

Monographs on Self-Inquiry #1

Nondualism in Western Philosophy

by
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This is a series of pointers to how the Western approach can assist with one's self-inquiry. It is less a historical survey, and more a collection of Western views that might serve as tools for inquiry, along with suggestions on how these tools might be used. The conclusion consists of a practical, forward-looking dialogue. I haven't included every philosopher in the Western tradition to have written something that might be considered nondual. Instead, my choices are pragmatic. I've chosen the writers I have found most helpful in skillfully deconstructing the classic dualisms that seem to block people doing nondual inquiry. So for example, the well known Heidegger and Nietzsche are not covered, though they wrote several things that can be helpful. Yet the lesser known writers Brand Blanshard and Colin M. Turbayne are covered, as I find that readers may find their approaches more useful.

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Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Nondualism.....	1
What’s Wrong with Dualism Anyway?	1
Nondualism East and West.....	2
Western Mysticism.....	2
How Nondualism is Done in the West	3
The Nondualist Reaction to Descartes	5
Materialism.....	6
The Myth of Jones: Eliminative Materialism.....	8
The Only Substance There Is: Nonmaterialism	10
Plotinus (205-270)	10
Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677).....	10
Thinking of the Pen: Idealism	11
John Scottus Eriugena (812-877).....	11
George Berkeley (1685-1753)	11
Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814).....	13
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)	14
The Turn Towards Language.....	16
And Away from Metaphysics.....	18
Where Do I Go From Here?	19
OK, I see that – Still, what do I do?.....	20
Test the Grip of Duality	20
One Duality at a Time.....	21
And – The Winner Is.....	22
A Note about Who is Right.....	24
Nondual Nacho Satsang	24
Weblinks:.....	26
General.....	26
Nonduality.....	26
Academic	26
E-Texts.....	27
Bibliography:.....	27

Nondualism

Nondualism is an experience, or a metaphysical¹ view about reality. As an experience, it is a sweet, nonobjective sense of presence, of borderlessness, and lack of separation. As a metaphysical view, nondualism holds that reality is not composed of a multiplicity of things. This seems vague, and it is because beyond this point, the varieties of nondualism disagree. If reality is not a multiplicity of things, is it then just *one* thing? Or less? Just what *is* reality? Some nondualists say that reality is awareness. Some say it is voidness. Some say it is a net of jewels, where each jewel is composed of the reflections from all the other jewels. And some nondualists say that the nature of reality is that it has no nature.

What's Wrong with Dualism Anyway?

So why is nondualism a goal? Does it feel better? Is it more true?

Most of the philosophers who write on nondualism argue that dualism falsely claims to be an accurate picture of our experience. They also argue that it causes suffering. These are two slightly different approaches.

Nondualism's "false claim" argument challenges dualism's claim to correctly represent reality. Dualism claims to be a view about how things really are, but when the view and its presuppositions are looked into, they are found not to be in accord with our experience. Our experience, say nondualists, is truly without borders, edges or separation. Therefore, the notion that the world is made up of divisions between self and other, good and bad, here and there, past and future, does not make sense. We only *seem* to experience these divisions. These divisions do not really exist, so *we do not really experience* them. Nondualism, it is argued, can correct the misinterpretation of our experience and restore our original wholeness.

Nondualism's "argument from suffering" has to do with dualism's effects – dualism leads to suffering and misery. Nondualists feel that a dualistic and divided experience of the world results in feeling separated (separated from what we take to be external objects, other people, the world, etc.). Feeling separated leads to feeling finite and vulnerable. It leads to suffering. This can be alleviated: a deep intuitive understanding of our nondual, unbroken

experience is the end of the experience of separation. Therefore it is tantamount to the end of suffering.

Nondualism East and West

Eastern and Western approaches to nonduality reflect the more general differences between Eastern and Western approaches to philosophy. Eastern philosophy is most often pursued within the context of the Eastern spiritual traditions. Western philosophy can occasionally be found within Western spiritual traditions, but it is much more active outside them.

Eastern philosophy has very strong nondual traditions, which include Taoism, several forms of Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta (the nondual extension of Hinduism). These traditions are also explicitly “soteriological.” That is, their purpose is to resolve the big questions of life and death, and to alleviate suffering. The experiential resolution of these matters is regarded as liberation or enlightenment. And the philosophies themselves are illustrated by hundreds of stories in which teachers assist students on their quest.

Western philosophy has also been known to adopt soteriological motives, especially in ancient times. The philosophies of the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Sceptics, and Boethius were avowedly therapeutic.² But Western philosophy’s goal has most often been to discover the truth about man and the world.

This truth-seeking goal has made Western philosophy more a scientific than a salvific enterprise. There is not a generally accepted goal in Western philosophy corresponding to liberation or enlightenment. Whereas Eastern philosophy is practiced in temples and ashrams, Western philosophy is studied in the library and the academy. The West has most often left its life-and-death questions to the churches, cathedrals and synagogues.

Western Mysticism

Before examining the nondualist strands in Western philosophy, we should say a few words about Western mysticism. The writings of the great Western mystics tend to overlap both philosophy and religion. Their

writings are not as logically precise as philosophy; neither do they require the same level of faith as religious writings.

Mysticism is often pursued by the nondual inquirer for the depth of its wisdom and how it penetrates man's most subtle experiences. To pursue the mystical path, one does not so much follow a line of argumentation as enter openly and whole-heartedly into experience. Mysticism and philosophy compliment each other. Many people find it more effective to engage both modes than either one alone.

Notable Western mystics and their works include **The Gospel of Thomas** and other works in the **Nag Hammadi Library**; the writings of Rabbi Akiva (40-135); **The Zohar** (150CE) by Shimon Bar Yochai (fl. 135 – 170); the **Sepher Yetzirah; or The Book Of Creation** (before 6th Cent.); Dionysius, the Pseudo-Areopagite (BCE 500); Origenes Adamantius (Origen) (c. 185-254); the monks of the **Philokalia** (c200-600); Meister Johannes Eckhart (1260-1327/8); **The Cloud of Unknowing** (14th Cent.); Theresa of Avila (1515-1582); St. John of the Cross (1524-1591); or Brother Lawrence (c. 1605-1691).

