

INSIGHT, THINKING, AND THE NATURE OF SELF
ON THE METHODS OF PHILOSOPHY AND WHAT "I" REFERS TO

by

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To my parents, brother, and teachers.

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Abstract

My thesis has two overarching components. The first is on the methods of philosophy and the second is on the nature of the self. I look at both Eastern and Western philosophy to show the core methods of philosophy within both branches. This is intertwined with seeing how each branch applies their philosophical methods to understand the nature of the self. I find that within Western philosophy, Ancient Greek philosophy with a focus on Parmenides and Plato (500BCE-300BCE) used insight and thinking to do philosophy, but that when we look at modern philosophy, starting with Descartes (1600CE), and our own discipline of contemporary analytic philosophy, the main method used is thinking, while insight is marginalized and often times ignored. As I demonstrate through my reading of Vedantic philosophy (8000BCE) and Buddhist philosophy (500BCE), insight as a philosophical method is more prominent and valued in Eastern philosophy than Western philosophy.

When methods of thinking are used to understand the nature of the self, we conclude, falsely, that the self is a thinking thing – the thinker. When methods of insight are used, we directly know, more correctly, that the self is _____, which can be linguistically labelled as Being, the Self, not-self, emptiness, awareness, pure consciousness, etc., which is ineffable.

My main argument is that philosophy today should include methods of thinking and insight to understand the nature of self. More controversially, I argue that to truly understand the nature of self, insight is necessary. This is because the nature of the self, which is _____, cannot be known through thought. The nature of self can be pointed to through thought but cannot be known through thought. Thus, I further argue that there should be attention training within philosophy and that attention training should be viewed as a legitimate philosophical method. Methods of training attention include methods such as meditation. Attention training isn't typically viewed or taught as a philosophical method within contemporary Western philosophy. But I argue that it should be in order to develop the higher methodological faculty of insight; a highly refined form of attention which cuts through ignorance to knowledge.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The thesis is divided into five main chapters: Western philosophy, Vedantic philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, a summary on overlapping themes, and my own analysis. The first chapter is on Western philosophy. I look at how insight or *noesis* is imbedded within the Western tradition, at least based on certain translations and interpretations of Ancient Greek philosophy. By looking at Parmenides and Plato, I argue that the mistranslation of *noesis* to “thinking” instead of “recognition” or “insight” has led Western philosophy astray, by getting Western philosophers to largely focus on “thinking” as the main and often times best or only way of doing philosophy. I then link this to Descartes’ method of doubt and inquiry into the nature of the self. In his *Meditations* Descartes concludes that the one thing there can be absolute certainty of is that the self is a thinking thing. I argue that this conclusion is wrong because Descartes’ method is wrong. Descartes uses “thinking” or *dianoia* to conclude that he is a thinking thing. If Descartes used *noesis* or “insight” as the epistemological method to understand the nature of the self, he would find that he isn’t a thinking thing. Instead, he would find that he is Being/awareness/pure consciousness, which is no-thing and isn’t thought based. Based on the previous historical outlining of Parmenides and Plato, I link how *noesis* or insight is viewed as the highest epistemological method within Western philosophy, higher than *dianoia* or thinking, and thus conclude that *noesis* should be used to understand the nature of the self.

The second chapter is on Vedantic philosophy, which is Hindu philosophy largely stripped of religion. I begin with the *Upanishads*, which are ancient Indian philosophical texts written from 800BCE-500BCE, slightly before Parmenides and Plato. I then look at

the *Bhagavad Gita* (500 BCE), Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy (800CE), and the 20th sage/philosopher Ramana Maharshi. There are two common threads running throughout these texts/philosophers. The first is that *buddhi* or "awareness" is a higher epistemological method than *manas* or "thinking." This is similar to the distinction made between *nous* and *dianoia* in Western philosophy. Second is the claim that there is a false self and a true Self. The false self is the self as a thinking thing which is distinct from other selves. The true Self, which is equivalent to Being, is awareness of pure consciousness which is no-thing and is non-thought based. The true Self is equivalent to universal consciousness, one consciousness. I'll argue that there can be insight into the Self as awareness or pure consciousness using methods of *buddhi/nous*. The basic claim here is that we can be aware of thinking and thus that thinking can't be our base self. However, our attention must be refined to have this insight in an experiential, non-intellectual way. In regards to the claim that the Self is universal consciousness, I'll argue that this goes a step too far into speculative metaphysics. While it is possible that the Self is a universal consciousness, I'll argue that this can't be indubitably known.

The third chapter is on Buddhist philosophy. First, I explain the Buddhist claim that there is no-self or that we are not-self. I argue that the claim "there is no self" isn't saying "I don't exist" but is more accurately saying "there is no self within the body-mind organism." Next, I look at Dzogchen Buddhism through Garab Dorje (700CE), Padmasmbhava (800CE), and Ponlop Rinpoche (21st century). Dzogchen Buddhism points towards the nature of self in a way that's similar to Vedanta. Last, I explain Zen Buddhism by focusing on Zen Koans. Through the work of the contemporary philosopher, Chung-Ying Cheng, I explain the mechanics of Zen Koans, which seem

nonsensical on the surface but actually have a profound underlying method. Koans point towards not-self or emptiness in a way that's different from Advaita or Dzogchen.

The fourth chapter is on Douglas Harding's "Headless Way." I introduce Harding, explain his legitimacy, and show his novel experiments to point to the true nature of self.

The fifth chapter is on the methods of philosophy. I first summarize how insight and thinking have been used within Western and Eastern philosophy. Next, I explain the limitations of insight and thinking and how both methods are necessary. Last, I argue that philosophers should train attention, through practices such as meditation, to hone the faculty of insight. Training attention should be done alongside training thinking.

Thus, my main argument is twofold. First, that philosophers should train in and use methods of insight/*buddhi/noesis* in addition to methods of thinking/*dianoia*. And second, that using methods of insight/*buddhi/noesis* are necessary to understand the nature of the self.

Chapter 2: Western Philosophy

2.1. Parmenides

In this chapter, I show how *insight/nous* was used as a philosophical method by the Ancient Greek philosophers, Parmenides and Plato. I then show how the 17th century philosopher and founder modern of Western philosophy, Descartes, didn't use *insight/nous* as a philosophical method and instead only used *dianoia*/thinking as a philosophical method. Descartes' method is significant in the history of philosophy as it largely influences the way contemporary Western analytic philosophy is done, which uses *dianoia*/thinking as its main method. Now, to start with Parmenides.

Parmenides, the Ancient Greek philosopher from the 6th century BCE, is typically considered as the founder of Western metaphysics. Parmenides believed that understanding Being was the central mission of philosophy. He viewed everything as composed of Being. Being doesn't change, is perfect, complete, and whole. Another way to put this is that Being is what is. According to Parmenides, what is, is. From him, there are two main ways of inquiry. The first is inquiry into what is. This way is legitimate because what is, is. The second way of inquiry is into what is not. This way is illegitimate because what is not, is not. There can't be any inquiry into what is not.

There are different translations of Parmenides' poem. Consequently, there are different interpretations. As will be seen with Plato, one of the key differences in translations comes from the words '*nous/noesis/noein*'. Typically, these words are translated as "thought". These translations aren't the most accurate, since when they are read by contemporary readers – moderns – they are associated with mental activity. But

this isn't what Parmenides meant when he used the word '*nous*'. Parmenides was referring to non-mental activity and thus "thought" isn't an accurate translation. In fact, it's a distorting translation. A better translation for '*nous*' is "recognition, awareness, or insight." This makes it clear that Parmenides isn't referring to concepts/thoughts/mental activity when he uses the word '*nous*'. This is important because it makes clear that the method of recognizing "what is" or "Being" isn't through concepts. Thus, "what is" or "Being" isn't conceptual. "What is" or "Being" includes concepts but isn't primarily conceptual. "What is" or "Being" is that out of which concepts arise. But if '*nous*' is translated as "thought" then the interpretation that follows is to equate knowing "what is" or "Being" through concepts. In other words, "Being" or "what is" is all that can be thought of. Whatever can be thought of is what is. This interpretation, sometimes called the logical-dialectical interpretation, is favoured by more contemporary philosophers such as Bertrand Russell (Palmer). In the next section, we'll look at two translations of Parmenides' proem. We'll then go through the different interpretations of Parmenides in more detail. Last, I'll argue that translating *nous* as "recognition, awareness, or insight," makes the most sense.

2.1.1. Parmenides' Proem

There are two contrasting translations of Parmenides' proem that we'll look at. The first is by the classicist John Burnet and the second is by the philosopher Rose Cherubin. Both scholars have expertise in Ancient Greek philosophy and translation which is why their work is being used. Burnet translates '*nous*' as 'thought'. Cherubin translates '*nous*' as "conceive, recognition, awareness, insight." Within her translation of Parmenides' proem,

Cherubin uses the word “conceive”. But in her footnotes, Cherubin explains that there are reasonable other ways to translate ‘*nous*’ such as awareness. She also has an article that explicitly addresses why ‘*nous*’ should be translated as “awareness” or “conceiving” and not as “thinking”. This article is called “Λέγειν, Νοεῖν and Τὸ Ἐόν in Parmenides.” In English this article is translated as “*Legein, Noein, and To Eon* in Parmenides.” This article is one of the textual sources I’ll use to argue that ‘*nous*’ should be translated as “awareness, recognition, or insight”. I’ll further argue that the mistranslation of ‘*nous*’ to “thinking” has led Western philosophy astray, by getting Western philosophers to largely focus on “thinking” as the main, only, and best way of doing philosophy. This argument will take more time to develop, as it will include Plato, Descartes, and links to Eastern philosophy which takes methods other than thinking – such as contemplative practices – more seriously to try to trigger recognitions/insights/awareness. But starting with Parmenides is helpful since he is the founder of Western metaphysics.

