

## Nondual Awareness: A Path Towards A More Compassionate Ethics

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*Abstract:* In this paper, I aim to formulate an alternative frame of reference for understanding ourselves as different manifestations of being and provide an opportunity for reflecting upon the need for a nondualistic perspective that unites, rather than divides, phenomena. I will present the failures of rationalism in its attempt to account for the true nature of reality. I will also present a critique of our general inclination, informed by rationalism, towards viewing language itself as an objective means of apprehending phenomena. Alternatively, I argue, we can adopt varying practices to facilitate nondual awareness, or NDA, and place ourselves in a position from which we can better apprehend the phenomena we experience. This achievement of NDA has the potential for increasing the cognitive mental states responsible for our feelings of compassion, connection, and identification towards others.

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Our current Western conception of knowledge, as purely based on rationalism, relies on flawed assumptions reinforced by language. By reanalyzing the importance of a variety of experiences that lie outside of the field of rationalism, we can expand our understanding of the true nature of our nondualistic reality and challenge the underlying assumptions that incorrectly yield a dualistic understanding of phenomena. In adopting a nondualistic frame of reference, we can improve our ethical orientation towards other beings, our environments, and ourselves, enacting behaviors that are more inclusive and compassionate. An inclusive and compassionate ethics is imperative in order to deconstruct a hierarchy of being<sup>1</sup> and equally view all manifestations of being.

Particularly in the West, given the criteria of rationality, we tend to affirm some experiences over others. The characterization of rationality typically entails an accurate, true representation of “fact” of the particular idea that is apprehended and of its relevant factors. William James describes rationalism as the following: “Rationalism insists that all our beliefs ought ultimately to find for themselves articulate grounds. Such grounds, for rationalism, must consist of four things: (1) definitely storable abstract principles; (2) definite facts of sensation; (3) definite hypotheses based on such facts; and (4) definite inferences logically drawn.”<sup>2</sup>

My critique here is not on rationalism itself but rather on our tendency to place rationalism as the sole basis for attaining knowledge. By solely emphasizing rationalism and using this theory as the basis for knowledge, we deny other valuable forms of knowledge,

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<sup>1</sup> Many individuals have implicitly perpetuated the idea of hierarchy among sentient beings – See Charles Darwin, “On the Origin of Species,” in *Principles of Biology*, (1864) – while others have explicitly adhered to the belief of a hierarchy by adopting an anthropocentric philosophy, or placing the value of human beings above all sentient and non-sentient beings.

<sup>2</sup> William James, “The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-02.” (Longmans, Green and Co., 1929) 53-73.

which rationalism cannot explain. I reject a sole focus on rationalism on two grounds: 1) it draws a necessary relation between knowledge and one's ability to express an experience; 2) it (incorrectly) assumes that there are truths independent of all other phenomena, which we can come to apprehend and consequently express accurately.

Rationalism defines knowledge based on what can be expressed via language. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, James states, "Vague impressions of something indefinable have no place in the rationalistic system... Nevertheless, if we look on man's whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial."<sup>3</sup>

A proponent of rationalism would argue that, because I might lack the ability to express an experience, it could not be said that I have knowledge of this experience. This is simply not the case. There is certainly a range of experiences that can be said to either supersede language, or altogether lie outside of the field of tools of expression. It would not follow from this simply to conclude that these experiences do not yield knowledge. Instead, we should conclude that it is possible that these experiences yield knowledge outside of the realm of rationalism. Therefore, these experiences require an entirely new perspective.

In *The Sun My Heart*, Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes the experiences we cannot express via language. He states, "Understanding is not an aggregate of bits of knowledge. It is a direct and immediate penetration... It is an intuition rather than the culmination of reasoning. Every now and again it is fully present in us, and we find we cannot express it in words, thoughts, or concepts."<sup>4</sup> Rationalism can only account for a small subset of experiences which can be expressed via language, and by attempting to understand the entirety of our knowledge based on this small subset, we are severely limiting ourselves.