How Nondualism is Done in the West

Proving the nondual nature of reality is not an overall goal for Western philosophy. A few philosophers have created nondual metaphysical theories; and others have argued against metaphysics altogether. But most philosophers who dissolve or dismiss dualities are not nondualists. The dualities left in the dust by these writers are merely casualties of their other work. In fact, the cleverest and most persuasive arguments tend to come from the works focused on narrower issues. These arguments can be very helpful in the course of one's nondual inquiry. As the old-time news editors used to say, "We can use it!"

We will examine some of the best known arguments that can be helpful in nondual inquiry, even if a given argument is not used by its author in to establish nondualism. Sometimes it is most effective to proceed piecemeal. Most of the well-known Western arguments take one (or more) of the following broad strategies.

Monist philosophies argue that the universe is truly made from only *one kind* of thing. An example would be that the entire universe is only God or consciousness. These kinds of views are the ones most similar to Eastern nondualism. Most monist arguments proceed by building systems, not so much by clever logic and dialectics.

Some of the most famous Western philosophies are the great monisms, which claim one kind of thing as the basis or true nature of everything else. In some monist philosophies, the one kind of thing is *numerically single*. Ancient examples of this single-style monism include the theory of Parmenides (b. 510 BCE), in which everything is “the One,” i.e., one unchanging substance discernible only through reasoning, and the more lively view of Heraclitus (540-475 BCE), in which “All is flux.” Hegel is a grand modern example with his system of absolute consciousness.

Other monist philosophies are not as “nondual.” That is, their one true kind of existent is numerically multiple. The one kind of thing is found in many identical parts or different places. Such ideas are found among the ancient atomists like Leucippus (c. 450 BCE), who argued that the world is made out of many identical particles. This notion is remarkably close to various modern scientific theories, which have proposed various kinds of elementary particles as the ultimate constituents of the world.

Reductive philosophies hold that the universe is made of fewer kinds of things than we think. Their goal is not to end up at nondualism, but rather to show that certain kinds of things that we take for granted do not exist and can be reduced to other things. A reductive philosophy might argue, for example, that the world is not really made up of external objects, ideas and minds, but can be accounted for by ideas and minds only. Other reductionists are materialists.

Since reductive philosophies do not try to rid the world of all dualisms at once, they can focus more attention on particular issues. Reductive arguments tend to be dialectically clever and precise. They end up doing more damage to a duality such as “mental vs. physical” than the gentle suggestions of a soft-focus monism. Democritus, Berkeley, Locke and more recently, Paul and Patricia Churchland provide strong examples of reductionism.

Anti-metaphysical philosophies arrive later, and became a trend in the mid-20th century. Wittgenstein, W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson, Nelson Goodman and Richard Rorty and others argue that we just don't need metaphysics anymore. Anti-metaphysics argues that it makes no sense to claim what something *really is*. It argues equally against monist and reductionist claims that certain things are metaphysically basic. Anti-metaphysics challenges anything's claim as basic, fundamental, of serving as the ground of anything else. Instead of discussing what we think the universe really is, anti-metaphysical philosophies suggest we simply talk about something else.

Anti-metaphysics can be of great assistance in one's nondual inquiry. If one loses conviction in the truth or accuracy of metaphysical pronouncements about the world, the body and the mind, one is thereby freed from several sticky attachments. The classic sticky metaphysical attachments are to one side or the other of dualities such as mind/matter, appearance/reality, fact/value, subject/object, free will/determinism, and so forth.

The Nondualist Reaction to Descartes

Modern nondual metaphysics seek to ground our world and our experience in what reality truly is. These efforts historically began as a reaction to dualism, which is the view that reality consists of more than one kind of thing. The most prominent kind of dualism, inspired by Rene Descartes (1596-1650), holds that there are two kinds of existing things, *physical* and *mental*. Descartes' monumental **Discourse on Method** (1637) is the classical statement of this kind of dualism. He begins with the mental side, whose reality he demonstrates by arguing that it is undeniable. He argues that "I think, therefore I am," and proceeds as follows. Since I think, I cannot be mistaken about my existence. Even if I am being fooled by (what Descartes calls) an "evil genius," I am nevertheless a conscious, thinking being.

Descartes argues for the physical side of the dualism by invoking God's existence, and God's nature as non-deceitful. God has given us the faculties that seem to perceive external physical objects. Surely God would

not deceive us about the existence of physical things! Therefore physical things exist in addition to mental things.

Most versions of Western monism that come after Descartes accede to his distinction between mental and physical. Some monisms come down on the materialist side, others on the nonmaterialist side. Among materialist monisms, some suggest *particles* as the ultimate constituent. Other materialist monisms decline to specify just what kind of material or particle is the ultimate one, leaving that detail to the discoveries of science. Nonmaterialist monisms tend to favor *consciousness* or *idea* or *Being* or even *God* as basic.

Materialism

Materialism is the view that reality consists solely of things having a location in space. Most materialists proceed reductively, arguing that things we take to be non-material are actually material things. We are mistaken, they say, to take things like minds, thoughts, and free will as non-material things.

One prominent kind of materialism is atomism, which holds that the one kind of thing that exists is tiny particles of matter. The earliest atomists are Leucippus (c. 450 BCE), his student Democritus (c. 460-360 BCE), and Lucretius (99-55 BCE).³ As a theory, atomism has two objectives. One, identify the world's ultimate ingredient by explaining the complex in terms of the simple, and two, allow for change and diversity. Atomism holds that what truly exists are tiny, solid, indivisible particles too small to be seen with the naked eye. The atoms exist within a limitless field of empty space and are compressed together in various degrees of density. The interplay of atoms and space leaves room for the atoms to move and touch each other. The world, the person and the eye itself are all made of these atoms. The eye cannot see the atoms themselves, but can see their effects as they move, collide and combine.

