

Ubi non cogito, ibi sum¹

some intuitions about the nature of awareness²

Pretentious?

Pretentious title, isn't it? That's the first thought that comes up in my mind after writing down the title of this contemplation. Is it true? That of course is another thought, but this second thought is different, it has a lot more potential, a lot more space in it. It does not hold a judgement, a label, it simply inquires about the nature of the previous thought. It is a thought that opens up, not closes down. I like this kind of thoughts much better, they seem to point to a different thing, a different place, a different path of thinking (if it is thinking at all at which they point ...).

Another inquiring thought following the first thought (or the second one) could be: who/what is asking the question that this thought is about. Now we are really getting somewhere! Or nowhere, just depending on how you look at it.

Stuff or space? Or both?

Before (or: without) answering this question, let's change the scene to a more practical level. Where am I? I am sitting in a chair, my hands are on the laptop, I am typing. I am looking at the screen when I am typing, and every now and then, if no words come, no ready thoughts to hammer down, I stare at a door. What is this thing, this door?



I know things about it because of my senses and experience. The door has a certain height, width, depth, weight, color. I can walk to it and touch it, open it, it feels a certain way, hard, impenetrable, cold, flat. My sensual perceptions seem to coincide with each other – they make sense. If I move my hand to the right edge of the door as my eyes perceive it, behold: there comes a point where my hands also feel the edge of the door, exactly at the point where my eyes predicted it to be. Of course they do, together my senses create my impression of reality. It would be very uncomfortable if the senses would not make a coherent picture. For instance, if I would walk to the door and suddenly find out that I could walk right through it. Surprise! It would be fun in a way, but also present a problem: if I

can no longer trust my senses, that would impede my functioning in reality as I perceive it. Another door I might perceive as being fictional and I would try to walk through it, and I might bump my head because this one turns out to be solid. Fortunately, if my body and brain function well (no illness, no drugs) this will probably not happen. Otherwise, homo sapiens would not have existed, for all our forefathers/mothers would have drowned in ponds they would have not seen as real, eaten by lions

¹ Where I don't think, there I am.

² I prefer the word "awareness" in stead of "consciousness", for this could point to connotations in psychological and medical sense like "unconsciousness" or "subconsciousness", which would lead astray from the notion of "awareness" as I perceive it.

they would not have believed in and starved from not eating the fruits they would not have trusted to exist. As they would not have survived to be our forefathers/mothers, we would not be here as their offspring.

So, our perception of reality makes it possible for us to deal with it in a practical way, to survive in the reality and to make the most of it. That is a good thing. But we should keep in mind, that we should not make too much of it. What we perceive of reality, is not equal to reality. Our vision of the door is not the door itself. Nor is our feeling of the door when we touch it or bump into it. We cannot know reality to the full. We only know our perception of reality. We only know the way that reality presents itself to us. That way of knowing is limited by the possibilities of our perception, by the very nature of our form. For instance, we have certain dimensions and everything around us presents itself as having more or less the same dimensions. Only if we enhance our senses, using for instance a (electron)microscope or a (radio)telescope, we can see things of other dimensions that otherwise were hidden to us. If we change our way of looking, we see different things. And very soon, reality literally starts to not make sense anymore, as we know from discoveries like space-time, relativity and quantum mechanics. We cannot make sense of these discoveries very well (useful as they are), because they touch at and perhaps even surpass the boundaries of our very perceiving-capacity, and even the boundaries of (our) existence itself. In a way, doing scientific research like this is also a “transcendental” experience, like meditation can be. The former is an outwardly directed curiosity, the latter goes inward³. The best way to describe reality at this level at this time in our human development, is that everything (every thing) is not a thing but more like a process. There is a constant process of creation going on, a constant popping in and out of existence, a constant traveling between the unmanifested and the manifested state and vice versa. And that there also is a lot of space involved, a lot of no-thing-ness, or: nothingness. We can call it dark matter, dark energy or a “field”, but that is not more defining than to call it Ohm or Dao. In fact, the latter is perhaps even a better description because it does not point to anything we “know” and we have to admit that we really don’t “know” what this space consists of.



So, the door is not what it seems to be at first glance. Is it not solid, not flat, not green? No. It is not. That’s just a perception. There is more to it. It only seems to be like that if we look at it a certain way. If we look closer, much closer, at the level of subatomic “particles⁴”, we would not perceive the door as green, solid, flat. In fact, we would not perceive it as a door at all. If we were for instance a neutrino, we would fly right through the door without any interaction, we would not notice it at all. At subatomic level, the door is not solid, it consists for a large part (99,9999999% is a fair approximation⁵) of “space”. We have not figured out what this “space” is yet, but for sure we know it is not “stuff”. Matter is not made out of matter. And space seems to be everywhere, even the stuff seems to consist of it⁶.