A further downfall in the emphasis on rationalism in discussions of knowledge is the underlying assumption that there are independent truths that we can apprehend and express. Zhuangzi critiques our conception of knowledge by emphasizing our flawed perspectives and the lack of objective truth in them, describing our understanding of phenomena as highly subjective. He states, "Everything has its 'that,' everything has its 'this.' From the point of view of 'that' you cannot see it, but through understanding you can know it. So I say, 'that' comes out of 'this' and 'this' depends on 'that' — which is to say that 'this' and 'that' give birth to each other."<sup>5</sup> In other words, from my particular standpoint, I understand my perspective as "this," while also understanding another individual's perspective as "that." Similarly, the other individual understands her own experiences through the divide of "this" and "that," taking ownership of her own experience and differentiating that which is "other."

This separation of subject and object, of "this" and "that," of what is "mine" and what is "yours," is reinforced by our dualistic language, thoughts, and perceptions, and has a definitive effect in our ability to engage and/or identify with our surroundings. Based on

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<sup>3</sup> James, "The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-02," 53-73.

<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Sun My Heart: Reflections on Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight." (Parallax Press, 2010) 42-65.

<sup>5</sup> Zhuangzi, "Zhuangzi: Basic Writings," ed. by Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, 2003) 23-70.

conventional language, calling my own experience “this” and another’s “that” is useful in interacting in our daily lives. Yet, it creates an irreconcilable divide between perspectives because we take our own individual perspective to be the objective truth and impose it onto larger society, failing to see our understanding as subjective. We have no tool to measure which of these perspectives is “best,” since best is a relative measurement and both are equally subjective. In the end, we arbitrarily decide what we deem to be “truth.” Therefore, an account of rationalism fails because the “truth” it attempts to reveal is itself subjective despite rationalists’ best effort to claim otherwise.

Beyond the subjectivity of perspectives, Zhuangzi also discusses the ways in which language itself fails us. Even if it were the case that we were able to find some sort of measuring tool by which to distinguish between the truth of two perspectives, our linguistic tool to express that truth is itself limiting. Watson states, “Zhuangzi insists that language is in the end grievously inadequate to describe the true Way;” or, in this case, the true nature of reality. It is inadequate in that it does not yield an exact representation of the knowledge we claim to apprehend about our reality. Zhuangzi states, “A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so. What makes them not so? Making them not so makes them not so.”<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, we are responsible for attaching meaning to the words we use but we should not confuse those words and their meanings, and, consequently, what is expressed in our created language, for true reality.

The meanings we give to words is dependent upon other relevant factors, e.g. background information, situational context, other individuals, etc. Given our subjective experiences and the ways in which language and meaning is fluid and ever changing, it is incorrect to assume that the language we use as a conventional tool is itself without flaws. Furthermore, our assumption that language is able to yield an exact representation of reality leads us to a false understanding of reality as it is. This becomes apparent in a further analysis of our linguistic structure.

The very structure of our affirmations are in subject-predicate form, introducing multiplicity, and, more importantly, dualism. We, as humans, tend to have particular difficulties uniting differences. It is much simpler for us to separate differences and systematize patterns based on similarities. In doing so, we create dualisms, e.g. “black” or “white,” “me” or “you,” “this” or “that,” etc. Given the nature of our language and the grammatical structures we uphold, there exists a dualism (which we create) between *subject* and *object*.

Thus, this dualism is created and does not actually represent the true nature of reality. It is merely conventionally useful. Hanh emphasizes the following: “In daily life, we have grown used to a way of thinking and expressing ourselves that is based on the idea that everything is independent of everything else. This way of thinking and speaking makes it difficult to penetrate non-dualistic, non-discriminatory reality, a reality which cannot be contained in concepts.”<sup>7</sup> The dualisms we have created are then confused as truly independent concepts of phenomena believed to accurately mirror reality as it is. For example, we tend to deem a phenomenon as “black” or “white,” and given our difficulty in apprehending the gray areas in between, we incorrectly believe this phenomenon to be *either* “black” or “white”—and we deem it to be so in reality. However, reality itself is not dualistic—only our

<sup>6</sup> Zhuangzi, “Zhuangzi: Basic Writings,” 23-70.