Fragment 2 of Parmenides’ Proem. Translation by Cherubin:

1. Come now, I will speak, and do you carry this speech away with you once heard,
2. Just which are the only roads of inquiry (seeking) to conceive [of] (OR: for thinking; *no•sai*):
3. The one, how it is and how it is not to be (OR: how it is not possible for it not to be),
4. Is the path of *Peith•* (Persuasion) - for *Al•thei•* (Truth) attends upon her;
5. The other, how it is not and how it is necessary [for it] not to be,
6. This indeed I indicate to you to be an all-not-inquirable-into straight track:

7. For neither would you know what is not (not-being) - for that is not accomplished
8. Nor would you indicate it. (Cherubin)

Fragment 2 of Parmenides' Proem. Translation by Burnet:

Come now, I will tell thee - and do thou hearken to my
saying and carry it away - the only two ways of search that
can be thought of. The first, namely, that It is, and that it is
impossible for anything not to be, is the way of conviction,

5. for truth is its companion.. The other, namely, that It is not,
and that something must needs not be, - that, I tell thee, is a
wholly untrustworthy path. For you cannot know what is
not - that is impossible - nor utter it; (Burnet)

There are a few important differences between these translations. Cherubin's translation states that there "are the only roads of inquiry (seeking) to conceive [of]". Burnet's translations states that there are "the only two ways of search that can be thought of." Both Cherubin and Burnet's translations agree *what* the two methods of inquiry are: what is/how it is/it is/to be and what is not/how it is not/is not/not to be. But they disagree on *how* the inquiry should take place. Cherubin's translation views the method as "conceiving". This might be understood as "thought" but Cherubin explicitly states this isn't the way to understand "conceiving". We'll see this shortly upon examining Cherubin's explanatory footnotes on '*noein*'. On the other hand, Burnet's translation views the method as "thought". Seeing this difference over how to translate '*noein*' is key

to understanding the different interpretations of Parmenides. In terms of the similarities, both translations agree that only one way of inquiry is legitimate – inquiry into what is/how it is/it is/to be.

Fragment 3 of Parmenides' Proem. Translation by Cherubin:

“for the same thing is for conceiving (awareness; *noein*) [of] and for being (OR:...for the same thing is to conceive (be aware) [of] and to be).” (Cherubin)

Fragment 3 of Parmenides' Proem. Translation by Burnet:

“For it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be.” (Burnet)

This is where the disagreement on *how* the inquiry into what is/how it is/it is/to be is made most clear. Cherubin's translations views conceiving/awareness/being aware as allowing for insight into being. On the other hand, Burnet's translation views thought as allowing for insight into being. The main point of Parmenides' proem is captured in fragments 2 and 3. Thus, we'll move on to unpacking Cherubin's translation of '*noein/nous/noesis*'.

*2.2.1. Cherubin's Translation of *noein/nous/noesis**

Cherubin has a few footnotes in her translation of the proem that are dedicated to unpacking '*noein/nous/noesis*'. They are listed below.

Footnote to Fragment 3, line 1: “*Noein* is the infinitive of a verb that most often means ‘being aware [of],’ “to be aware [of],’ ‘to conceive [of]’ (in the sense of having a mental

conception of something - not conception in the sense of procreation), ‘conceiving,’ and so on. It can also mean ‘to intend,’ ‘to plan,’ and the like.”

Footnote to Fragment 4, line 1: “*Noos* can be translated as ‘mind,’ ‘intelligence,’ ‘awareness,’ ‘intellectual awareness.’ It is etymologically related to *noein*. Anaxagoras will use the same word; it is spelled *nous* in his dialect.”¹

Fragment 8, lines 35-36: “I would translate *noein* as ‘conceiving’ or ‘awareness’ instead of ‘thinking,’ for reasons detailed in my article, “*Legein, Noein, and To Eon* in Parmenides” (*Ancient Philosophy* 21 [2001]: 277-303).”

To further understand the meaning of ‘*noein/nous/noesis*’ we’ll now look at Cherubin’s article “*Legein, Noein, and To Eon* in Parmenides.” Cherubin translates ‘*noein*’ as “realizing, recognizing, thinking, intending, conceiving, or awareness” (277, 280, 291). Cherubin states that “it is often argued that Parmenides or the goddess means to assert some sort of general identity between τὸ εἶναι or εἶναι (being or what is), on the one hand and νοεῖν or νόον (conceiving, thinking, knowing, mind, or the contents of thought) or the other” (278). This is essentially a correspondence theory of truth which states that truth is correspondence with fact (David). Scholars such as Charles H. Kahn, 1988, view Parmenides’ position as “the identification of Mind with Being, that is, of cognition and its object” (as cited in Cherubin 283). Others such as Vlastos, 1953, view Parmenides

¹ These explanatory footnotes are clear on their own, except for the first - Footnote to Fragment 3, line 1. It’s important not to interpret “mental” as meaning “thought.” Cherubin stated in an email correspondence “I don’t think anything I say in the article limits *noein* to what you are designating as ‘mental’, but perhaps I am wrong. I am not entirely sure what you are understanding ‘mental’ to include and to exclude. As far as I can tell, *noein* is not limited, in Parmenides’ time, to what we would call ‘thought-based reasoning’ and it is not at that time equivalent to what today in the West might be called ‘thought’.”

position as “being is all alike. If thought is any part of being, all being must be thought (as cited in Cherubin 283). Others such as Gallop, 1984, and Barnes, 1982, view Parmenides’ essential position as “whatever is thought of exists” (as cited in Cherubin 283). Bertrand Russell, in his book *The History of Western Philosophy* espouses this view most forcefully. We’ll look at Russell’s position in more detail later.

As Cherubin states, “these suggestions are not accurate” (278). The main argument against this is that “in general νοεῖν is supposed to involve becoming aware of or having in mind what is, or what obtains. Or rather, νοεῖν [thinking] is supposed to address or to grasp exactly εἶναι τὸ ἐόν [what is or being].” As Cherubin points out, if εἶναι (what is) is synonymous with νόον (translated as thinking) then this would put strain on our current use of “thinking”. When we use phrases such as “I think that” or “I think so” there’s an implication that we’re not sure. Thus, “[t]hese uses allow or even signal a sense that ‘what I think’ may not be the same as ‘what is’” (287). This becomes even more clear when we look at the Homeric context (8th century BCE, which presumably influenced Parmenides since he was born in the 6th century BCE) in which νοεῖν was used. As Cherubin states:

“Von Fritz, 1845, 223-225 summarizes Homeric meanings and connotations of νοεῖν this way: suddenly understanding, realization (a situation, or the truth of a situation), planning or intending, conceiving [of] or visualizing (generally with regards to remote real things). He notes that in Hesiod, we find the idea νόον can be blunted or misled and hence fail to realize what is real (226). We can see from

this that when nothing has gone wrong, *voeĩv* addresses, or grasps something that is real or true.” (as cited in Cherubin 287)

These framings of ‘*voeĩv*’ as a sudden understanding or realization closely match Zen Buddhist *Kensho/Satori* recognitions of ‘not-self’, Advaita Vedanta recognitions of ‘The Self’, Douglas Harding’s recognition of having no head, as well as many others. The framing of ‘*voeĩv*’ as grasping what is true when nothing has gone wrong is also similar to *Kensho/Satori* recognitions of ‘not-self’, Advaita Vedanta recognitions of ‘The Self’, and Douglas Harding’s recognition of having no head. These traditions along with Harding, claim to have direct recognition of what the self is, as either it not existing or it existing as One Self.² These terms will be explained in later chapters of the thesis. I mention this now so it’s easier to understand the connection later. The framing of ‘*voeĩv*’ as a sudden understanding or realization also ties in with Cherubin’s interpretation of Parmenides as saying that “the goddess has both suggested and argued that mortals’ very way of looking at things has deep flaws” (291).³ This point is important to remember as it will become relevant later in the paper.

2.2.3. Russell’s Correspondence Theory of Truth Interpretation of Parmenides

² These two positions, while seemingly contradictory, will be shown to *not* be contradictory later in the paper. Holding seemingly contradictory positions when engaging in this is also supported by Cherubin’s interpretation of Parmenides. She ends her paper by stating, “[a]cknowledging the conditions of inquiry also includes recognizing (*voeĩv*) that the possibility of identification and the possibility of meaning appear to depend on contradictions or paradoxes” (301).

³ This point connects especially well with Douglas Harding’s recognition of having no head.

The translation of Parmenides that Russell uses in his book *The History of Western Philosophy* is Burnet's translation (49). To remind, Burnet translates 'νοεῖν' (*noein*) as "thought". Thus, the translation of Parmenides that Russell uses states that:

The thing that can be thought and that for the sake of which the thought exists is the same; for you cannot find thought without something that is, as to which it is uttered. (Russell 49)

Russell also includes a footnote at the end of this sentence from Burnet which states "The meaning, I think is this... There can be no thought corresponding to a name that is not the name of something real" (49). Russell builds on this point and states that:

The essence of the argument is this: When you think, you think *of* something; when you use a name, it must be the name of something. Therefore both thought and language require objects outside themselves. And since you can think of a thing or speak of it at one time as well as at another, whatever can be thought of or spoken of must exist at all times. Consequently there can be no change, since change consists in things coming into being or ceasing to be. This is the first example in philosophy of an argument from thought and language to the world at large. (49)

To explain this point, Russell then goes into a long analysis into whether based on this view George Washington, Hamlet, and unicorns exist (49-52). For example, Russell states:

“Suppose, for example, that you talk of George Washington. Unless there were a historical person who had that name, the name (it would seem) would be meaningless, and sentences containing the name would be nonsense. Parmenides maintains that not only must George Washington have existed in the past, but in some sense he must still exist, since we can use his name significantly. (49)

Russell views Parmenides as asserting a correspondence theory of truth. That is, truth is that which corresponds with fact. Truth is when thought or language corresponds with fact. More formally this can be put as:

x is true iff x corresponds to some fact.

x is false iff x does not correspond to any fact (David).

For example, suppose it's a fact that Justin Trudeau is the Prime Minister of Canada on Aug 10th, 2022. If I said on Aug 10th, 2022, “Justin Trudeau is the Prime Minister of Canada” then this would be true. But if I said on Aug 10th, 2022 “Barack Obama is the Prime Minister of Canada” then this would be false.

Russell's view of Parmenides, based on the correspondence theory of truth and sometimes referred to as the logical-dialectical interpretation (Palmer), essentially views

thinking as the tool to recognize truth. Proper logical thinking allows us to recognize truth. What is, is that which can be thought of. This is the standard position in contemporary analytic philosophy. The problem is that this position is based on a mistranslation of Parmenides and also Plato, which we will cover later. When ‘voεĩv’ or ‘vóov’ (*noein/nous/noesis*) is translated properly as “realizing, recognizing, or awareness,”⁴ then the meaning of Parmenides’ poem is completely different compared to when ‘voεĩv’ or ‘vóov’ (*noein/nous/noesis*) is improperly translated as thinking or thought. When ‘voεĩv’ or ‘vóov’ (*noein/nous/noesis*) is translated properly as “realizing, recognizing, or awareness” this implies that a non-conceptual recognition is the way to grasp truth, what is, Being. To show through the philosophical literature that this recognition must be non-conceptual, we must now look at Plato.