³ More about meditation later.

⁴ Subatomic processes or interactions would be a better description. Even the word “subatomic” is not perfect.

⁵ It also depends on the sort of matter. Hydrogen is less dense than, say, Uranium, so they are not equally “empty”.

⁶ To be fair, we have to keep in mind that the space in stuff, like say in a Hydrogen atom or the wood in a green door, although empty, is not “vacant”. It is like a giant hotel room with only one little guest: there is a lot of space

Mind stuff is like normal stuff: we misperceive it

And the same applies to us. To our body, our mind, our being. Because we are also the same as everything we perceive, we are some way in which reality presents itself. To us, to each other, to the universe, to itself. So if we look at reality (or any object that we perceive as real), in fact what happens is, that reality is looking at itself.

Now, let's get away from things and look at our mind. More precisely, at everything that we experience of our mind. Since our mind is also part of our reality, we cannot know it any more than we can know reality. We can only know it the way it presents itself in our senses. Since we perceive our senses to be the product of our mind as well, it puzzles us with the extra difficulty that our mind presents itself to us, and in us, as itself. So how to proceed? We cannot possibly solve this puzzling question any more than the goldfish can answer the question: "How is the water quality today", since it is immersed in water in such a penetrating way that it will not even perceive the water as some-thing else than itself, or not at all. To perceive the water quality, the fish must first get out of the water, even for just a second. Then he knows! We seem not able to walk to, or look at our mind like we walk to the door to check how it presents itself, because we don't seem to have a point or perspective that is different from the mind: everything seems to happen in the mind and it never stops. Or does it?

Get out of your mind

To answer this question, let's leave it for what it is for a moment; we still can agree for now that our mind presents itself to us in the form of feelings, sensations and thoughts. Let's call this mind stuff.

And this mind stuff in a way is only a representation (abstraction) of reality, which in its turn is only a perception of that what is behind reality (which cannot be known at all). If we think about a door, this thought is an abstraction of a perception of the real thing. If we think of a person, the same applies. If that thought turns into a feeling about the person, everything gets even more abstract (no matter how "real" the feeling might feel). So, we have to be careful if we rely on mind stuff!



Now, another question that arises is: is this all there is? Well, just as with "stuff" that presents itself as a door, we can say that these feelings, sensations and thoughts, this mind stuff, is in a way true, but no more than the door is true: it depends on our way of perception. So, as our mind stuff is the way in which the mind presents itself to us, and we are the way that reality presents itself to us, and because we know that reality is much more than stuff namely space in and between the stuff, we can assume that our mind holds something much more than what it presents to us at first glance as well, as a sort of mind-space. We could call this "awareness" or "consciousness"⁷. And as is the case with the door, we can "find" (or better: perceive) this "awareness" if we take a closer look at

left in the room, but the room is fully "occupied" nevertheless and cannot be sold to another guest at the same time. That is why we cannot walk through a closed green door, although both we and the door are mostly empty space. The electron in the atom is, in the same way as the hotel guest, "occupying" the entire space within the boundaries of the atom by "moving around" constantly: We can't even exactly pinpoint it, only predict its whereabouts with a certain probability, like the hotel manager can't tell where exactly the little guest is in his room (without inquiring or looking). The atom (like the hotel guest) will not, or only under strict conditions, allow anything (or anybody) else to enter this space. If this happens, it will cause a chemical or nuclear reaction in case of the atom, or a tea-party in the hotel room. Of course, all these analogies are only a way to describe our perceptions, and we know from the green door what to think of those ...

⁷ See annotation 2.

it. To do this, we have to get out of our mind, like the fish that has to get out of the water to get a perspective.

Meditation

Now, how can we know this is true and how can we do that? We have to find a place or process where everything the mind presents to us, is not. If only we could be there for just a second, we could verify this. So we are looking for a place or process where there are no thoughts, sensations or feelings. No mind stuff. From that place or process we could observe the mind in its business. Where could that be and how can we get there?



There must be such a process or place if we follow the analogy of matter and space. The answer can be found in meditation and intuition. We can easily verify that this is true if we meditate, because even at moments that there are no thoughts, feelings or sensations in our mind (or: in the moments between those phenomena, since our mind is a busy little bugger), we still are aware of ourselves on another level, or simply: we “are”. In fact, it would be accurate to say that everything that seems to arise in the mind, actually arises in awareness. Like space seems to be everywhere, even inside “stuff”, awareness seems to be everywhere too, even (but not only) inside our mind. Our silent mind is the instrument with which we can perceive awareness. If the mind is silent (no mind stuff i.e. no-mind), the feeling of “being” prevails and presents itself to us. If we perceive this, we cannot pinpoint it to a specific place or time. It is everywhere and timeless. It is our effortless natural state and in our silent mind it gives rise to a peaceful and tranquil feeling of “being”. In all these qualities, it differs from the mind stuff, that is always part of a causal chain, costs effort and energy in all its “doing”, is bound to time and place and mostly does not feel peaceful or natural at all. So the nature of awareness is like space, no-thing-ness, just like the space in stuff. On closer examination, it presents itself in “no-mind”, and we cannot know it in the normal way because it is not an object but we can perceive it in the silence of our mind that we can find in meditation, in the silence between the manifestations of the mind, the no-thing-ness that is between and at the source of thoughts, feelings and sensations.



