. Though his argument merits a detailed rebuttal which I can’t do here, let me just say here that I disagree with the idea that significance can be approached from a purely metaphysical perspective, ignoring the conceptual schemes involved.

¹⁷ Frankish came up with this account partly in response to criticism in Balog (2023).

The upshot of our discussion is that values are primarily apprehended in experience. Even if the sciences in the future will greatly enhance the understanding of human psychology in a general way, we could not understand *ourselves* – our emotions, aspirations, loves, and passions, everything that moves us – without introspection. As Kierkegaard (1981, p. 78-79) said: ...

this is the wonder of life, that each man who is mindful of himself knows what no science knows, since he knows who himself is.

Consequently, orienting toward meaning and value involves contemplating conscious experience. Contemplation is a distinct process that is, like conceptual thought, partly voluntary: paying attention to the content – including the affective content - of one’s experience, seeing how what one encounters in the world makes one feel.¹⁸ In contemplation, experience is “held” in attention and explored without a particular goal. This is different from other forms of attention, which are fast-moving and task oriented. Contemplation brings associations among memories, images, fantasies, and thoughts.

It happens in small ways every time we stop to appreciate the world as it is, every time we are present for what is happening deliberately, rather than breezing through in automatic pilot (or being absorbed in thought to the exclusion of experience). One might contemplate nature, art, or other people’s presence (instead of just thinking about their words). It could be a state of reflection reading a novel or poem. It could be just sitting and mulling over some experience of the day. Though values – the ruggedness of a landscape, the velvetiness of a wine, or the warmth of someone’s voice – are perceived in experience, they are not always readily so. Their discernment requires focus and patience. Contrary to a widely held conception, contemplation does not mean an inward focus on experience itself, a drawing back of one’s attention to the self. It may very well consist of an experiential focus on the *objects* of experience.

But not all is well with our ability to contemplate. Laments about young people’s inability to read novels¹⁹, or pay undivided attention to anything have reached a panicky intensity lately. There is a common thread to these problems, and of course, they do not only afflict the kids. We are all losing our ability to contemplate. Young people are in an especially difficult place: whereas older people still remember and possess that ability to some degree, younger people have not had the opportunity to pick it up in the first place. While it always required a certain amount of leisure and cultivation, today, contemplation is widely underappreciated and is in decline. Before I say more about the reasons for this decline, I will highlight a few of its benefits.

Grasping values

¹⁸ ‘Reflection’ is another word for this; I nevertheless prefer ‘contemplation’ for its closer association with deliberate attention. This association also makes it possible to distinguish it from rumination, which is an obsessive and automatic rather than a deliberate and voluntary process. Of course, it is hard to sort thinking neatly into categories; one style of thought might bleed into another. But I hope the idea is clear enough to be useful.

¹⁹ Horowitch 2024.

Since value is grounded in experience, contemplation leads to more, and more accurate knowledge of value. In Sinan Antoon's novel on the Iraq war, *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist describes his job in this way:

If death is a postman, then I receive his letters every day. I am the one who opens carefully the bloodied and torn envelopes. I am the one who washes them, who removes the stamps of death and dries and perfumes them mumbling what I don't entirely believe in. Then I wrap them carefully in white so they may reach their final reader – the grave.

The corpse washer, as a function of his occupation, attains a more direct, experiential perspective on war's destruction than those who learn about it from the news. He sees and *contemplates*, over and over, the bodies, maimed, drained of life. His contemplation reveals not just the gun-shot wounds, corpses, and destruction but also their particular awfulness. Such perception of dreadfulness forms the basis of further associations – it brings up related memories and images of violence. Attention to all this throws the dreadfulness of war into sharp relief.

Sensibility can be trained in many ways – art, music, mountain climbing, and even corpse-washing are ways to increase sensibility. It proceeds by joining contemplation with conceptual elaboration. The experience of an arpeggio is different for one who has the concept, and for one who doesn't; war's ravages are different for someone who has the experience and vocabulary to grasp its gruesome details than for someone who doesn't. The more attention one pays and the greater conceptual sophistication one has, the more fine-grained one's understanding of the world through experience, and the more fine-grained one's discernment of the values manifesting in it.

The corpse washer's experiences lead him to grasp war's significance in ways that separate him from people who hear about it from the news. This kind of difference in understanding is manifest, for example, in debates between survivors of mass shootings and politicians in charge of gun laws. The survivor thinks about gun violence experientially, with a better understanding of the stakes involved than the politician who tends to think about it in impoverished, sanitized terms such as "civilian casualty" or "a breach of public safety".