In his **Essay Concerning Human Understanding** (1690), John Locke proposes an updated version of atomism called "corpuscularianism." This is a claim that all matter is made of minute corpuscles which themselves have no observable properties or discernable causal relations to what we

actually observe. Locke's denial of observable properties to the corpuscles makes some sense – for if the corpuscles are too small to be seen, then how can they have observable properties? But this unobservability thesis gets Locke into trouble with George Berkeley (1685-1753), the most famous “idealist.” After Berkeley, philosophy took a turn towards the nonmaterial side, and corpuscularianism became more of an explanatory hypothesis than a metaphysical theory.

Modern philosophical materialism is not necessarily atomistic. It is largely an attempt to solve the puzzle as to why mental things such as thoughts and feelings seem so much different from physical things such as rocks and trees.

Psychologist B.F. Skinner (1904-1990) has been accused of materialism because of his denial of personal autonomy. In his shocking and popular **Beyond Freedom and Dignity** (1971), Skinner argues against the notions of a thinking, willing, choosing faculty in mankind. These notions lead to blame and punishment, which Skinner argues do not serve to improve society. Skinner suggests another way to understand human behavior and improve society. This is to think of behavior as completely determined by conditioning, which is made up of genetic background and life history. If we improve people's physical and social environments, we will improve society. The arguments are similar to those of an Eastern philosophy known as “advaitic non-doership.”

More recent philosophical materialisms are explicit attempts to account for mental phenomena in terms of physical phenomena. Psychologist U.T. Place asked, ‘Is Consciousness a Brain Process?’ in a 1956 article, and argued that mental states just are brain states. This is called the “identity theory.” But identity works both ways, and critics noted that mind/brain identity does not do what the materialist wants, which is to show how mental terms are empty and physical terms are not.

In other words, identity theorists wanted to favor the brain by saying, “the brain is what the mind is identical to; therefore the brain is basic and mental terms are empty.” But since identity is bilateral, it also allows the idealist to favor the mind by saying “the mind is what the brain is identical to; therefore the mind is basic and physical terms are empty.” This warranted

inference from the materialists' own premises did not sit well with the them, so they sought other theories that allowed them to eliminate mental terms.

The Myth of Jones: Eliminative Materialism

“Eliminative materialism” does intend to discard the mental model in favor of the physical. It argues that commonsense or “folk” psychology, which speaks of mental states, beliefs and feelings, is simply mistaken about our cognitive processes. Folk psychology’s most important terms simply do not refer to anything, according to eliminative materialism, whereas terms for brain states and brain functions have verifiable referents.

Eliminativists take advantage of the philosophical momentum provided by Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976) and Wilfrid Sellars (1912-1989). In **The Concept of Mind** (1949), Ryle comes down on the physical side of traditional Cartesian dualism. He examines mental concepts, attempting to show how they invariably appeal to the actions and interactions between physical bodies. What we are *really* talking about, he argues, is bodies, not minds. The notion that there is a “ghost in the machine” or a conscious inner controller directing our actions, Ryle calls a “category mistake.” To think that anger is truly a state of mind is just such a mistake, because the only real category is a body – a body which at the moment happens to flush, speak loudly, move quickly and unpredictably. These are observations about bodies, not minds.

The eliminativist view is an alternative to what could be called the spectator view of the mind. The spectator view is the one that most denizens of the modern industrial scientific world grow up with. It posits an inner spectator within the theater of the mind. This spectator regards all sensory input, feels feelings, thinks thoughts, contemplates alternatives, makes choices and utters speech. This spectator’s job is to accurately represent the outer world in thought, and communicate it accurately to others.

The spectator view is one of the main barriers to nondual understanding. According to this view, the spectator is metaphysically distinct from that which it observes (the world). Inner is cut off from outer, and most everyone, after acceding to the notion of the inner observer, proceeds to

identify with it. Eliminative materialism accepts most of the observations that folk psychology accepts, but does away with the dualities between inner and outer, subject and object, and seer and seen.

One of the most subtle and cogent presentations of eliminative materialism comes from Wilfred Sellars.

If bodies exist and minds do not, then how did the notion of mind arise in the first place? This is just what Wilfred Sellars tries to account for in his subtle and influential **Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind** (1956).⁴ Sellars tells a fascinating story called the “Myth of Jones.” Jones is one of our “Rylean ancestors.” Jones and his neighbors can do things and move and communicate, but they do not have or cannot recognize anything called experiences or “inner episodes.” When they talk about what they do, the language is phrased in terms of publicly observable characteristics. Sellars develops the myth by having Jones attribute the same physical states to his neighbors when they are *silent* as when they are *talking and moving*. To do this, Jones postulates inner states and thoughts and a controlling entity to his neighbors. After a while, talking in terms of states and inner controllers becomes comfortable and efficient, and voila! It’s as though the Ryleans had minds all along!

Early eliminativists might have gotten a boost from Ryle and Sellars, but the most recent weapon in the eliminativists’ arsenal is probably neuroscience. Paul and Patricia Churchland, in a series of publications including Paul’s paper “Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes” (1981) and Patricia’s book **Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind/Brain** (1986) develop the overall argument that neuroscience is a much more rigid and reliable guide than folk psychology. Further neuroscientific research will show us what we are *really* talking about when we use those unreliable folk psychological terms such as ‘beliefs’ and ‘emotions’. Some day, say the Churchlands, we will be able to eliminate such talk.

Daniel Dennett is a well-known prolific writer who could be seen as a “soft eliminative materialist.” In **Consciousness Explained** (1991) he does not so much try to negate mental phenomena as argue that they do not depend on a unitary mind. He combines neuroscience with philosophy and

psychology in an attack on the spectator theory of consciousness. The spectator theory is another Cartesian legacy – the spectator is a unified inner observer who is aware of ideas being projected in a sort of theater of the mind. Dennett tries to eliminate this unitary observer with a kind of functionalistic artificial intelligence view, in which mental states are the software for the hardwiring of the brain.