There is as much awareness as there is space

Through meditation we can establish that there is more to the mind than thoughts etc., namely awareness, like there is more to matter than stuff, namely space. If the same proportionality applies here (and why would it be different, they present themselves in and as the same universe), we could even assume that thoughts, sensations and feelings are only a very small part of our being, and that most of it (99,9999999%) is awareness⁸. So on closer examination, there is a much larger framework that presents itself in us, in which all the mind stuff arises, namely awareness. We just have to get into that place.

Once we realize the relative “unimportance” of the products of our mind, and the enormous potential of awareness, we could start perceiving our thoughts, sensations and feelings and even the entire reality around us as such, namely of “relative importance”. Yes, our mind has a habit of presenting us with a constant stream of this mind stuff and we cannot ignore this, we have to act on it on occasion as well. But like there is more space than stuff, there is more awareness than mind stuff. We just have to look for it and become sensitive to it. Since we have not learned how to experience it (at least, in the western world our upbringing is only focused on stuff and persona, ego, personality instead of on space and awareness), we have to practice perceiving awareness.

Become a master in meditation, improve on Descartes

Practice makes perfect but it could take a while. There is a notion that to become master at anything (piano playing, physics, skating, you name it) you have to practice for 10.000 hours. If we start meditating regularly today for two hours a day, we will master the art of awareness in fourteen years. If every child would be introduced to meditation at the age of four, it could be a master at eighteen. Now that would be a great coming of age! But nothing withholds us from starting now or meditating more. We could even meditate all day long. How? Meditation is like intuition. We all have intuition. Intuition is something we all know that surpasses thinking and feeling and sensing. It resembles awareness. The very word intuition points to exactly that: it means to observe, to consider, to look at, upon or towards favorably. What should we observe? Our mind and its products. And the mind stuff that is around us from other minds. Thoughts, feelings, sensations are to be observed. Not to be believed or followed without careful and aware consideration. If we start a habit of merely looking at the products of our minds like we sense a smell or hear a sound, rather than immediately believing and identifying with them, we are meditating.

If we start living from a place of intuition and meditation, we will soon start to experience the space in the stuff and the awareness in the mind. We will experience that in this space and awareness, we actually “are”, much more so than in the stuff and the mind stuff. And that everyone and everything is also rooted in this space and awareness. We are defined infinitely more accurately and intensely by space and awareness, than by stuff (possessions, accomplishments, knowledge) and mind stuff (thoughts, feelings and sensations).

⁸ We could even say that, like stuff seems to be a sort of space in a manifested/condensed form (a localized, self-maintaining field) so everything is space (presenting in various levels of activity), mind stuff is a sort of awareness in a manifested/condensed form (a localized, self-serving manifestation of awareness) so all the mind is actually about, is awareness (presenting in different levels of excitement). Reality as we perceive it then consists of stuff and mind stuff, which on closer inspection translates to space and awareness; and who will tell the difference between those two, if in fact they are different at all?



Descartes was well on the way of discovering this, and perhaps he pointed even to this when he said “cogito, ergo sum” (I think, therefore I am), only his wording was very unfortunate or he thought about it a bit too long. It is not in (or because of) the thinking that we all are, but in the awareness, in the non-thinking, which prevails and precedes all thinking. If we experience the space in stuff, we will not attach that much to it and we feel richer with less. If we experience the awareness in and around thoughts, feelings and sensations, we will not suffer so much from them and we will feel peace with ourselves and others.

It will not be difficult, once we have got a taste of awareness, to perceive it more and more, because it feels so damn good. It has the taste of ultimate freedom. Finally our mind starts behaving as our servant instead of our master. And we will want to be in this state all the time, and immediately notice it when we are pulled out of it by mind stuff, and go back again to perceive from awareness.

Like the door points to the space behind and in the door, every thought, perception or feeling points to the awareness behind and around it. Every product of our mind can be a door to awareness if we change our perspective by intuition and meditation.

It's like Rumi said: *“You are not a drop in the ocean, you are the entire ocean in the drop.”* Or like Descartes could have said: *“Ubi non cogito, ibi sum”*.

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