<sup>7</sup> Hanh, “The Sun My Heart: Reflections on Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight,” 42-65.

concepts, mental representations, language, etc. represent it as such.

Language is only a tool we use to express the abstractions obtained from our apprehension, and in the process of becoming aware of a concept, abstracting that concept, attaining a mental representation of it, and then expressing it via language, the true nature of the concept is lost. James explains that abstract ideas “form the background for all our facts... Everything we know is ‘what’ it is by sharing in the nature of one of these abstractions. We can never look directly at them, for they are bodiless and featureless and footless, but we grasp all other things by their means.”<sup>8</sup>

This deeply rooted dualistic frame of reference affects the ways in which we interact with our environments and even the compassion we feel towards others and ourselves. Despite the ways in which our abstractions and the consequent mental representations we obtain are inaccurate, many individuals have experienced a different form of apprehending the world around them, one that is not tied to the dualism between subject and object which is reinforced by language. It is possible to adopt an alternative perspective.

Hanh states, “To be aware is to be aware of something. When the mind settles on the mountain, it becomes the mountain... When we say ‘know,’ both the known and the knower are included.”<sup>9</sup> We might dismiss this way of thinking because of its apparent implausibility, but a closer look will reveal the wisdom it carries and the benefits it yields. Hanh provides a nondualistic understanding of reality in which we *are* the awareness of our minds. The subject (the knower) that perceives the mountain is the same as the object (the known) that is being perceived. This is an understanding of consciousness as “consciousness-of,” and through such a view, the subject and the object involved in thought are interdependent.

Given that thought itself includes both the subject (the knower) and the object (the known), this distinction of one as “subject” and another as “object” is misguided. We cannot distinguish between that which is “inner” and that which is “outer.” If only the thought is present, we cannot distinguish that “I” (the thinker) is separate from the “mountain” (the thought). A closer analysis will reveal the following: there is no “I” involved in the process of thinking. There is merely the thought occurring regarding perception. We cannot separate the perceiver and the object of perception. There is only perception.

No dualism exists in reality itself. It is only created because of our experience of perception—an experience we describe with a dualistic frame of reference. Hanh further discusses this point by stating, “In the phenomenal world, things seem to exist as separate entities which have a specific place: ‘This’ on the outside of ‘that.’ When we deeply penetrate the principle of interdependence, we see that this sense of separateness is false. Each object is composed of and contains all others.”<sup>10</sup>

By reanalyzing experiential knowledge, we can include experiences of subject-object nondualism, such as the ones Hanh describes. Once we have deconstructed this false dichotomy between subject and object, we can also rid ourselves of the categories we create. In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Suzuki states, “‘You’ means to be aware of the universe in the form of you, and ‘I’ means to be aware of it in the form of ‘I.’ You and I are just swinging doors. This kind of understanding is necessary. This should not even be called understand-

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<sup>8</sup> James, “The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-02,” 53-73.

<sup>9</sup> Hanh, “The Sun My Heart: Reflections on Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight,” 42-65.

<sup>10</sup> Hanh, “The Sun My Heart: Reflections on Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight,” 42-65.

ing; it is actually the true experience of life.”<sup>11</sup> Suzuki believes that the “true experience of life” is characterized by nondual awareness. Hanh described the lack of divide between the mountain, as object, and the person, as subject. Similarly, here Suzuki breaks down the dualism between what one might view as “oneself” and “others”.

A being is a process of experiences, actions, emotions, etc. that is dependent upon many other factors. Therefore, both “I” and “you” are manifestations of being that rely upon one another and upon other manifestations. In this sense, “I” cannot exist without “you”, and an awareness of this interdependence breaks down the dualism between subject and object and opens up the possibility for a different state of consciousness that is nondualistic.