The Only Substance There Is: Nonmaterialism

This kind of monism holds that there is only Being, God, mind, ideas or consciousness. It includes the following philosophical varieties: *idealism*, *pantheism* (all is God), *panentheism* (God is the nature of all, but lies beyond as well), and *neutral monism* (the basic stuff is neither physical nor mental). Nonmaterialist monism is similar in an abstract way to the Eastern philosophies of Advaita Vedanta, Buddhist Dzogchen and Pure Land.

Plotinus (205-270)

Plotinus's monism is an early example of neutral monism. In his **Enneads** Plotinus embellished Plato's notion of the One, or the Good. The One for Plotinus is self-caused, and causes the world as well. How does The One cause the world? Not by setting off a chain of chronological events, but by being what all things are at the simplest level. The One causes the world in the way the ocean causes waves. We can grasp the One not by observing properties of things, but by deduction, understanding what it is not. This is similar to the "neti-neti" (not this, not this) approach in Advaita Vedanta.

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

In his **Ethics** (1677), Spinoza sets out a number of propositions which lead to his conclusion that God is the only substance. The argument relies heavily upon Spinoza's characterization of "substance" and "God." A substance is defined as having its own characteristics, which define just what it is. A substance can also have what Spinoza calls "affections," which are non-essential characteristics. God is defined as that substance which has infinite characteristics, one of which is existence. The propositions relevant to Spinoza's monism can be summarized into the following philosophical argument. And for modern readers, the notion of

“awareness” or “universe” may be substituted for Spinoza’s “God.” Similar arguments have been made in Eastern teachings.

1. Two substances cannot share any characteristics.
2. God is a substance with infinite characteristics which all express eternal and infinite essence. With such characteristics, God exists, and cannot **not** exist.
3. Therefore, God is the only substance.

Getting from (1) and (2) to (3) depends on Spinoza’s notion of characteristics. According to (1), no two substances can have even one characteristic in common. According to (2), God has all the characteristics there are, and God exists. There are no characteristics left over for any other substance to have. Therefore, (3), no other substance exists.

Thinking of the Pen: Idealism

Idealism holds that what we normally think of as physical objects is actually a mental substance. There are points of overlap among idealism, pantheism and the neutral monism of Plotinus.

John Scottus Eriugena (812-877)

In the middle ages, Eriugena gave the neoplatonic monism of Plotinus an idealist twist. Using sources from the Neoplatonic and mystical traditions, as well as from Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Eriugena argued in **The Division of Nature** that God is beyond being and non-being. With the assistance of Ideas in God, all things emanate from God and return back to God.

George Berkeley (1685-1753)

Berkeley is not a monist, but the reductionist *par excellence*. He argues resolutely for the nonmaterialist side of Descartes’ dualism in **Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous** and **A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge**. There are no physical objects, just minds and ideas. Berkeley’s conclusion is so un-intuitive, and his arguments so clever and impassioned, that he remains one of the most famous idealists in the Western tradition.

Berkeley attempts to refute a widely held view that we now call the “representationalist theory of perception” (RTP), which holds:

- (1) Physical objects possess observable qualities, including color, shape, size, hardness, texture, fragrance, etc.
- (2) If you mentally strip away all observable qualities from an object, what is left is physical substance as their support and substrate, and it is not observable.
- (3) Physical objects exist whether or not they are observed; they exist outside the mind.
- (4) These external physical objects are perceived by causing our ideas of them; they do this by impinging upon our senses and then being communicated to the mind.
- (5) Our ideas represent external objects by being likenesses of them.

RTP sounds plausible to most people, perhaps even today. But Berkeley disagrees with (2)-(5) above. He argues that rocks, trees and houses exist, but that they are really combinations of ideas. His argument is simple.

- (B1) It cannot be doubted that the mind perceives ideas; for a mind to perceive an idea is for that idea to exist in that mind.
- (B2) Ideas can exist only in a mind (not outside); also the mind cannot contain anything other than ideas.
- (B3) What is not an idea cannot be perceived by the mind because only ideas are in a mind.
- (B4) Because it exists only in a mind, an idea cannot be a likeness of an external object. What is outside the mind is not available to be compared with what is in the mind. The comparison cannot be made.

Because of (B1) – (B4), Berkeley argues, external material objects cannot be said to exist, because they are impossible to perceive. This conclusion is the basis of Berkeley’s famous dictum “esse est percipi,” or “to be is to be perceived.”

As an example, imagine the burning sensation we feel when our hand is in the fire. This sensation in us is not a likeness of a burning sensation within

the fire itself. Therefore RTP's statement (5) above is false. The other qualities of the fire – color, shape, sound, size, temperature, location – are analogous. They do not exist in the fire itself apart from the mind; they are ideas perceived by the mind. Since we cannot say that the fire, as an external object, is perceived at all, (4) above is false. Because (4) is false, (3) is also false, since nothing outside the mind can be perceived whatsoever. Because external physical objects are not perceived and hence cannot be said to exist, it is mere fantasy to talk about their makeup as composed of an external, unobservable material substance, with observable qualities that exist in the substance itself. So (2) is groundless. But Berkeley does accept (1), and interprets “physical” objects as ideas in combination.

This brings up the question, where do our ideas come from if not from external physical objects? For Berkeley, who was a bishop in good standing in the Church of England, there are only minds and ideas. So our ideas can come only from another mind – the mind of God. This also solves for Berkeley the problem of the continued existence of things. Does the pen on my desk actually go out of existence when I'm not thinking of it? No, says Berkeley, because God is thinking of the pen at all times, even when I am not.

Berkeley is not officially a monist because in the majority of his philosophical writings he accepts both minds and ideas. But there have been hints that he also had a private theory, according to which he applied similar arguments to the notion of *mental* substance (a thinking mind) as he applied to the notion of *physical* substance.⁵ There is also some indication that later in his life, Berkeley quietly adopted a pantheistic monism.⁶

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814)

After Descartes, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) became the most influential dualist. After the revolutionary influence of Kant's **Critique of Pure Reason** (1781, 1787), no one, especially in Germany, could write philosophy without attempting to reconcile the gap that Kant seemed to have widened between knowledge and its object. Kant's **Critique** argued that the object in itself is totally independent of our knowledge of it. This independence renders the object utterly unknowable. Many subsequent

philosophers reacted to Kant's subject/object gap by emphasizing the subject or knower-side of the gap, and building the world of objects from the knower. This subject-side emphasis became the keynote to German Idealism.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte made the first move. In his **Science of Knowledge** (1794), Fichte chooses to begin with the subject side because he sees the knowing subject (and not the inert, unknowable object) as the basis of moral freedom and autonomy.