2.2. Plato

Plato was born after Parmenides in the 5th century BCE. He is arguably the most important philosopher in Western philosophy and it’s often said that all Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. To cover Plato, we’ll go over what is arguably his main work: *The Republic*. The section of *The Republic* that we’ll focus on will be Plato’s work on metaphysics. We’ll cover Plato’s analogy of the sun and divided line. This will allow us to grasp the main points of Plato’s metaphysics and will build nicely on our understanding of Parmenides. Of course, in covering Plato there are many different texts that can be referred to. It might be claimed that to truly understand Plato, one must look through all his works and see how they fit together. In the deepest sense,

⁴ I leave out “conceiving” among other words because this translation, at least by my measure, seems to imply that *noesis* is conceptual even though *noesis* is not conceptual.

this is true. But for space considerations this is impossible. Moreover, for the purposes of this thesis it's unnecessary to cover all of Plato's work or *The Republic* as a whole. This is because what will be shown is that similar to Parmenides, Plato has been mistranslated and misunderstood. In particular, similar to Parmenides, Plato's use of 'νοεῖν' or 'νόον' (*noein/nous/noesis*) has in many cases improperly been translated as 'thinking' or 'thought'. The same applies to misunderstandings of Plato's "Idea of the Good" which has typically been understood to mean that "The Good" is a concept/thought. When properly understood, I'll argue that "The Good" isn't a concept/thought and is a non-conceptual recognition equivalent to what is/Being, which isn't conceptual. Covering Plato's analogy of the sun and divided line is the most efficient way to demonstrate these points.

There are many different translations of Plato's Republic. We'll focus on two: Alan Bloom's translation and W.H.D Rouse's translation. The reason for choosing these two translations is that they offer strong contrasts in how 'νοεῖν' or 'νόον' (*noein/nous/noesis*) are translated in different versions of *The Republic*. In describing the divided line Bloom's translation states that there are "four affections arising in the soul in relation to the four segments: intellection in relation to the highest one, and thought in relation to the second" (Bloom 511D-511E). Moreover in explaining what "intellection" is - 'νοεῖν' or 'νόον' (*noein/nous/noesis*) - Bloom's translation provides a helpful footnote which states that intellection equals *noesis* and that thought equals *dianoia*. Furthermore, the footnote, which is a diagram, shows that *noesis* is higher than *dianoia*. *Noesis* allows us to comprehend 'the forms' while *dianoia* allows us to comprehend math as well other subjects that require analytical reasoning. Thus, Bloom's translation makes

clear the difference between *noesis* (intellection, awareness, realization, recognition)⁵ and *dianoia* (thought, thinking). And to reiterate, it makes clear that *noesis* (intellection, awareness, realization, recognition) is a higher epistemological method than *dianoia* (thought, thinking).

W.H.D Rouse's translation states that there are "four divisions of the line: Exercise of Reason for the highest, Understanding for the second" (Rouse 514A-514B). In a diagram of the divided line, Rouse states that "exercise of reason" is "dialectical thought" (Rouse 508C-509D). Moreover, comprehension of the forms/ideas/ideals is done through using dialectical thought (Rouse 508C-509D). Thus, Rouse's translation seems to equate *dianoia* (thought) with *noesis* (recognition, realization, awareness). Moreover, Rouse's translation is explicit in placing thought, specifically dialectical thought, as the highest method. Now, Rouse's translation does place "dialectical thought" (exercise of reason) above "mathematical thought" (understanding). But dialectical thought is thought nevertheless. Thus, Rouse's translation places thought as the highest method, unlike Bloom's translation.

This section has sought to be a helpful overview of the differences in translations of Plato's Republic. In the following sections we'll cover Plato's analogy of the sun, divided line, and allegory of the cave.

⁵ One criticism I would have of Bloom's translation is the translation of *noesis* as "intellection". In contemporary times, when people read the word "intellection" which is very close to the word "intellect" it's associated with "thinking". The words "intellect" and "thought" are even used interchangeably in contemporary times. For example, if we say "she is a great intellectual" this is understood in contemporary times as synonyms with "she is a great thinker." Similarly, if we say "she has a great intellect" this is understood in contemporary times as synonymous with "she is great at thinking." Thus, I'd argue that translating *noesis* as recognition, realization, or awareness, as Cherubin did, is better since it makes clear that *noesis* is not thought-based/conceptual and is very different from *dianoia* (thought/thinking). At least, I'd argue this at the time this thesis is being written. This is because in my view translations need to be updated based on the times and historical context/culture one is in because the 'flavour' and meaning of words can change over time and depending on the historical context/culture one is in.

2.2.1. Plato's Analogy of the Sun

Plato's analogy of the sun is used to describe what Plato calls "The Good." Plato states that "The Good" is the highest 'realm' and describes the Good as "being" (Rouse 517A-518A) or "that which is and the brightest part of that which is" (Bloom 518C-518D) depending on the translation.⁶ He analogizes the Good to the Sun to explain in a more intuitive way the Good and how the Good operates. The Sun allows for light/sight (Rouse 507A-508C). Since the sun causes light/sight, light/sight isn't the sun, although sight is needed to see the sun (Rouse 507A-508C). Without light/sight objects or the colour in objects can't be seen (Rouse 507A-508C). Without objects, images can't be perceived. For example, the object of a tree provides the basis for the image/picture of a tree. The Good operates in a similar way to the Sun by allowing for all knowledge and opinion to be. The Good allows for knowledge/truth (Rouse 507A-508C). Knowledge/truth are Goodlike but are not the Good (Rouse 507A-508C). Below knowledge and truth are substantiated opinion (sometimes translated as "belief) and unsubstantiated opinion (sometimes translated as "conjecture") (Rouse 507A-508C). Below is one way to diagram the analogy of the sun.

⁶ In Bloom's translation, in an early section when describing what "The Good" is, Plato says "although the good isn't being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power" (Bloom 507e-509c). This same section is translated by Rouse as "although the good is not itself a state of knowledge but something transcending far beyond it in dignity and power" (508c-509d). Furthermore, Rouse includes a literal translation in a footnote which states "but the cause that they are, the cause of their state of being, although the good is not itself a state of being" (508c-509d). Rouse's translation seems to be more accurate for this section. The reason for this is because The Good must still *be*. If the Good wasn't *be* then it would not be. But if it not be then it doesn't exist. We can go back to Parmenides to understand what is being communicated here. What Plato is trying to communicate is that "The Good" is not a *state* of Being, nor a specific instance of Being, it is Being itself. But when the word "Being" is used it can be unclear in the sense that it can point to the whole of Being or a specific instance of Being. Hence, the reason why I above stated "The Good" must still *be*. If I stated, "The Good" must still be in Being, it makes it seem like "The Good" is a specific instance of Being, which is incorrect. The correct view is that "The Good" equals Being.

Table 1: Plato's Analogy of the Sun

Visible 'Realm'	Intelligible 'Realm'
The Sun	The Good
Sight/Light	Knowledge/Truth
Seen (objects/things)	Substantiated Opinion
Images (shadows, reflections, images)	Unsubstantiated opinion

To have knowledge and possibly recognize the Good⁷ the soul must rest in the region of “real being” (Rouse 507A-508C). Plato states:

“Understand then, that it is the same with the soul, thus: when it settles itself firmly in that region in which truth and real being brightly shine, it understands and knows it and appears to have reason; but when it has nothing to rest on but that which is mingled with darkness – that which becomes and perishes, it opines, it grows dim-sighted, changing opinions up and down, it is like something without reason” (Rouse 507A-508C).

Plato is making a similar point to Parmenides. There is the way of knowledge and the way of opinion. The way of knowledge is true while the way of opinion is false. To follow the way of knowledge requires a connection with “real being” which is also similar to Parmenides’ talk of “being.” What Plato means by “real being” and “soul” are unclear. But at the least, talk of “real being” implies that there is such a thing as false

⁷ It's unclear whether Plato is referring to the Good or knowledge in this section.

being. There is also the implication that if we connect with false being, or at least do not connect with real being, then we are being led astray into the way of opinion. Thus, a connection with “real being” is necessary for truth. The view that the soul must connect with real being to recognize truth is similar to Advaita Vedanta’s view that the self, our typical sense of “I” which is false, must recognize the Self, the universal true sense of “I” to know truth. In the following section, Plato provides further explanation of “the Good” by equating the Good as that which gives “the power of knowing to the knower” (Rouse 507A-508C). Plato states:

“Then that which provides their truth to the things known, and gives the power of knowing to the knower you must say is the idea or principle of the good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of understanding and of truth in so far as known; and thus while knowledge and truth as we know them are both beautiful, you will be right in thinking that it is something different something still more beautiful than these. As for knowledge and truth, just as we said before that it was right to consider light and sight to be sunlike, but wrong to think them to be sun; so here, it is right to consider both these to be goodlike, but wrong to think either of them to be the good – the eternal nature of the good must be allowed a yet higher value.” (Rouse 507A-508C).⁸

⁸ For reference, the Bloom translation has a similar translation. The Bloom translation states “Therefore, say that what provides the truth to the things known and gives the power to the one who knows, is the idea of the good” (508d-509a)

There are two ways to understand Plato's connection between the Good and "the power of knowing." First, "the power of knowing" is a capacity of the Good but isn't the Good itself. Second, the "power of knowing" is the Good. I will take this second understanding as correct. The reason for this is because of the word "is" when connecting the "power of knowing" to the Good. Plato states that the power of knowing "is" the Good. In other terms, the power of knowing = the Good. This power then allows for knowledge/understanding/truth. Thus, knowing, which is the Good, is primary and allows for there to be knowledge.

The power of knowing is similar to Advaita Vedanta's view that the Self is that which allows for there to be knowledge. According to Advaita, the Self is the knowing that knows knowledge. Buddhism is similar, by viewing there being knowing that knows knowledge but not a Self that knows the knowledge. Buddhism says there is simply a flux of knowing with no Self behind it. Both these views are similar to Plato's, with some differences that we will go over in more detail later. The main difference between these Eastern views and Plato's is that the Eastern views are nondual while Plato's views are dualistic. To put it simply, Advaita and Buddhism say there is no distinction between the Self/no-Self and everything else (for example, knowledge and opinion). In contrast, Plato says there is a distinction between the Good and everything else which the Good illuminates (for example, knowledge and opinion). Despite this, there is still a close connection between the Good and the Self/ the Good and no-Self.