Imagine the changes that would result in this experience of unity. A nondualistic perspective forms a foundation for deconstructing a hierarchy of being, which we often incorrectly reinforce. It is clear that, given a dualistic perspective in which subject and object are separate, categories regarding different forms of being are consequently drawn. In drawing these categories, we place some beings above others, and attach different value systems to these categories. Yet, we have already seen the ways in which this dualistic perspective is not only inadequate in expressing the true nature of reality, but is also limiting in allowing us to find “truth” outside of our subjective experiences. The alternative is adopting a nondualistic perspective, which has the potential to yield a more inclusive ethics by ridding itself of the need to categorize and divide.

James states, “All our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious, are due to the ‘objects’ of our consciousness, the things which we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with ourselves. Such objects may be present to our senses, or they may be present only to our thought. In either case they elicit from us a *reaction*; and the reaction due to things of thought is notoriously in many cases as strong as that due to sensible presences.”<sup>12</sup> For this reason, the ways in which we apprehend the true nature of reality and what we deem to be “knowledge” directly affect how we engage in our communities and interact with our environments.

Once we have validated experiences that cannot be explained through rationalism, we can value alternative ways of connecting and identifying with other beings. By opening our minds to viewing the world with a nondualistic frame of reference, even despite the ever-present dualisms in our patterns of thought and language, we can begin to shift our habitually dualistic orientations towards others and engage in actions that are more compassionate. An experience of inclusivity, one that entails others as well as oneself (equally), has the potential for significantly improving our feelings of compassion, and thereby our interests in the wellbeing of humans, nonhuman animals, ecosystems, and environments. Subject-object nondualism can seem very abstract and perhaps even unattainable, yet it does entail *practical* implications.

Miller explains the benefits of nondual awareness, specifically gained through the consistent practice of mindfulness: “Non-dual mindfulness seeks to collapse perceptual dualism by exposing it directly from within the field of awareness. Non-dual meditative methods develop three important characteristics of genuine mental health: (1) receptivity to the flow of phenomena, (2) enhanced metacognitive surveying of mental processes, and (3) recognition

<sup>11</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, et al. “Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind.” (Shambhala, 2011) 28-55.

<sup>12</sup> James, “The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-02,” 53-73.

of the innate reflexivity of awareness or what is known as ‘awareness of awareness.’<sup>13</sup>

Given the psychological benefits of adopting a nondual perspective, researchers have developed a newfound interest to further understand nondual awareness and how this state of consciousness can be achieved. Josipovic,<sup>14</sup> a research scientist at New York University, has devoted his research efforts to analyzing fMRI images of the neural pathways in the brains of Buddhist monks who consistently achieve nondual awareness through their meditative practice. Josipovic tracks “the changes in the networks in the brain as the person shifts between modes of attention” and this shift between “the internal and external networks in the brain concurrently may lead the monks to experience a harmonious feeling of oneness with their environment.”<sup>15</sup> Essentially, Josipovic has found that, through the practice of nondual awareness meditations, these individuals have successfully affected their habitual mental capacities to shift towards a more compassionate cognitive mental state.

In his research, Josipovic has found that nondual awareness, or NDA, is an alternative “background awareness that precedes conceptualization and intention and that can contextualize various perceptual, affective, or cognitive contents without fragmenting the field of experience into habitual dualities.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, NDA is a background awareness that is prior to our conceptualization, categorization, and division of phenomena. It is readily accessible to us through practice and meditation. Josipovic explains that the emphasis on duality is “variously understood as being due to a basic identification of one’s self with one’s body and mind, or due to a notion of an independently existing self in persons and objects, or due to a grammatical structure of language that inevitably organizes cognition along a subject-object dichotomy.”<sup>17</sup>

A true understanding and experience of nondualism means not only a deeply felt connection with other manifestations of being (whether it be a nonhuman animal, an ecosystem, or an environment), but also a *commitment* to compassion. Bob Douglas argues, “we need to engineer a transition from the current, nearly universal human mindset, which sees humans as the superior species in total control of our planet, to a new operating paradigm where we recognize our utter dependence on healthy ecosystems and make their nurture central to our culture.”<sup>18</sup> I believe that this paradigm can be found in nondualism, and through the practice of NDA, as “Man becomes one with Nature.”<sup>19</sup>

An example of such a practice is presented in *Bodhicaryavatara*, in which Santideva, an individual in traditional Buddhist thought believed to be the embodiment of compassion, addresses the cultivation of compassion towards all beings. He states, “At first one should

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Dale Miller, “Effortless Mindfulness: Genuine Mental Health through Awakened Presence.” (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004) 100-105.