Fichte's argument is an early nondual tour de force. It seeks to reconcile free will with physical causation, as well as self with other. It is an attempt to explain the world and our experience by using no conceptual building blocks other than the "I."

Specifically Fichte strives to reconcile two seemingly opposed everyday notions – the freedom of the self vs. the causal necessity which was generally believed in his time to be imposed upon objects in the material world. That is, the will is supposedly free, but an apple necessarily falls from a tree. How can this be reconciled? He begins with the proposition that "the I posits itself." He then maps the progress of the I's development. The next movement is "the I posits itself as an I," followed by "the I posits itself as self-positing." This latter shows that the I is self-aware, which is the self-consciousness that all consciousness entails. The I is always immediately present to itself, prior to any sensory content. Because the I is unitary, and it exists through and as something that posits itself, the I is both a fact and an act. The I is not any kind of substance, rather its nature is that it self-positing. The I's freedom is not absolute, rather, it discovers and senses a limitation. This limitation starts as a feeling, then a sensation, then an intuition, and then a concept. Thus is the entire world created from the I. Fichte's I is not an absolute I like the Brahman or Self of Advaita Vedanta, but a finite, empirical self.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) built one of the grandest monistic systems in Western philosophy. In **The Phenomenology of Spirit** (1807) he argues that nothing less than Absolute Spirit (God,

consciousness) is the basis of all phenomena. The history of the world is actually the evolution of Spirit. As Spirit evolves toward self-definition and self-consciousness, the world becomes more sophisticated. Spirit moves in a dialectical way. Something is posited. This can be called the *thesis*. As the thesis undergoes self-development, it inevitably encounters its own limits. These limits also develop and help spawn the *antithesis*. As Spirit moves to resolve the tension between thesis and antithesis, it rises to a higher level and forms the *synthesis*, which encompasses and accounts for the two.

This tripartite dialectic can be seen from the human perspective as the evolution of consciousness. In an individual observer, *subjective consciousness* asserts itself, discovers its limitations, and discovers other people and their activities. By seeing that it is also instantiated in other locations, subjective consciousness realizes its universal characteristics. It therefore becomes *objective consciousness*. But this subjective/objective distinction is not static as in Kant's philosophy. Hegel argues that it is actually a movement. The movement is the progress of *absolute consciousness* (God or Absolute Spirit) as it becomes more developed and self-aware.

The evolution of Absolute Spirit can also be seen, Hegel argues, in cultural progress. *Art* makes the first appearance on the world stage. It is likened to subjective consciousness. *Religion* follows. Because of its recognition of the objectified otherness and subjectivity of God, religion is analogous to objective consciousness. *Philosophy* makes its entrance later still; it encompasses both art and religion; it manifests as the self-conscious recognition of the Absolute's development.

Philosophical monism of the idealist sort, similar to Hegel and Fichte's, was taken up by English-speaking philosophers over the next century. British Idealists such as Thomas Hill Green (1836-1882), Francis Herbert Bradley (1846-1924), and the Americans Josiah Royce (1855-1916) and Brand Blanshard (1892-1987) argued during their careers that the Idea is metaphysically basic. The most recent idealist work from these writers is Blanshard's **The Nature of Thought** (1939), in which he tackles the traditional problem of the relation between the idea and its object. His

conclusion is clever and unique – it’s a matter of degree. Blanshard argues that the object *just is* the idea, more fully realized.

The Turn Towards Language...

The older monist-style idealism lost its steam early in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, partly due to the rise of science and mathematics. The popularity of science stimulated an effort in philosophy to emulate scientific styles and methods. Importance was given to observation, verification and language. New philosophical movements arose, such as “logical positivism,” “philosophical analysis” and “ordinary language philosophy.” These movements examine the relations among sentences, as well as between sentences and states of affairs in the world.

Philosophies that focus on language are not trying to make a nondual or monistic claim, but more a reductive claim. That is, they reduce the kinds of things we take as basic to a smaller number. They try to use fewer items, primarily language, to account for our experience.

One can attack a dualism with the weapons on hand, without leaving anything in its place. This is just what Royce, Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, and Colin Turbayne did⁷ – they gave the new focus on language a behavioral slant. The result was to soften, blur or eradicate the old Cartesian and Kantian dualities that had occupied center stage for three hundred years.

Josiah Royce proposes a notion of the world consisting of signs interpreted by an infinity of minds. This is less dualistic than at first appears, since the minds themselves may also be interpreted as signs. Ludwig Wittgenstein turns away from the notion of language as having meanings that represent the world. For him, there is no independent entity called Meaning. Rather, the *meaning* of a word lies in its *use*. For Wittgenstein, conversation is a series of language games, where word choices are moves in the game.

W.V.O. Quine argues against the distinction between two kinds of sentences, sentences that are true in virtue of a logical relation between their terms (“No married men are bachelors”), and sentences that are true because they happen to represent facts in the world (“Some men are

married.”). This dualism is Kant’s “analytic/synthetic distinction,” and refers to the difference between what we can know without worldly experience, and what we need experience to know. The stronger the grip of the analytic/synthetic distinction, the stronger will be the felt difference between what *we supply* to knowledge, and what the *world supplies*. In Eastern nondual terms, this is very similar to the distinction between Self and Other.

But Quine’s view is that the analytic/synthetic distinction does not stand. What really distinguishes the two kinds of sentences, he argues, is that we treat the former kind of sentence as hard to give up, and the latter kind as easy to give up. The difference is merely conventional, even though it is widely believed to be metaphysical. And with the linguistic analytic/synthetic distinction succumbing to Quine’s attack, the metaphysical distinction between Self and Other loses a prime means of support.