So far, we've seen that according to Plato there is the Good which allows for all knowledge and opinion. Plato defines the Good in different ways. For example, Plato states that the Good is that which gives "the power of knowing to the knower" (Rouse

507A-508C). Recognizing the Good also is associated with some sort of connection with “real being” (Rouse 507A-508C). Thus, Plato has defined the Good but has not told us *how* to recognize the Good. This is what the next section, on Plato’s Divided Line, deals with.

2.2.2. *The Divided Line*

The divided line is an analogy to show different methods of epistemology, moving from the least ‘real’ to the most ‘real’. The line [AE] has four different sections. Sections [AB] and [BC] refer to opinion while sections [CD] and [DE] refer to knowledge. The first section [AB] refers to unsubstantiated opinion/conjecture (Rouse 508C-509D). The next section [BC] refers to substantiated opinion/belief (Rouse 508C-509D). The next two sections, those that deal with knowledge, are of far greater importance and thus more space will be dedicated to explaining them. Section [CD] refers to “thought” – *dianoia* – to use the Ancient Greek word. (Rouse 509D-510E). The method of thought “passes not to a new beginning, a first principle, but to an end, a conclusion” (Rouse 508C-509D). Geometry is the best example of this since it posits certain axioms and derives what it can from these axioms. As Plato puts it:

“I suppose you know that students of geometry and arithmetic and so forth begin by taking for granted odd and even, and the usual figures, and the three kinds of angles, and things akin to these, in every branch of study; they take them as granted and make them assumptions or postulates, and they think it unnecessary to give any further account of them to themselves or to others, as being clear to

everybody. Then, starting from these, they go on through the rest by logical steps until they end at the object which they set out to consider” (Rouse 508C-509D).

Put simply, math uses assumptions. The assumptions aren't proved in themselves, they are simply taken to be true. Math then uses logic to derive what it can from the assumptions given at the outset. There's nothing wrong with this method. And, of course, it's an incredibly powerful method. But there's a central problem with it; we can't know with absolute certainty whether the assumptions are right in the first place. If the assumptions are wrong, then everything else is wrong. To be sure, even if the assumptions are wrong, math still might work for practical purposes. Math might also work theoretically, in so far as everything would be logically consistent. But this doesn't mean it would be true, because if the assumptions aren't true, then everything else isn't true. Plato elaborates on this point by stating, “[t]his ideal, then, that I have been describing belongs to the first part [CD] of things thought, but the soul, as I said, is compelled to use assumptions in its search for this; it does not pass to a first principle because of being unable to get out clear above the assumptions” (Rouse 508C-509D).

More broadly speaking, section [CD] essentially lays out the analytical method. The analytical method starts with certain axioms and derives what it can from those axioms. Mathematics is an excellent example of the analytical method since it starts with certain axioms and gets results that are certain, at least within the confines of the system. The problem is, we can't actually say whether mathematics is certain in an absolute sense because we don't know whether the axioms are true in the first place.

Analytic methods within philosophy face a similar difficulty. To see this, let's look at a classic example of deductive reasoning:

Premise 1: All men are mortal.

Premise 2: Socrates is a man.

Conclusion: Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

If the premises are true, then the conclusion follows. The problem is, can we know with absolute certainty that the premises are true? Although the premises are highly reasonable, we can't seem to say with absolute certainty that the premises are true. For example, perhaps it's the case that not all men are mortal. It's possible that there are some men that no one has ever seen before that are not mortal. Thus, analytic methods in philosophy face the same problem as in mathematics, which is that we can't know for certain whether the axioms are true.

Recognizing this problem, Plato states that "thought is something between opinion and intelligence" (Bloom 509C-511D). In other words, the analytical method is something in between opinion and intelligence.⁹

The last section [DE] is the most important. Section [DE] refers to "intellection" – *noesis* – to use the Ancient Greek word (Bloom 509C-511D[n38]). The method in intellection is to move to "a beginning that is free from hypothesis" (Bloom 509C-511D). In the Bloom translation, Plato further explains by stating:

⁹ When Plato uses the term "intelligence" he is referring to *nous*, which is a direct recognition of knowledge.

“Well, then, go on to understand that by the other segment of the intelligible I mean that which argument itself grasps with the power of dialectic, making the hypothesis not beginnings but really hypothesis – that is steppingstones and springboards – in order to reach what is free from hypothesis at the beginning of the whole. When it has grasped this, argument now depends on that which depends on this beginning and in such fashion goes back down again to an end; making no use of anything sensed in any way, but using forms themselves, going through forms to forms, it ends in forms too” (Bloom 509C-511D).

Plato makes clear that *noesis* is about a kind of direct knowing. This direct knowing is free from hypothesis and allows us to reach the beginning of the whole. What the “beginning of the whole” exactly refers to is unclear. But what is clear is that this method is not one primarily involving thought. Thought – *dianoia* – is used in the beginning, when argument is used to make hypothesis not as beginning but really hypothesis. But then, thought – *dianoia* – is transcended when there is the direct knowing – *noesis* – of the beginning of the whole which is free from hypothesis.¹⁰

It's important to note that when Plato refers to “dialectic” he isn't referring to our typical conception the word. As Simon Blackburn states in the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (1996), “dialectic” is usually understood as the “art of conversation or

¹⁰ Scholars such as F.M. Cornford describe the direct knowing of *noesis* in the following way: “The experience Plato means is, I believe, rather an act of metaphysical insight or recognition than what we should call a ‘religious experience’ – certainly nothing of the nature of trance or ecstasy. But the knowledge is of a kind in which the soul is united with the harmonious order it knows, an insight which harmonizes the soul’s own nature and illuminates the entire field of truth. Up to that moment the philosopher has used his powers of intuition and intellectual understanding but only at that moment does he ‘begin to have *nous*’ (190). The way Cornford describes *nous* is similar to Zen Buddhist experiences of ‘satori’ or ‘kensho’ which are claimed to be sudden insights into the nature of Being.

debate” and is “[m]ost fundamentally the process of reasoning to obtain truth and knowledge of any topic” (131). Since there are “different views of this process, different conceptions of dialectic emerge” (131). For example, the “Socratic method of dialectic is the process of eliciting the truth by means of questions aimed at opening out what is already implicitly known, or at exposing the contradictions and muddles of an opponent's position” (131). According to Aristotle, “dialectic is any rational inference based on probable premises” (131). When Plato uses the term “dialectic” he isn’t referring to any of these conceptions. As Blackburn states, “[i]n the middle dialogues of Plato, however it becomes the total process of enlightenment, whereby the philosopher is educated so as to achieve knowledge of the supreme good, the form of the Good” (131). Moreover, other scholars, such as J.L Stocks, come to similar conclusions in interpreting Plato’s meaning of “dialectic”. Stocks states that according to Plato, “[d]ialectic, as the contemplation of Being, is given first place in the hierarchy of knowledge” (Stocks 80).¹¹ Understanding Plato’s meaning of the word “dialectic” is important because it helps to show that Plato isn’t referring to the dialectic as solely a thought-based process. In other words, we can’t just use thinking to reach the Good. We use thinking as a springboard to reach what is beyond thinking – the Good. Plato ends the chapter by giving a summary of the divided line:

“And, along with me, take these four affections arising in the soul in relation to the four segments: intellection in relation to the highest one, and thought in

¹¹ The textual evidence that Stocks uses comes from *Philebus* not *the Republic*. Stocks coming to the same definitional conclusion by looking at a different textual sources of Plato strengthens this interpretation of “dialectic”.

relation to the second; the third assign trust, and to the last imagination. Arrange them in a proportion, and believe that as the segments to which they correspond participate in truth, so they participate in clarity” (Bloom 509C-511D).

Thus, Plato ends the chapter by again hammering the point that intellection, *noesis*, is different from thought, *dianoia*. And that intellection, *noesis*, is a higher form of knowing than thought, *dianoia*.

The Rouse translation has a radically different translation of section [DE], *noesis*¹², compared to the Bloom translation. This is the key section where these translations diverge and is helpful in explaining how Western philosophy has methodologically proceeded since the Ancient Greeks. The Rouse translation views *noesis* as “dialectical thought” (Rouse 508C-509D). Moreover, *noesis* is called “reason” which is equivalent to “intellection” in the Bloom translation. And *dianoia* is called “understanding” which is equivalent to “thought” in the Bloom translation. The significant difference in the Rouse translation is that both *noesis* and *dianoia* are categorized as “things thought” (Rouse 509D-510E). The Rouse translation states:

“Now, then, understand...that by the other part of [DE] of things thought I mean what the arguing process itself grasps by power of dialectic, treating assumptions not as beginnings, but as literally hypotheses, that is to say steps and springboards for assault, from which it may push its way up to the region free of assumptions

¹² The Rouse translation doesn’t use the term *noesis*. This is different from the Bloom translation which specifically equates section [DE] with *noesis*. For simplicities sake, I’ll refer to section [DE] of the divided line as *noesis*, as it’s simpler to write than section [DE].

and reach the beginning of all, and grasp it, clinging again and again to whatever clings to this; and so may come down to a conclusion without using the help of anything at all that belongs to the senses, but only ideals themselves, and, passing through ideals, it may end in ideals” (Rouse 509D-510E).

There are a few things to notice. First, as stated before Rouse translates section [DE] as “things thought”. Second, Rouse seems to have a mistaken understanding of what Plato means by “dialectic” as he translates it as “the arguing process”. But as we saw before according to scholars such as Blackburn and Stocks, Plato doesn’t mean “dialectic” to be “the arguing process”. Viewing “dialectic” as “the arguing process” is the typical definition of dialectic which isn’t what Plato means. Plato means “dialectic” as something like “the total process of enlightenment” (Blackburn 131) or as “the contemplation of Being” (Stocks 80).

The last thing to notice regarding this section is the trickiest. The Rouse translation does state that there is a final move to a “region free of assumptions” that is the “beginning of all.”¹³ What’s unclear about this is whether this highest point is thought-based or non-thought based. If this section is taken on its own, it could be interpreted that the “beginning of all” is non-thought based. This interpretation would require viewing the dialectic as a conceptual region which then “springboards” to a non-conceptual region which is “the beginning of all.” While this is a plausible interpretation, it’s likely not what Rouse means. Rouse likely means that the “beginning of all” is

¹³ It’s unclear whether the “region free of assumptions” is the “beginning of all” or whether the “region free of assumptions” leads to the “beginning of all.” I’ll assume that the “region free of assumptions” is “the beginning of all.” It doesn’t matter for the point I am trying to make but this is my assumption nevertheless.

conceptual, thought-based. This is because Rouse continually refers to *noesis* as “things thought” or as “dialectical thought” and gives no indication that *noesis* could be non-conceptual. When Rouse refers to *noesis* as “dialectical thought” this is within his own diagram of the divided line. Only when a certain section of Plato is interpreted in a certain way does the Rouse translation indicate that *noesis* is non-conceptual. Thus, taking Rouse’s own words along with his translation of *noesis* throughout as “thought”, the stronger assumption is that Rouse views *noesis* as conceptual. This is important because this translation is the opposite of the Bloom translation, which views *noesis* as non-conceptual.