<sup>14</sup> Z. Josipovic, “Neural correlates of nondual awareness in meditation.” (Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci., 2014) 9-18.

<sup>15</sup> Matt Danzico, “Brains of Buddhist Monks Scanned in Meditation Study.” *BBC News*, BBC, 24 Apr. 2011, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-12661646.

<sup>16</sup> Josipovic, “Neural correlates of nondual awareness in meditation,” 9-18.

<sup>17</sup> Josipovic, “Neural correlates of nondual awareness in meditation,” 9-18.

<sup>18</sup> Bob Douglas, “Transforming Human Society From Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism: Can We Make It Happen In Time?” *Health of People, Places and Planet: Reflection Based on Tony McMichael’s Four Decades of Contribution to Epidemiological Understanding*. Ed. 600-610.

<sup>19</sup> Zhuangzi, “Zhuangzi: Basic Writings,” 23-70.

meditate intently on the equality of oneself and others as follows: 'All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself'... When happiness is liked by me and others equally, what is so special about me that I strive after happiness only for myself?"<sup>20</sup>

Hanh suggests a similar meditative practice: "The key point is never to let your awareness stand apart from whatever you regard as the object of awareness. Once you are aware, body, mountain top, or flowing river, all become your mind."<sup>21</sup> Josipovic's research suggests that this nondual awareness, which deconstructs the dichotomy between subject and object, is often felt as "oneness" with, or as being deeply connected to, one's environment. Therefore, the cognitive changes that occur in nondual awareness have a direct effect on an individual's affect, attitude, and emotional disposition towards their surroundings. This "connection" with one's surroundings yields a more compassionate form of interacting with the environment and the beings manifested within.

All experiences are subjective and all experiences are equal. There is no need to value one over the other or to care more about one subset of being over another. Given the true nature of reality and the ways in which all beings are dependent on all others, compassion for oneself necessitates compassion for another. Nondual awareness is a step towards a more inclusive, compassionate ethics, but it requires a thorough commitment to deconstruct habitual and societal dualistic practices set in place to categorize and divide.

Cook emphasizes, "There has to be an ongoing effort to achieve this consciousness in moment after moment of activity and encounter."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Rita M. Gross argues, "Taking interdependence seriously urges us to apply 'both-and' solutions rather than 'either-or' arguments to knotty problems."<sup>23</sup> I am not suggesting merely a meditative practice in isolation from the world, but rather a renewed effort to account for concerns regarding humans, nonhuman animals, and ecosystems *equally* in our attempts to solve the problems we face on a daily basis.

As Cook states, "Compassion carries the commitment to *do* something about suffering."<sup>24</sup> There is no limit to our compassion. By misguidedly reinforcing the idea of dualism, we are operating under the flawed assumption that we cannot equally care about the well-being of humans and nonhuman animals/ecosystems. A genuine experience of nondualism is one where there is no divide between the human world and the natural world, especially since humans are merely a part of nature itself, and we are all merely different manifestations of being. A commitment to cultivating patterns of thought and action that yield compassion leads us on a path towards a more inclusive ethics.

<sup>20</sup> Santideva, "The Bodhicaryavatara." Edited by Kate Crosby. (Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Hanh, "The Sun My Heart: Reflections on Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight," 42-65.

<sup>22</sup> Dogen, "Sounds of Valley Streams: Enlightenment in Dogen's Zen, Translation of Nine Essays from Shobogenzo." Edited by Francis H. Cook. (State University of New York Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> R.M. Gross, "Toward a Buddhist Environmental Ethic." In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65.2 (1997): 333-53.

<sup>24</sup> Dogen, "Sounds of Valley Streams: Enlightenment in Dogen's Zen, Translation of Nine Essays from Shobogenzo." Edited by Francis H. Cook.

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