In Wilfrid Sellars’s attack against “The Myth of the Given,” he proposes that “all awareness is a linguistic affair.” He argues against the classical dualistic empiricism, in which there is supposedly something given to experience in a bare, raw, un-interpreted way, versus something known as the result of interpretation. This “given” is supposedly known *non-conceptually*, such as a red patch of color, and serves as a secure foundation for interpreted data, which is *known conceptually*. The conceptual knowledge would be something captured by the statement, “I see something red.”

Against this notion of a simple given like the red patch, Sellars argues that there is no such thing as raw and un-interpreted data. Sensing is not knowledge. When you’re driving on “auto-pilot mode,” you might actually be able to stop at a red light, even though you are not aware of having done so. Even a photoelectric cell can be constructed to respond differentially to red vs. green. Knowing, on the other hand, involves bringing something under classification. Sellars response to the dualist empiricist is this: if seeing the red patch is knowledge or something of which we are aware, then we know that it is a red patch, or that it is something red. In this case it is not a given, but the result of some interpretation and enclosure within a web of concepts. On the other hand, if it *is* a raw given, it is not something

known, but rather exists on the level of a sunburn, or the reaction of the iris to a change in lighting. So for Sellars, the “given” drops out. Knowing is always conceptual, always holistic, always devoid of a distinction between raw and interpreted. For something to be known is for it to exist in the “logical space of having and giving reasons.” Therefore, all knowledge is a matter of language.

Colin M. Turbayne suggests that we get away from the old dualistic “spectator” view of the world, and see the world as a language instead. According to the spectator view, the external world is the photographer’s model, which, thanks to mechanical rules, is conveyed to the theater of the mind. Turbayne proposes that we dispense with this mechanical, ocular metaphor and take up the linguistic metaphor instead. Why? It is easier to account for oddities and changes in science if we interpret them with the linguistic metaphor as exceptions to grammatical rules or as linguistic evolution. Science can be very hard to explain (and embarrassing as well) with the mechanical metaphor, where we say afresh with every new innovation, “Now we *really* see the world accurately as it is.” Employment of the linguistic metaphor is an emphasis on language but it is not a monism or a true metaphysical claim. Turbayne is not saying that the world *is* a language. It is not a machine or giant theater either. He is saying that anything we say about the world is some kind of metaphor. So let’s choose an effective one, and not take any of them literally.

And Away from Metaphysics

Beginning in the early twentieth century, Western philosophy began to sprout reactions against the metaphysical urge. Philosophers such as John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Nelson Goodman and Donald Davidson have criticized metaphysical claims that there is a way the world truly is. These writers have inspired anti-metaphysical movements such as pragmatism, existentialism, hermeneutics, deconstructionism and postmodernism.

The individual philosophers and movements lie beyond the scope of this chapter, but many of them are summarized quite nicely by Richard Rorty in a recent article. Rorty, who has referred to himself as an “antidualist” or an “antiessentialist” or a “pragmatist” or a “nonrepresentationalist,” has

written tirelessly against metaphysics ever since his well known book **Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature** (Rorty, 1981). In his recent article “A World without Substances” (Rorty, 1999), he summarizes the various philosophies that have turned away from making metaphysical claims. He sees most anti-metaphysical philosophies as trying to shake off the traditional dualisms such as essence/accident, substance/property, appearance/reality and subject/object. There are certain other commonalities as well. Anti-metaphysical views do not hold that there is a way that things really are. Instead, they hold that

- No description of things is intrinsically privileged over others. Its “betterness” depends upon the purpose at hand.
- Things do not consist of essences but of relations to other things.
- We never know a thing-in-itself. We never know anything in a description-neutral way; we only know true sentences about it.
- “Objective truth” does not mean “in touch with reality,” but instead means “in consensus with other inquirers.”
- The old, invidious distinction between appearance vs. reality has given way to the new, pragmatic distinction between less useful descriptions vs. more useful descriptions.

The anti-metaphysical approach is somewhat like the Buddhist view that likens phenomenality to Indra’s net of jewels. In Indra’s net, no jewel is primary or basic. Rather, each jewel reflects only the reflections of all the other jewels. Anti-metaphysics can be seen as nondualistic, not by claiming that “reality is One,” but by not falling into dualistic claims. Instead of advocating a new replacement for the essences that have been dropped, anti-metaphysics says, “Let’s change the subject.”

Where Do I Go From Here?

All these philosophers say different things. God, ideas, brain science, language, anti-metaphysics! Who’s right? How do I proceed? Since Western philosophy is not as soteriologically minded as Eastern philosophy, there are not as many teaching aids. There are not as many

inspiring stories of a teacher leading a student to insight and inspiration and the end of suffering.

Nevertheless, Western nondualistic philosophy can be used as a tool to root out the conceptual bases of suffering. All nondual philosophies attack the claim of a truly dualistic world by attempting to show how our normal understanding of the world is mistaken. Normally, we think that the world is made up of a multiplicity of objects or substances or sentient beings. Nondual philosophies attempt to provide a clearer understanding which reveals how these distinctions are not the case. One just needs to know where to look and how to proceed.

OK, I see that – Still, what do I do?

It can certainly help to have a human, written or internet guide to the Western philosophers. Human guides include college teachers, spiritual teachers and philosophical counselors. You can find teachers through *Google*, through Jerry Katz's www.nonduality.com, which includes one of the largest list of teachers in existence. You can find philosophical counselors through www.philosophicalgourmet.com, which evaluates various academic departments, or through www.APPA.edu, the official website of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association. Basic philosophy guidebooks can be found on Amazon by typing “guide to philosophy” into the keyword search field. Lou Marinoff's **Plato Not Prozac!** is a well-known place to begin learning how various famous philosophies might be of service. Informative internet links include Garth Kemerling's www.philosophypages.com and the giant www.Epistemelinks.com. There is a much smaller list of books and writers (Western and Eastern) on my www.heartofnow.com that I and others have found helpful.