This difference in translations of *noesis* in Plato parallels the difference in translations of *noesis* in Parmenides. As we can recall, there are two main ways to translate *noesis* in Parmenides’ proem. The first is translating *noesis* as “thought” which Burnet does. Burnet’s translation states that there are “the only two ways of search that can be thought of” (Fragment 2) and that “it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be” (Fragment 3). Thus, Burnet’s translation associates thinking with Being. Or another way to put it is that Burnet’s translation associates thinking with “what is.” The second main way to translate *noesis* in Parmenides’ proem is “recognition”, “conceive”, or “awareness” as Cherubin does. Cherubin’s translation states “the only roads of inquiry” are “how it is” and “how it is not” (Fragment 2). The translation also states that “for the same thing is for conceiving (awareness; *noein*) [of] and for being (OR:...for the same thing is to conceive (be aware) [of] and to be)” (Cherubin). Cherubin makes clear in her footnotes that *noein*, a possible translation of which is “conceive”, is not conceptual. Thus, the Cherubin translation doesn’t associate thinking with Being. Another way to put

is that Cherubin's translation doesn't associate thinking with "what is." Cherubin's translation views conceiving/awareness/a recognition as allowing for insight into Being/What is.

Cherubin's translation of Parmenides parallels Blooms translation of Plato. Both view *noesis*, the highest tool of philosophy, as non-conceptual. Both view proper inquiry into Being to be done through insight. Burnet's translation of Parmenides parallels Rouse's translation of Plato. Both view *noesis*, the highest tool of philosophy, as conceptual. Both view proper inquiry into Being to be done through thinking.

2.3. The Methodological Significance for Philosophy

Within Western philosophy, the tool that is usually used to do philosophy is thinking – *dianoia*. To attempt to answer questions, we use analytical reasoning to come to a conclusion. This method of doing philosophy is so ingrained that we even see it in artwork depicting western philosophers, such as Rodin's sculpture, "The Thinker" which depicts a philosopher bent over with his hand on his chin, thinking. However, as we have seen from understanding Parmenides and Plato properly, thinking is not the only way to do philosophy. Philosophy can be done through insight or recognition – *noesis*. Both Plato and Parmenides view *noesis* as the tool to be used to understand being. This way of doing philosophy parallels some branches of Eastern philosophy, such as Buddhist and Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Both Buddhism and Advaita stress the importance of insight to answer certain philosophical questions, such as "what is the nature of the self?" The way to trigger insight is through practices such as meditation, whereby thinking is quieted, allowing for a breakthrough of insight. Like analytical training within the Western tradition, meditative training and other kinds of training can take decades to

master. If an insight occurs, then analytical reasoning is placed on top of that insight. The importance of insight and quieting the thinking is so ingrained within Eastern philosophy that we even see it in the artwork of Eastern philosophy. It is common, for example, to see statues of philosophical figures, such as the Buddha or Advaita Vedanta's Shankara, sitting in meditative postures, with their legs crossed, back upright and cupping their hands together.

The point of the previous sections focusing on Parmenides and Plato is to open up the methodological space in Western philosophy for taking seriously methods other than thinking to do philosophy. If the founders of the Western philosophical tradition took seriously methods other than thinking to do philosophy, then this is good reason for contemporary Western philosophy to do the same. Now, even if this historical outlining is correct, it doesn't mean that the positions Parmenides and Plato held on the methods of philosophy is correct. Parmenides and Plato could have viewed insight/*noesis* as a legitimate philosophical method, but insight/*noesis* could still be an illegitimate philosophical method. In other words, just because Parmenides and Plato believed something doesn't make that thing right. This is a fair point. However, again, this historical outlining is to show that even within the Western tradition, methods other than thinking have been used and valued within philosophy. This historical outlining isn't to show that these methods are right. It's to show that they are already embedded within the tradition – albeit forgotten or ignored. This should be good enough reason to at least engage with these methods, even if they are wrong.

2.4. Descartes

This section will focus on 17th-century French philosopher, René Descartes. Descartes is arguably the founder of modern Western philosophy. Descartes is important within Western philosophy given his methodological approach to philosophy. Descartes' philosophical methodology is to ask what he knows with absolute certainty. What he knows with absolute certainty, he can set up as a foundation for doing philosophy. He begins by asking what he can doubt with any possibility. If it's possible to doubt it, he can't know it with absolute certainty. The conclusion Descartes comes to is that the only thing he can know with absolute certainty is "I am, I exist" (Descartes 47). To be clear, when Descartes says "I am, I exist" the "I am" he is referring to is *not* the "I am" pure consciousness perspective of Eastern traditions. The "I am" Descartes is referring to is "I am" as a *thinking thing*. Descartes clarifies what he means by "I am" when he says "[t]herefore, strictly speaking, I am merely a thinking thing, that is, a mind or spirit, or understanding, or reason – words whose significance I did not realize before. However, I am something real and I truly exist. But what kind of thing? As I have said, a thing that thinks (Descartes 48). Thus, the conclusion Descartes comes to, through *dianoia*/thinking, is that "I exist as a thinking thing." To use the words that Descartes uses in the Preface of the Meditations, "I had no distinct awareness of anything which I knew belonged to my essence, other than the fact that I was a thinking thing" (Descartes 33).

This section will summarize Descartes' method in more detail. I'll then argue that while Descartes' method is almost perfect, it isn't perfect. By stopping at *dianoia*/thinking Descartes fails to recognize what the self is. Using *noesis*/insight, it's clear that I am not a thinking thing. Using *noesis*/insight, it's clear that I am not-self, as

the Buddhists say, or that there is only the Self, a kind of transcendental Self like Advaita Vedanta says. I'll argue that while we can't say whether Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta is correct in terms of their metaphysical positions, they are saying the same thing in terms of the insight into the nature of self. They are saying the same thing, but their framings are different. Thus, the position I'll fundamentally be arguing for is that what I know with absolute certainty is that "I am, now." This is an insight, which is non-thought based. I'll argue that there are specific methods to recognize this, such as meditation. I'll argue that "I am, now", which is equivalent to recognizing Being, should serve as the foundation for philosophy, since it is the one fact we can know with absolute certainty. However, before we get to all that we will first go over Descartes in more detail.

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* is different from other philosophical texts in that it is supposed to be an exercise for the reader. The reader is supposed to go through the steps that Descartes makes themselves. By having readers go through the steps themselves, Descartes is convinced that readers will come to the same conclusions that he does. As Bernard Williams is quoted as saying in Andrew Bailey's introduction to *Meditations*, "the 'I' that appears throughout them from the first sentence on does not specifically represent [Descartes]: it represents anyone who will step into the position it marks, the position of the thinker who is prepared to reconsider and recast his or her beliefs, as Descartes supposed we might, from the ground up" (Williams as cited in Descartes 11).¹⁴ Elizabeth Anscombe puts it similarly, stating "[t]he first-person

¹⁴ An interesting side note is that Descartes' *Meditations* is modeled on "spiritual exercises" that Jesuit students, such as Descartes, had to do in school. These exercises were required "to learn to move away from the world of the senses and to focus on God" (Descartes 11). This is interesting for two reasons. First, it shows that Western philosophy and spirituality have not always been viewed as distinct. In contemporary philosophy, spirituality and philosophy are viewed as separate. However, for Descartes they were not. Arguably, this shows that spirituality and philosophy are inherently linked within Western philosophy, as Descartes is often considered the founder of modern philosophy. Within Eastern philosophy, spirituality

character of Descartes' argument means that each person must administer it to himself in the first person" (Anscombe 21).

2.4.1. *The First Meditation*

Descartes' First Meditation is called "Concerning those things which can be called into doubt." As the title indicates, this meditation investigates what can be doubted.

Descartes' reasoning was that if something can be doubted, then it cannot serve as an indubitable first principle of philosophy (33).

Descartes' first argument can be called the "the argument from perceptual error."¹⁵ This argument points out that we cannot completely trust our senses as they sometimes deceive us (Descartes 41). This is something that we're all familiar with, and, as Descartes states, "from time to time the senses deceive us about minuscule things or those further away" (Descartes 41). Descartes doesn't give examples, but we can all relate to this. For example, I might believe that there is a pool of water on the road in front of me when driving on a hot day. However, when I get to that spot while driving, I find that there is no water in front of me. This mirage occurs because my senses, via my

and philosophy are not seen as sharply distinct or distinct at all. Because of this, Eastern philosophy classes are sometimes categorized as religious studies courses and other times as philosophy courses (we'll leave aside the distinction between religious studies and spirituality for practical purposes). This historical point is important as it can help to lessen the prejudice that contemporary Western philosophy has towards spirituality which often leads to prejudice towards Eastern philosophy. The second reason why this side note is interesting is that Jesuit students had to perform *exercises to learn* to move away from the senses and focus on God. This isn't so different from Buddhist "practices" or "exercises", which attempt to make students "recognize" or "learn" the no-self. Buddhist meditations strive to move attention away from objects (the senses) to recognize the no-Self. Similarly, Advaita Vedanta "practices" or "exercises", which attempt to make student "recognize" or "learn" the Self/God. Advaita meditations strive to move attention away from objects (the senses) to recognize the Self/God. Even Descartes' naming of his book *The Meditations on First Philosophy*, has interesting parallels to Eastern philosophy in the use of the word "meditations." Descartes isn't conducting meditation in a way exactly parallel to Eastern philosophy, but it isn't entirely distinct. Descartes' meditation is based more on thought experiments and analysis whereas Eastern meditations are based more on the direct experience of formally meditating and analysis.

¹⁵ Acknowledgement to Mike Hymers for this term.

perceptual apparatus, deceive me. Another example could be when we glance at a stranger on the other side of street and believe them to be our friend. However, as we get closer, we realize that we were mistaken and that they're not our friend. Descartes' point is that we can't ultimately rely on our senses since they sometimes deceive us. If something has deceived us once, then we can be deceived again. As Descartes states, "it is prudent never to place one's entire trust in things which have deceived us even once" (Descartes 41). He extends the argument from perceptual error to a more extreme version: the dream argument.