To the degree that one's evaluative life centers around abstract concepts while having dimmed the perception of value, one has cut the source of one's connection to value. Life becomes cerebral and deadened.²⁰

Appreciating the world

According to the Buddhist and Daoist tradition, contemplation fosters appreciation. The point is not just that contemplation discloses goods to pursue – it also leads to valuing life as such. It can bestow vividness and meaning on ordinary, boring, everyday activities; only it can create the sense that one's life has touched the world. As D.T. Suzuki (1956, p. 58) remarks:

²⁰ Indeed, contemplation may be a last resort for moral agency when normal moral thought had lost its purchase, as in situations of extreme dehumanization. In the film *Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015) the protagonist Saul, a prisoner in Auschwitz, is first shown in a deadened state of being. In the opening scenes he hardly pays attention to any of the killing happening around him – he is just doing his tasks in a mechanical way. He regains a sense of agency amidst the general chaos after witnessing, with his attention focused on it like a laser beam, the murder of one particular person, who he later declares to be his son (the movie is ambiguous about whether that is so). He now has a mission: to try to arrange a proper funeral.

Life, as far as it is lived in concreto, is above concepts as well as images. To understand it we have to dive into and come in touch with it personally; to pick up or cut out a piece of it for inspection murders it; when you think you have got into the essence of it; it is no more, for it has ceased to live but lies immobile and all dried up.

In “Blacksmith Shop”, Czeslaw Milosz (1991) expresses the point vividly; the poem’s imagery mixes with one’s own memories, creating the sense of awe it expresses:

At the entrance, my bare feet on the dirt floor,
Here, gusts of heat; at my back, white clouds,
I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this:
To glorify things just because they are.

“*Slow decisions*”

moral change and moral achievement are slow...the exercise of our freedom...is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and ... not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. (Murdoch 1970, p. 33)

One might decide between career choices by weighing them in relatively abstract, preconceived terms, such as the pay involved, the security the job offers, opportunities for learning, etc. Alternatively, one might frame the decision as a *discovery* of what it *might be like* to work in those occupations. Such framing allows a more fine-grained and nuanced sense of the values involved as well as a more authentic appreciation of them.

The first kind of deliberation, with its straightforward considerations of value and chance of success, is usually fast (though it might not be if information about some aspect of the situation is lacking). It typically doesn’t take weeks or months to complete. On the other hand, when decisions are made in this way, they often have limited power to change behavior, as the fate of New Year’s resolutions shows. Exploratory deliberation, on the other hand, takes time. In a slow decision process, one allows oneself to live with the question for a while, long enough for one’s feelings about the decision to emerge. How one wants to spend one’s life and whom one wants to spend it are always discoveries rather than simply a matter of rationally appraising the known parameters of a situation.

Sometimes, even when all the relevant facts are known, it takes time to make an appropriate decision. Such a decision can happen as a result of a familiar consideration presenting itself over and over again – as, for example, in the case of having to deal with an untrustworthy friend or lover. You might have understood, in an abstract sense, what is happening and may have been at the point of trying to draw the consequences. But your fruitless ruminations never quite came to a conclusion, neither decision felt quite right. Like Hamlet, you hesitated. But once you gradually allow yourself to fully experience your friend’s behavior – putting aside any effort to find excuses – you likely come to a point where you can act. As Kierkegaard puts it in *Either/Or*,

Ask yourself, and continue to ask until you find the answer. For one may have known a thing many times and acknowledged it ... and yet it is only by the deep inward movements, only by the indescribable emotions of the heart, that for the first time you are convinced that what you have known belongs to you ... for only the truth that edifies is truth for you.

Overcoming abstraction, bias, and self-deception

Contemplation, however, is difficult. It is often difficult to become aware of the affective valence of experience as many other things claim one's attention. Moreover, contemplation requires a certain amount of self-denial: it requires accepting one's experience of the world as it is instead of seeing it in the light most flattering for the self. This runs against forces in human nature. Most commonly, one turns one's back on subjectivity to escape pain. As Freud has described, the mind has built-in mechanisms that help expunge unwanted experiences from consciousness: repression, dissociation, sublimation, etc. In more ordinary cases, one simply takes a step back to consider the "facts" rather than dwell on the experience.

Even small discomfort can prompt one to turn away from experience. If I pass a homeless person on the street, I might tune out to avoid the pangs of guilt about not contributing. We react to anything that challenges our self-image. What needs to be learned, as Iris Murdoch (1970, p. 23) has observed, is

how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.

Contemplation requires the skill to direct attention to what is going on in an impartial way, without distortion.²¹

Contemplation and the contemporary world

As he died to make man holy, let us die to make things cheap
(Leonard Cohen, "Steer your way")

Because of these difficulties, all cultures have come up with ways to cultivate contemplation. The Chinese book of divination, the I Ching, guides decisions not by providing practical solutions but by offering an opportunity to contemplate life in an open-ended manner. Meditation, a central practice in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, has reached – for Westerners – unimaginable sophistication in sustaining attention to various aspects of experience.

In the Western tradition, its most visible forms were religious practices that focused on experiences of the divine. However, in the last few hundred years, since the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment – an interlude of romanticism notwithstanding, which brought back a passionate

²¹ Murdoch (1970) p. 32 discusses a case like this involving a mother and a daughter-in-law. Throughout the book, she emphasizes the moral relevance of the inner life in coming to a more accurate perception of value. If successfully executed, "selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen."

engagement with feeling – Western culture has changed in ways that provide less encouragement, space, and even possibility for engagement with conscious experience.