Test the Grip of Duality

Not all dualities are created equal. Some of these dualities have actually been proposed as the solution to other dualities.⁸ Certain dualities exacerbate more than others the sense of alienation and being out of touch with reality. If you are interested in nondual inquiry and have a philosophical bent, you might be able to work on those first. Or you can work on the ones that seems the easiest to dispose of.

You can test the grip of these dualities. Ask yourself about each of the Big Dualities and check how you would feel if you had to live without it: Free will and determinism. Good and evil. Cause and Effect. Matter and spirit. Subject and object. When you visualize going about life without this duality, which one gives you the worst sinking feeling? This is probably the one you feel most attached to. Which one seems conceptually impossible to do without? This is the one that is probably the most integral to the rest of your understanding. About which one do you say, “Yeah, and so??” This is the one you can do without most easily.

One Duality at a Time

Here are some examples of how you might proceed by tackling the dualities one-by-one.

The notion of free will/determinism often carries a charge. It often seems that human life would be anarchic or chaotic without freedom of choice. If you wish to look into the issue, you can begin with Ted Honderich's **How Free Are You: The Determinism Problem** (Honderich, 1993), which shows how a just, fair, safe society is compatible with the notion that our actions are determined by causes. Closely related to this duality is the distinction between good and evil. Do they exist? Are they absolute? Are there true resolutions to ethical conflicts? Do you feel that a path of nondual inquiry would invalidate this distinction? You might try Richard Taylor's genial and compulsively readable **Good and Evil** (Taylor, 1999), which argues that the basis for morality is neither naturalistic nor supernatural, but conventional.

Another related duality is the distinction between cause and effect. Often this grabs our interest because we wish to know what is responsible for the world, and how we can act so as to remain safe. If you are interested in looking into this duality, the classic work is David Hume's **An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding** (Hume, 1999), especially Sections 19 and 43. This groundbreaking work shocked eighteenth century readers by arguing that that cause and effect are nothing other than regularity of succession of ideas. A cause as a special power transmitted from one thing to another simply cannot be found.

One of the more deeply entrenched dualities is matter vs. spirit. Why do they seem so irreducibly different from each other? Why do I feel separate from the moon but not from my thoughts? No philosopher has set out to demolish this distinction in such a thoroughgoing way as George Berkeley. His simplest work is **Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous** (Berkeley, 1998).

And – The Winner Is

The stickiest duality of all is the distinction between knowledge and its object, which is the same gap that Kant formalized over two centuries ago. This distinction is basic to the claim that knowledge has a real, independently existent referent. According to this duality, our thoughts represent an independent world of physical and mental existents, which are truly present even when they are not perceived or cognized. This duality is perhaps the most entrenched of all. It seems as if every moment of our experience is structured according to this gap. Even questioning it can begin to make a person feel alone in the universe, exposed and vulnerable. This duality is often the last one to dissolve in the course of one's nondual inquiry.

Examination of this duality makes a person feel as though the world is about to disappear, or that intellectual and perceptual blindness is about to hit. This can be scary and cause people to back away from the investigation. Experienced teachers of course take this fear as a favorable sign that the inquiry is reaching deeper than the word level, and have skillful and helpful ways of guiding the person through the process.

There are several fine shadings on this duality. Various writers attack it by interpreting it as the distinction between subject/object, thought/referent, or language/meaning, appearance/reality. Regardless of how it is clothed, there are several quite direct and helpful attacks on this duality.

Subject/Object – William Samuel and Joel Goldsmith write in a mystical way that everything is an outpouring of God. Samuel's **A Guide to Awareness and Tranquility**, (Samuel, 1967) is a triumphant song of praise to God as one's nature. Joel Goldsmith's **The Mystical I** (Goldsmith, 1993) and **Consciousness Is What I Am** (Goldsmith, 1976) proclaims that God is

the only cause and the only subject. Everything else is an effect of God's nature.

Thought/Referent – If you would like a nondualist account of the relation between a thought and its referent, you might consider Blanshard's **The Nature of Thought** (Blanshard, 1939), particularly a chapter in Vol. I entitled “The Theory of the Idea,” which generously examines various theories and concludes that our ideas, when fully developed and fully coherent, *just are* that reality.

Language/Meaning – Wittgenstein performs a similar task in his influential **Philosophical Investigations**. Here he investigates the relationship between language and its object. Using aphorisms and often cryptic pronouncements, he argues against the picture theory of meaning (that language accurately captures reality). He states that this picture theory is a kind of bewitchment.⁹ He argues that language is better understood by its use in particular contexts which he calls “language games.” Meaning lies in use, not in a separate metaphysical realm that language supposedly points to.

Appearance/Reality – Things seem so intransigently distant because we think that our thoughts are supposed to represent an independent reality that is not made of thoughts. One of the best philosophical antidotes to this dualism is W.T. Stace’s clear and engaging “Refutation of Realism” (Stace, 1934). Stace (1886-1967) was a mystic and a philosopher who combined Eastern with Western approaches. In his 1934 article he updates Berkeley by arguing that there is no such thing as an unexperienced object.

Then there are Richard Rorty's well-written essays in his **Objectivity, Relativism and Truth**, Vol. 1 (Rorty, 1991), especially the Introduction and “Inquiry as recontextualisation: An anti-dualist account of interpretation.” Rorty calls himself an “antirepresentationalist.” He argues against both realism (the external existence of the world) and antirealism (there exists only a web of beliefs). Both sides of the debate are based on the unsupportable claim that our ideas represent things that are not ideas. This representational claim can never be proven, so there is no basis upon which to make the distinction between realism and antirealism. Hence the distinction is unnecessary.

A Note about Who is Right

Sooner or later most serious enquirers reach a point of doubt or exasperation. “Who is right?” This frustration parallels the one felt by aspirants in Eastern traditions. These aspirants observe that the Advaitins say everything is consciousness, while the Buddhists say it’s all emptiness. Faced with this diversity, the philosophical aspirant finds herself asking who is correct, or whether the teachings can be reconciled.