The dream argument shows that when dreaming we're completely convinced that the dream is real.¹⁶ However, in actuality the dream is not real, and we're lying in bed. The point is that since our senses deceive us while dreaming, our senses could be deceiving us now and thus we could be dreaming now. As Descartes states:

"How often have I had an experience like this: while sleeping at night, I am convinced that I am here, dressed in a robe and seated by the fire, when, in fact, I am lying between the covers with my clothes off! At the moment, my eyes are certainly wide open and I am looking at this piece of paper, this head which I am moving is not asleep, and I am aware of this hand as I move it consciously and purposefully. None of what happens while I am asleep is so distinct. Yes, of course – but nevertheless I recall other times when I have been deceived by similar thoughts in my sleep. As I reflect on this matter carefully, it becomes

¹⁶ Lucid dreaming, which is when one becomes aware that they are dreaming, is a counterexample. However, most dreams are not lucid. Thus, Descartes point still works since he only needs one case of dreaming where we're completely convinced that the dream is real.

completely clear to me that there are no certain indicators which ever enable us to differentiate between being awake and being asleep, and this is astounding; in my confusion I am almost convinced that I may be sleeping” (Descartes 42).

Thus, using the dream argument Descartes concludes that it’s possible that our senses deceive us even about the world. It’s possible that the world, including all the objects and people we see, are ‘dream stuff.’ Just as when we’re lying in bed sleeping and all the visuals of our dreams, including objects and people, are made of ‘dream stuff’ it’s possible that the world is like that too. This point further proves that our senses cannot be trusted as the foundation for philosophy.

Descartes then moves on to the math argument. The math argument states that certain things, regardless of whether we’re awake or asleep, are always true (Descartes 43). Math is the best example of this. Two plus two equals four and it doesn’t matter whether we’re awake or asleep for this to be true (Descartes 43). As Descartes states:

“Arithmetic, geometry, and the other [sciences] like them, which deal with only the simplest and most general matters and have little concern whether or not they exist in the nature of things, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three always add up to five, a square does not have much more than four sides, and it does not seem possible to suspect that such manifest truths could be false” (Descartes 43)

However, even the truth of math is doubtable if we press hard enough. This is where Descartes moves on to the evil demon argument. The evil demon argument starts off by positing that perhaps there is an all-powerful God that makes it *seem* like math is true although math isn't *actually* true (Descartes 43). Perhaps God tricks us into believing that two plus two equals four although two plus two doesn't actually equal four (Descartes 43). Or perhaps there is a field even simpler than math which we don't have access to as humans (Descartes 43). Descartes states that, given that God is good, he wouldn't do this (Descartes 43). So he switches these points to supposing that an all-powerful evil demon could be tricking us into believing math is true when it actually isn't (Descartes 44).

Descartes states:

“Nevertheless, a certain opinion has for a long time been fixed in my mind – that there is an all-powerful God who created me and [made me] just as I am. But how do I know He has not arranged things so that there is no earth at all, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no magnitude, no place, and yet seen to it that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? Besides, given that I sometimes judge that other people made mistakes with the things about which they believe they have the most perfect knowledge, might I not in the same way be wrong every time I add two and three together, or count the sides of a square, or do something simpler, if that can be imagined?...Therefore, I will assume that it is not God, who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some malicious demon, at once omnipotent and supremely cunning, who has been using all the energy he possesses to deceive me. I will suppose that sky, air, earth, colors,

shapes, sounds, and all other extended things are nothing but the illusions of my dreams” (Descartes 43-44).

The power in Descartes method lies in its ability to doubt literally everything that can be doubted. To recap, there are four main arguments that Descartes uses: the argument from perceptual error, the dream argument, the math argument, and the evil demon argument. At each step, he presses the argument further to see if he can doubt even further. At the last stage of the evil demon argument, even math is possible to doubt as an evil demon could be tricking us. In the second meditation, Descartes goes over the one fact that cannot be doubted, “I am, I exist” (Descartes 47). We will cover this in the next section.

2.4.2. The Second Meditation

The one thing that Descartes cannot doubt is that he exists as a thinking thing. The Second Meditation fleshes out how Descartes views himself as a thinking thing. (Descartes 19). Thus, to start, we’ll go over Descartes’s phrasing of this.

“So then, is it the case that I, too, do not exist? No, not at all: if I persuaded myself of something, then I certainly existed. But there is some kind of deceiver, supremely powerful and supremely cunning, who is constantly and intentionally deceiving me. But then, if he is deceiving me, there again is no doubt that I exist – for that very reason. Let him trick me as much as he can, he will never succeed in making me nothing, as long as I am aware that I am something. And so, after thinking all these things through in great detail, I must finally settle on this

proposition: the statement *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true every time I say it or conceive of it in my mind” (Descartes 47).

As we can see, in *The Meditations the cogito* is translated as: *I am, I exist*. And “*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true every time I say it or conceive of it in my mind” (Descartes 47).

In other words, *I am, I exist*, is true every time I think about it. This is made clearer when Descartes later states “I am merely a thinking thing” (Descartes 48).

To see how thinking – *dianoia* – is central to Descartes’ understanding of the self we’ll go over the sections where he emphasises this. In the second meditation, Descartes goes over the evil demon argument again. To recap, this is the argument where an evil demon is deceiving Descartes about all sensory experience and even about math.

However, then when it comes to thinking, Descartes says:

“What about thinking? Here I discover something: thinking does exist. This is the only thing which cannot be detached from me. *I am, I exist* - that is certain. But for how long? Surely for as long as I am thinking. For it could perhaps be the case that, if I were to abandon thinking altogether, then in that moment I would completely cease to be. At this point I am not agreeing to anything except what is necessarily true. Therefore, strictly speaking, I am merely a thinking thing, that is, a mind or spirit, or understanding, or reason – words whose significance I did not realize before. However, I am something real, and I truly exist. But what kind of thing? A thing that thinks. (Descartes 48)

In this section, Descartes explicitly ties the nature of the self to thinking. Thinking is so tied to the self that Descartes is even willing to entertain the case that when he stops thinking he stops existing. Descartes views thinking and being as one and the same. To think is to be. Descartes continues to explore other things that he may be, before again concluding that he must be a thinking thing:

“And what else besides (48)? I will let my imagination roam (48). I am not that interconnection of limbs we call a human body (48). Nor am I even some attenuated air¹⁷ which filters through those limbs – winds, or fire, or vapor, or breath, or anything I picture to myself¹⁸ (48)...But what then am I? A thinking thing? What is this? It is surely something that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and perceives (49)...From these thoughts, I begin to understand somewhat better what I am (49)” (Descartes 48-49)

2.4.3. *Understanding Descartes' Method*

¹⁷ This part of the meditation is closest to what some Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist philosophers say the self is. Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist philosophers say the self is awareness. In other words, “I” is awareness. Awareness is not a thing but is no-thing. Awareness isn’t nothing but is like an empty space that is lit up. This is what some sages have claimed to have recognized. Awareness is similar to air in that it is formless and all pervading (relatively).

¹⁸ This line of inquiry is similar to the Advaita Vedanta philosopher and sage, Ramana Maharshi. Maharshi’s famous text in Indian philosophy “Who Am I?” goes through a series of steps to conclude that the self is fundamentally formless awareness. He starts off by concluding he is not the body, not the breath, not *prana* (unintentional biological process necessary for life, including such things as breathing, blood movement, maintaining homeostasis, metabolic processes), and not even thinking. Fundamentally, “I” is awareness, that which is aware of thinking. As we can see, Maharshi’s steps are similar to Descartes but he goes a step further – a step past thinking. Maharshi’s fundamental tool is *nous* while Descartes’ is *dianoia*. We’ll go through Maharshi’s text in the section on Indian philosophy. This brief introduction serves as a nice comparison point.

Let's take a step back and look at Descartes' method to understanding the self. Descartes' method is based on *dianoia* – thinking. Descartes *thinks about* how his eyes sometimes deceive him. Descartes *thinks about* how he could be in a dream. Descartes *thinks about* how an evil demon could be deceiving him even about math. And lastly, Descartes *thinks about* how he is a thinking thing. In a way, Descartes' method is close to question begging. Of course, he comes to the conclusion that he must be a thinking thing since his method of discovering what he is, is based on thinking. This isn't to say that Descartes' method is unintelligent. The method is brilliant. The point I'm making is to show the limitations of Descartes' method. To be fair, as Andrew Bailey points out in his introduction to *The Meditations*, "Before the thinker can come to know that 'I am, I exist' is true, Descartes elsewhere admits that she must know, for example, what is meant by thinking, and that doubting is a kind of thought" (Bailey in Descartes 17). Thus, Descartes does admit elsewhere that understanding what is meant by thinking is an even more fundamental step than "I am, I exist." To be fair to Descartes, his understanding of what 'thinking' is does include a wide variety of mental processes. For example, in the second meditation he states, "[b]ut what then am I? A thinking thing. What is this? It is surely something that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and perceives" (Descartes 49). However, insight or *nous* is not included as part of this list of the varieties of thinking/mental processes/conceptual categories. Furthermore, insight or *nous* is not included as a nonconceptual category distinct from these mental processes. In other words, insight or *nous* is not included in Descartes method at all.

Moreover, to briefly switch to contemporary analytic Western philosophy which largely follows in Descartes footsteps, the use of “intuition” in thought-experiments doesn’t count as insight and is still a variety of thinking. For example, a famous thought experiment is:

- 1) It is conceivable that there be zombies.
- 2) If it is conceivable that there be zombies, it metaphysically possible that there be zombies.
- 3) If it is metaphysically possible that there be zombies, then consciousness is non-physical.
- 4) Consciousness is non-physical. (Chalmers 106)

Proponents of this argument will often say that the first premise is based on an intuition. In my view, “intuition” used in this sense is still a variety of thinking and isn’t insight. Philosophers who have the intuition of the first premise simply have a thought which floats by in their consciousness saying, “it is conceivable that there be zombies.” When their attention lands on this thought and they believe it, they have the intuition that “it is conceivable that there be zombies.” But this is just a thought telling them “it is conceivable that there be zombies.” Thus, intuition is still a variety of thinking and isn’t insight. Insight is different since it’s not thought-based.