The value nihilism of illusionism and the popular spread of scientific denials of consciousness, value, and agency²² are not by any means the main factors in this shift. It has happened gradually, because of the speed of modern life, the overabundance of sensory stimulation due to commerce, media, and telecommunication, and lately, as the final straw, the 24-hour news cycle, the addiction to digital existence and the intrusion of social media into most spheres of life. The proliferation of virtual spaces, while keeping people perpetually busy, dims the perception of the social and natural world. It removes the contexts within which contemplation and an experience of wonder are more likely to occur.

This nadir of experience is belied by the fact that everywhere, cultural and commercial outlets are willing to sell us “experiences,” which are, in reality, manufactured spectacles designed to compensate for the loss of ability to really experience. Car dealers are selling “experiences” rather than simply cars; people who do not necessarily enjoy looking at van Gogh’s paintings are treated to enormous wall-sized projections of them to get ‘immersed in an art experience’. Size and novelty compensate for an emptiness of the heart. Precious art is packaged and sold as if all one needs is to be there and take a glance (and a selfie); they have become commodities everyone is encouraged to “experience” for 5 or 15 minutes. A recent visit to Cappella di Scrovegni consisted of waiting in a room where a video screen announced how great the art we were about to see was and then a 15-minute visit to the chapel, where a guide was continually speaking, to view the forty or so masterpieces painted by Giotto. Twenty years ago, when it was not yet hyped as a consumer destination, visitors were allowed unlimited time and total quiet in the chapel. Such unmanufactured, unpackaged experiences are now few and far between.

Illusionism is not a widespread view at this point. But it might be the canary in the coal mine. Are we getting ready for a turn toward zombification? There might be an unholy collusion between the forces of technology and the spirit of science. First, our technologies might make us more receptive to illusionism as a theory of mind. The situation is different than it had been prior to the twentieth century. Everyone used to take it for granted that it is through conscious experience that we primarily relate to the world and the good or bad in it, and it wasn’t controversial that awareness of experience is a crucial component of self-knowledge, and, through empathy and imagination, of knowledge of other people. Now we can think about ourselves not only as conscious subjects but also as information processors or a collection of neurons firing away in our skulls. Advances in neuroscience and AI, together with the digital saturation of our lives, make it more believable that we, too, are simply unconscious machines. The third-person story threatens to take over. It appears that Descartes’ view of animals as mindless robots is inching toward acceptance as a view of humans. From metaphor of alienness, robots have become our shadows, our refuge from ourselves.

The collusion works the other way as well. Digital technology has already made it hard for contemplation to find a foothold²³, fitting for an age where experience is mined for money. Illusionism, because of its implications for value, further weakens the motivation for contemplation. It also weakens empathy for oneself and others. This connection seems to have some empirical

²² See, e.g., Graziano (2014), Overbye (2007), Rosenberg (2016)

²³ Granted, there are counter-movements as well. The New Age – despite heavy losses and commercialization - partly survives in the popularity of meditation and yoga, and personal practices such as journaling, etc. There is also good old-fashioned rear-guard action in arts, music, and literature.

corroboration. For example, in a study on mind perception²⁴, the authors have found that people want to avoid harming other creatures to the degree that they attribute to them the capacity for experience. The self-alienation that follows is part of a general alienation from the world, embodied in techno phantasies of virtual worlds.²⁵

4. Metaphysical postscript

One of the upshots of the preceding discussion is that metaphysical beliefs might very well have practical consequences. One's evaluative outlook depends on how one experiences the world; but how one experiences the world is penetrated in turn by the metaphysical beliefs one brings to the world to make sense of it. Metaphysical beliefs about the mind and the self, for example, are not only theories but also directly affect what that self is like. Ian Hacking (1996) talks about the “looping effect” — the process by which one's emotions, aspirations, principles, and values are shaped and channeled by social understanding and labeling (which, in turn, can affect that understanding in a feedback loop).

When she thinks about herself as purely physical, as constituted, say, by a complex array of brain processes, it might be natural for a meditator not to aim for liberation from suffering but rather for thickening one's pre-frontal cortex – as a student in a meditation class recently said. Or, more relevant to our present concerns, if I am told I am not conscious, I might cease attaching a lot of importance to my conscious states. Even if it does not end all concern and care for my life or the lives of others, it might subtly alter my relationship with them. Conversely, if I believe that I have an immortal soul and that everyone is a creature of God, that will shape my attitudes as well. It might make it easier for me to feel empathy for others. It is an interesting question whether some false metaphysics might be better for human flourishing than true ones, and how their loss might be overcome. However, illusionism, I believe, is both false as a theory and wrong in terms of its practical consequences.

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²⁴ Gray, H.M ; Gray, K. ; Wegner D. M. (2007).

²⁵ See, e.g., Chalmers (2022).

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