The question really hits home when one considers the goal of inquiry – the pacification of the sense of separateness. One begins to ask, *How can this pacification arise when one’s teachings might be saying the wrong thing?? Teachings seem so different!* No one wants to be led down the wrong road. So the aspirant comes to feel the need to adjudicate between teachings, or at least prove that they are all saying the same thing after all.

Skillful nondual inquiry confronts this very issue squarely. One comes to see how the goal of a picture of a real world beyond the picture makes no sense. The very notions of “accuracy” and “representation” themselves depend on a dualistic split between appearance and reality. I discuss this point, along with the notion of reconciling Advaita, Buddhism, idealism, realism and materialism in a future monograph.

Nondual Nacho Satsang

Excerpted from a recent conversation over a plate of nachos.....

Q: So, can Western philosophy really help?

A: It has helped for others. The insights and teachings *are* out there. Yes, they’re scattered, and not as easy to find in one work such as Nisargadatta Maharaj’s I Am That. But they are there.

Q: That’s just it! It’s so all-over-the-place! How do I find direction?

A: Search google.com for “philosophical counselor” and ask whether the practitioners you encounter can help with nondual inquiry. Follow your heart, which will let you know which philosophical issues are relevant to your nondual inquiry, if any. Explore the bibliography and weblinks in this article.

Q: How do I keep all this from getting dry like a brainiac?

A: Again, follow your heart. Of course this stuff isn't for everybody – no approach is. But if it has gotten under your skin, then the deeper your desire for clarity on issues like free will, knowledge/object, self/other, etc., the less dry you'll find the philosophical approach. It's quite similar to Advaitic jnana yoga and Buddhist analytic meditation. Some of those who do this inquiry find that it matters more than anything else, and it shows up as the breath of life itself.

Q: But that sounds like a lot of “doing.” I've heard that there's nothing to do.

A: Hah! Is there really any difference between inquiry, and a bird singing on a tree branch? Whether you are truly doing anything, or not truly doing anything, is actually one of the issues that come under scrutiny!

Q: Are there groups that do this?

A: As of yet there's no widespread Western-style social context for this exact kind of inquiry. Nothing large and analogous to the satsang movement. Small, private gatherings do happen (for instance, I have a “nondual nacho satsang” on Thursdays). But this is changing, enlarging. The West is seeing a growth in cafes philos, diners pensants, and salon gatherings. These social structures are already in place, and Western philosophical self-inquiry is well suited to their dynamics. There's no doubt that Western or combined East/West-style inquiry will grow, and it will form its own shape as it goes.

Weblinks:

General

<http://google.com>

Popular general search engine, very commercial.

<http://www.dogpile.com>

General meta-search engine, searches other search engines for you, not so commercial.

Nonduality

<http://www.nonduality.com>

Jerry Katz's comprehensive site on nonduality.

<http://heartofnow.com/files/links.html>

The links page on my site. Includes books and writings I have found helpful.

Academic

<http://www.APPA.edu>

Official non-profit site of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association. Members can assist with study on the well known Western philosophers. Some members can assist with nondual inquiry.

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/philinks.htm>

Guide to Philosophy on the Internet, by Peter Suber at Earlham College. He stopped updating it in 2003, but many links there are still active.

<http://www.Epistemelinks.com>

General philosophy web portal. Lots of links to links, from e-texts to job listings!

<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com>

Ranks the academic graduate programs in philosophy.

<http://www.philosophypages.com>

Garth Kemerling's philosophy site. An easy first stop to look up a philosophical word, book or person.

<http://plato.stanford.edu>

The authoritative **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** online.

E-Texts

<http://www.questia.com>

Online library. Charges a monthly fee, but you can find classic, old, obscure, and out of print books and articles here.

<http://www.epistemelinks.com/Main/MainText.aspx>

Episteme's (see above) E-texts page.

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¹ "Metaphysics" is that branch of philosophy that studies the nature of reality. There are other branches, such as epistemology (the study of nature of

knowledge), ethics (the study of good and evil and the rightness of human conduct), esthetics (the study of art or beauty), and logic (the study of reasoning).

² On the pre-socratics, see Kirk (1983) and Waterfield (2000). On Boethius, see Boethius (2000).

³ On the ancient atomists, see Taylor, C.C.W. (1999).

⁴ Sellars's book requires some technical background in modern philosophy. Some of the same views are made by B.F. Skinner in his last publication, **The Origins of Cognitive Thought** (Skinner 1989).

⁵ See for example Colin M. Turbayne's "Berkeley's Two Concepts of Mind" (1970).

⁶ See Berkeley's **Siris** (1744), sections 266-289, esp. 287. This was his last work, officially about the health benefits of tar-water. The mystical pantheism Berkeley praises is slipped in towards the end, along with defenses against possible accusations of atheism.

⁷ See Royce (2001), originally published in 1913; Quine (1980), originally published in 1951; Wittgenstein (1999), originally published in 1953; Sellars (1996), originally published in 1956; and Turbayne (1970), originally published in 1962.

⁸ Many of these dualities have been created by philosophers themselves in their attempt to understand and explain other things. A philosopher might create a metaphysical distinction in *one* area in the attempt to solve a puzzle in *another* area.

For example, in the classical world following Plato and Aristotle, the substance/attribute distinction was thought up in order to help account for the permanence/change distinction. The puzzle was, "Does a thing perpetually change, moment-to-moment, or does it remain the same over even a short period of time?" If it never stops changing, then how can it truly be a thing in the first place? If a thing never changes at all, then even a color change would mean that the thing somehow loses its identity becomes another thing. To solve this puzzle, a new distinction (duality) was thought up. A thing has a *substance* (i.e., true nature) which never changes. And it has *attributes* (e.g., color size, shape) which can change without the thing losing its identity. This is a new distinction used to help solve the puzzle brought about by the previous distinction.

⁹ In fact, Wittgenstein himself had earlier propounded a sophisticated version of this very same theory in his equally influential **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus** (1922). His later work **Philosophical Investigations** (1953) is often regarded as a recanting of this view.