This is where Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist methods of understanding the self are helpful. Since they prioritize insight as a philosophical method these Eastern traditions use meditative methods to see from a first-person point of view where thinking

arises from and to understanding the nature of thinking. To be clear, by using the word “understanding” I don’t mean understanding the nature of thinking by using more thinking. I mean “understanding” in the sense of *nous* – insight or recognition. These traditions claim that the self is _____. They attempt to communicate what this _____ is by calling it awareness. In other words, “I” is awareness. Awareness is not a thing but is nothing. Awareness isn’t nothing but is like an empty space that is lit up. The self, which is awareness, is that which is aware of sense perceptions. Similarly, the self, which is awareness, is that which is aware of thinking. These Eastern traditions claim that the self as awareness can be directly recognized. In other words, there can be insight or *nous* into what the self truly is. The self as awareness isn’t something that can be thought about since awareness isn’t thought-based. Awareness or pure consciousness is thoughtless and is the base from which thoughts arise. Again, although this can be intellectually stated, the recognition itself isn’t intellectual as the recognition isn’t conceptual. As the famous saying in Zen Buddhism goes, “the finger pointing to the moon isn’t the moon itself.” Thus, although the self as awareness can be intellectually pointed to, the self as awareness must be directly recognized.

Descartes states in his preface that he “had no distinct awareness” that he was anything other than a thinking thing (Descartes 33). The claim that Buddhist and Advaita philosophers make is that awareness which is aware of itself, is the self. And that awareness, which is the self, is that which is aware of thinking. As Descartes states:

“I had no distinct awareness of anything which I knew belonged to my essence, other than the fact that I was a thinking thing, or a thing possessing in itself the

faculty of thinking. In what follows, however, I will show how from the fact that I know nothing else pertains to my essence, it also follows that there is, in fact, nothing else belonging to it” (Descartes 33)

This quote is helpful in showing the differences between Descartes’ method and Eastern philosophical methods in understanding the self. Descartes’ method is based on thinking/*dianoia*, whereas Eastern methods are based on *nous*/insight along with thinking/*dianoia*.

Descartes’ method is also similar to the Burnet translation of Parmenides’ Proem which states that: “For it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be.” (Fragment 3 of Parmenides Proem, Burnet). The Advaita and Buddhist traditions which state that the self is awareness has methodological parallels to Cherubin’s translation of Parmenides. The Cherubin translation of Parmenides’ proem states: “for the same thing is for conceiving (awareness; *noein*) [of] and for being (OR:...for the same thing is to conceive (be aware) [of] and to be).” (Fragment 3 of Parmenides Proem, Cherubin). Cherubin’s translations views conceiving/awareness/being aware as allowing for insight into being. On the other hand, Burnet’s translation views thought as allowing for insight into being.

Descartes’ method also has parallels to W.H.D Rouse’s translation of Plato. To recall, Rouse’s translation of Plato equates *dianoia* (thinking) with *nous* (insight). The Rouse translation views *noesis* as “dialectical thought” (Rouse 508C-509D). Thus, within the Rouse translation, dialectical thought, which is the highest section of the divided line, Section [DE], is deemed to be the highest epistemological method. Again, if we look to

Descartes' method, it's based upon thinking. His method is based on thought experiments and a series of logical steps to conclude that he is a thinking thing – that he is *the thinker*. If, however, we look at the Bloom translation, it's clear that *noesis* is a kind of direct knowing that is different from *dianoia*. *Dianoia* as made clear in section [CD] of the divided line is analytical reasoning, such as in mathematics. Analytical reasoning is used to come to a conclusion. In contrast, the direct knowing of *noesis* is to reach the beginning of the whole which is free from hypothesis. As Simon Blackburn states, “[i]n the middle dialogues of Plato, however it becomes the total process of enlightenment, whereby the philosopher is educated so as to achieve knowledge of the supreme good, the form of the Good” (131). And as J.L Stocks says, according to Plato “[d]ialectic, as the contemplation of Being, is given first place in the hierarchy of knowledge” (Stocks 80). Thus, *noesis* in the Bloom translation is beyond thinking. It makes clear that we can't just use thinking to reach the Good. We use thinking as a springboard to reach what is beyond thinking – the Good. This method of understanding the Good uses insight primarily and not thinking. This parallels Advaita and Buddhist methods to understand the self which primarily use insight and not thinking to see what the self is.

When Descartes states that the most indubitable knowledge is “I am, I exist” as a thinking thing, he is using thinking or *dianoia* to conclude this. Depending on the translation of Parmenides and Plato, this arguably strays from Western philosophy's highest epistemological method – *noesis* – which is non-thought based insight. In the next chapter, we'll go over Eastern philosophical methods of philosophy and understandings of the self. What is important to notice in this upcoming chapter is the similarities in placing insight as the highest epistemological method.

Chapter 3: Vedantic Philosophy

3.1. Vedanta: The Upanishads

In this chapter, I show how, according to Vedantic philosophy, insight plays a central role in understanding the true nature of the self. To do this, I look at the Upanishads (800BCE), the Bhagavad Gita (500 BCE), the philosopher/sage Adi Shankara (700CE), and the philosopher/sage Ramana Maharshi (1900 CE). I start with examining the Upanishads.

The Vedas are Hindu religious texts dating back to roughly 1500BCE. For the most part, they deal with religious rites and rituals (Ravindra 32-33, Whispers). The Upanishads are the fourth and last section of the Vedas which were written between 800BCE-500BCE. The Upanishads are different from the rest of the Vedas in that they are philosophical texts. These philosophical texts arguably represent the highest contribution of Indian philosophy to world civilization. The Upanishads deal with topics such as metaphysics, philosophy of mind, epistemology, and other branches of philosophy. The main focus of the Upanishads is inquiry into the nature of the self (Ravindra 35, Whispers). The Upanishads claim that when one inquires into their fundamental nature and asks “Who Am I?” they will find their true Self, *Atman* (Ravindra 35, Whispers). Upon discovering *Atman*, which is individuated consciousness, one discovers that it is same as Brahman, which is universal consciousness (Ravindra 35-36). Thus, there isn’t really individuated consciousness but there is only universal consciousness for *Atman* is *Brahman* (35-38). Thus, the self is the Self or being is Being.

This true self-knowledge leads to liberation, enlightenment, nirvana (Ravindra 36, Whispers).¹⁹

It's important to note that knowledge of the Self is not intellectual knowledge (*dianoia*). Knowledge of the Self is not “an intellectually derived metaphysical principle underlying a study of the external forces” (Ravindra 35, Whispers). Knowledge of the Self “is not merely rational; to know *Atman* is to have one's whole being transformed” (Ravindra 36, Whispers). As the Mundaka Upanishad states “one who knows Brahman becomes Brahman” (Mundaka Upanishad 3.2:9 as cited in Ravindra 36, Whispers). This parallels to philosophers such as Parmenides (*Diels, Fr.* 185 as cited in Ravindra 17, Whispers) and Plotinus (*Enneads* vi.9 as cited in Ravindra 17, Whispers) who state that “to be and to know are one and the same.” Knowledge of the Self is known through direct recognition (*nous*) and then it is lived.

To begin with understanding Vedantic philosophy, which centers insight of the Self or Being as the core of philosophy, we'll begin with the oldest Upanishads: The Chandogya Upanishad and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. These Upanishads are not only the oldest but are typically regarded as the most important. We'll then focus on the Bhagavad Gita, a philosophical text written between 500BCE-200BCE which is typically

¹⁹ The terms “liberation, enlightenment, and nirvana” are loaded terms that have different interpretations. On one side of the spectrum, they can refer to the perfect human. This human has realized their fundamental essence as not human – as God – and is thus God in human form. Accordingly, everything they do and say is perfect. On the other side of the spectrum, these terms refer to the end of psychological suffering. Of course, physical pain still arises but mental pain, which we can define as thought-based mental narratives which cause suffering, do not arise. Thus, “liberation, enlightenment, or nirvana,” is simply the end of psychological suffering. From a ‘negative perspective’ one does not gain anything but simply loses psychological suffering. From a ‘positive perspective’ one gains continuous peace of mind. Personally, I favour the latter interpretation which defines “liberation, enlightenment, and nirvana” as the end of psychological suffering or continuous peace of mind. This is because defining the terms this way is more metaphysically parsimonious and seems more accurate and realistic compared to an ideal of perfection.

viewed as a summary of all the Upanishads (Ravindra 3, Bhagavad Gita). Next, the philosophy of Adi Shankara, the 8th century CE systemiser of the Advaita Vedanta school of Indian philosophy, will be explained. Shankara is a key figure with Indian philosophy as he wrote compelling logical and insight-based commentaries on the Upanishads placing self-knowledge or *jnana yoga* at the core of Indian philosophy. Shankara asserted that *Brahman* or the Self is the reality of everything and that this could be directly recognized (Dalal). Thus, Shankara links “a metaphysics of *brahman* to a philosophy of consciousness” (Dalal). Last, we’ll finish with the 20th-century philosopher and sage Ramana Maharshi who wrote the text “Who Am I?”. In this text, Maharshi asserts that the self is awareness. Maharshi is unique in Indian philosophy as he strips down and clarifies that Self, *Brahman*, and *Atman*, which are referred to in older Indian texts, simply refer to awareness. Awareness is more fundamental than mind (thoughts and the seemingly existent thinker) and is that which is aware of thoughts and sees through the seemingly existent thinker of thoughts.

As we go through each section, it’s important to note the primary epistemological method used to understand the Self – insight. Notice how placing insight or *nous*²⁰ as the highest epistemological method has parallels to Parmenides and Plato, the founders of Greek philosophy.

3.1.1. *The Chandogya Upanishad*

The Chandogya Upanishad was written between 800-600 BCE. It tells the story of a young man, Shvetaketu, who comes to learn about the Self from his wise father. When

²⁰ To use the Ancient Greek term.

Shvetaketu is 12 years old his father sends him off to school to sharpen his intellect. Shvetaketu returns home when he is 24 years old and is proud of his intellectual abilities and knowledge. His father asks him whether through all his intellectual abilities he has had insight into the nature of the Self. Shvetaketu replies that he has not and his father explains to him the nature of the Self. The story is structurally similar to the Ancient Greek Socratic dialogues, where someone asks Socrates questions and Socrates answers them as the wise philosopher. The story also bears epistemological similarities to Parmenides and Plato in that it places *nous* above *dianoia*. When Shvetaketu goes to school he improves his knowledge and thinking abilities, *dianoia*. However, he doesn't have insight or direct knowing, *nous*, into the nature of the Self. His father implies that this direct knowing is more important than thinking abilities and thus tells his son about it.

The Chandogya Upanishad is more philosophical than many other Upanishads. It gives philosophical grounding to the view that Being is primary and that our true nature is Being itself. This ancient text isn't as clear about what Being or the Self actually is and how it can be directly recognized as compared to philosophers such as Shankara or Ramana Maharshi. But it's important in that it gives strong reasoning to open the possibility that we are Being itself. It's also important historically, as it's the grounding upon which much of Eastern philosophy lies. Historically, it's also of interest how the Chandogya Upanishad is similar to Parmenides' Proem. This is especially the case since both texts were written around the 6th century BCE, likely independently but coming to similar conclusions. Like Parmenides, the Chandogya Upanishad centres the primacy of Being. Furthermore, like Parmenides, it implies that there are two ways of inquiry:

inquiry into Being and inquiry into not-being. Similarly, it concludes that inquiry into Being and centering the primacy of Being is the only legitimate path. The Upanishad states:

“In the beginning, my dear, this was Being only,-one, without a second.-Some say that, in the beginning, this was Non-being, only one, without a second. From that Non-being sprang Being. ‘But how could it be so, my dear?’-said he;-‘How could Being be born from Non-Being ?-in fact, this was Being only, in the beginning, one, without a second” (*Chandogya Upanishad*, Jha, 6.21-6:22). “Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos And entered into everything in it. There is nothing that does not come from him. Of everything he is the inmost Self. He is the truth; he is the Self supreme. You are that, Shvetaketu; you are that” (*The Upanishads, Chandogya Upanishad*, Eknath Easwaran, 6.23).

Before further explaining this text, a point on translation must be made. As can be seen, two different translations are used. The reason I do this is because the Jha translation of the Chandogya Upanishad emphasizes philosophical depth more than the Easwaran translation. However, the Jha translation can also be more literal at times. For example, 6.23 of the Jha translation states, “It conceived-' May I become many; may I grow forth'; and It created Fire. That Fire conceived- ' May I become many ; may I grow forth ' ; and it created Water. Therefore whenever a man is hot and perspires, it is water produced from fire.” This is different when compared to 6.23 of the Easwaran translation which

states that everything comes from the Self/Being.²¹ At times, the Jha translation is more literal while the Easwaran translation focuses more on the intended meaning of the text. Given our modern understanding of science, it's inaccurate to say that Being created fire,²² which created water, and that sweating is produced by some kind of internal fire. This is where the Easwaran translation is helpful since it cuts right to the intended meaning of how everything grows forth from the Self/Being.

When it comes to choosing which translations to use for Indian texts, my methodology will be to use the translations that are the most philosophically coherent. Of course, this will be determined on my own assessment. The reason I do this is so that the strongest philosophical positions are presented. For the purposes of this thesis, I'm interested in engaging with the strongest philosophical positions. Thus, I'll favour a translation that is more philosophically deep and coherent than another. This might mean switching translations at times, as was done above.

Now for interpreting the Chandogya Upanishad. This Upanishad makes clear that in the beginning there was only Being. A logical argument is then made to defend this position. Currently, there is Being. We are completely certain of this. Whatever this is, it is. Even though we can't precisely say *what* it is, it still is. This becomes most apparent when we look to the nature of the self. Whatever I am, I still am; I exist. Given this, how could existence come out of non-existence? This is logically impossible.

²¹ The full Easwaran translation of 6.22-6.23 states "In the beginning was only Being, One without a second. Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos And entered into everything in it. There is nothing that does not come from him. Of everything he is the inmost Self. He is the truth; he is the Self supreme. You are that, Shvetaketu; you are that." Thus, this translation makes clear that the Self is the same as Being, and that everything comes from the Self/Being.

²² Unless one wanted to claim that "fire" refers to the Big Bang. However, this is a stretch. It's better to just admit that the philosophers of Ancient India didn't know everything and at times were scientifically wrong in their statements.

The materialist position claims that dead matter gives rise to consciousness, somehow. This is typically explained through emergent properties, whereby a certain number and arrangement of neurons somehow gives rise to consciousness. There are a few problems with this view. First, it starts the reductionist position at a convenient place. Instead of starting the analysis at say, atoms, the analysis starts at neurons because it's causally convenient. It ignores the central problem that neurons *exist* and that atoms *exist*. Thus, it's predicated on a view that existence comes from existence. Second, in terms of pure logic, it again seems impossible. Getting being out of non-being is a pure logical contradiction. It might be claimed that the big bang proves that non-being came out of being. But this isn't the case. The singularity prior to the big bang still was; it existed. Thus, the Big Bang still showed getting being out of being. When it comes to the one thing I'm certain of, that "I exist", connecting this with existence itself is arguably the most metaphysically parsimonious.²³ What's interesting about this Upanishad, is the implication that this can be directly realized. That the Self, as Being itself, can be realized. This doesn't have to be believed or simply taken on faith, it can be known. When Shvetaketu's father tells him of the Self, there's an implication in the story that the father has had insight into himself as the Self. Moreover, when Shvetaketu's father says "you are that" it means that Shvetaketu, along with everyone else, is also the Self. However, they have not realized it. This means that for us, we, the readers, are also the Self but like Shvetaketu have not realized it. Thus, I interpret the point of this Upanishad

²³ I say "arguably" because it might be claimed that the existence of "I" is not necessarily the same as existence itself. In other words, the fact of my being isn't necessarily equivalent to Being itself. The point of this paragraph and the arguments I outline isn't to definitively show that the position of the Chandogya Upanishad is correct. It's to show that it's logically coherent and is still logically coherent even in today's age of modern science.

as not trying to give a complete metaphysically coherent defence of the Self but rather to give an account that's logically coherent enough to encourage open-minded people to explore the possibility that they are the Self. While precise methods of how to inquire into this aren't the strong suit of the Upanishads, later texts such as Shankara's Vivekachudamani and Ramana Maharshi's "Who Am I" do this.

3.1.2. The Brihadarankyaka Upanishad

The Brihadarankyaka Upanishad was written between 900-600 BCE. It tells the story of the philosopher Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi in conversation about the nature of the self (Easwaran, Upanishads, 55). Yajnavalkya tells Maitreyi about how we are really the Self, universal consciousness, and that this can be discovered by looking within our own consciousness (Easwaran, Upanishads, 55). This recognition leads to no suffering (Easwaran, Upanishads, 55). This Upanishad is important because it makes clear that the Self is simply pure consciousness or awareness.

As a lump of salt thrown in water dissolves and cannot be taken out again, though wherever we taste the water it is salty, even so, beloved, the separate self dissolves in the sea of pure consciousness, infinite and immortal. Separateness arises from identifying the Self with the body, which is made up of the elements; when this physical identification dissolves, there can be no more separate self. This is what I want to tell you, beloved (Brihadarankyaka Upanishad, Eknath Easwaran, 2.412)...The sages call it Akshara, the Imperishable. It is neither big nor small, neither long nor short, neither hot nor cold, neither bright nor dark, neither air nor space. It is without attachment, without taste, smell, or touch,

without eyes, ears, tongue, mouth, breath, or mind, without movement, without limitation, without inside or outside. It consumes nothing, and nothing consumes it (3.8.7-8)...The Imperishable is the seer, Gargi, though unseen; the hearer, though unheard; the thinker, though unthought; the knower, though unknown. Nothing other than the Imperishable can see, hear, think, or know (3.8.11).

There are two main parts to this section. In the first, the Self is described as pure consciousness. When the pure consciousness identifies with the body, this leads to a false and separate sense of identification. Reality appears to be objective, with “I” being here somewhere within the body and the world being there.²⁴ This means that “I” is separate from the world. It’s also important to note that “body” as referred to in the text also refers to the mind. Within Indian philosophy, the term body-mind is often used as the body is not viewed as separate from the mind. Another way to put this is that thinking is not viewed as occurring separately from the body (Ravindra 117, Whispers). Thus, when consciousness identifies with the body, which includes the mind, there’s a perception of separateness. Thus, the antidote for this is for pure consciousness to drop identification with the body-mind. If this happens, there will be no more sense of a separate self.

The section describes what pure consciousness is. No clear definition is given; in fact there seems an attempt to yank a clear understanding out of the reader’s mind. Pure consciousness is (non)described as neither hot or cold, neither big or small, neither inside or outside, non-attached, not the senses, and not the mind (the thinker). This is similar to Buddhist approaches to describe the not-self, which usually describe it in negative terms.

²⁴ Ramana Maharshi makes clear that the sense of separateness refers to a perception of the world as objective. We’ll cover Maharshi in a later section.

I'll later argue that the Self of Vedanta and not-self of Buddhism are the same thing but this is interesting to flag here. In giving this non-description of pure consciousness – the Self – a certain point is being made and that is on the ineffability of pure consciousness. Understanding pure consciousness can't occur through language or thought because pure consciousness isn't language or thought-based.

In the next part of the Brihadarankya Upanishad we'll look at, King Janaka has a discussion with Yajnavalkya on what “the light of man” is. The light of man refers to our true nature or the true nature of the self. Also, an interesting point to flag is on the use of the word “light.” When referring to the nature of the self, both western philosophers and eastern philosophers like to use the word “light.” For example, Descartes states “For whatever natural light reveals to me – for example, from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and things like that – cannot admit of any possible doubt, because there cannot be another faculty [in me] as trustworthy as natural light, one which could teach me that the ideas [derived from natural light] are not true” (Descartes 55-56). What's interesting here is that Descartes equates “the natural” light with something like reason, thinking, the mind, *dianoia*. He even believes that nothing could be higher than thinking as an epistemological method. However, this runs in direct contrast to Indian philosophy which views insight as the highest epistemological method. Also, in this next section of the Upanishads “the light of man” is stated to be “pure awareness.” The light of awareness is not thought-based and there must be insight into it for it to be known. “Light” is used by many other Indian philosophical texts, such as the Bhagawad Gita which we'll explore. But when “light” is used in these texts it refers to pure

consciousness or awareness, the Self, which is not thought-based. For now, however, we'll look at the dialogue between Yajnavalkya and Janaka.

“JANAKA: Yajnavalkya, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA: The sun is our light, for by that light we sit, work, go out, and come back.

JANAKA: When the sun sets, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA: The moon is our light, for by that light we sit, work, go out, and come back.

JANAKA: When the sun sets, Yajnavalkya, and the moon sets, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA: Fire is our light, for by that we sit, work, go out, and come back.

JANAKA: When the sun sets, Yajnavalkya, and the moon sets, and the fire goes out, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA: Then speech is our light, for by that we sit, work, go out, and come back. Even though we cannot see our own hand in the dark, we can hear what is said and move toward the person speaking.

JANAKA: When the sun sets, Yajnavalkya, and the moon sets, and the fire goes out and no one speaks, what is the light of man?

YAJNAVALKYA: The Self indeed is the light of man, your majesty, for by that we sit, work, go out, and come back.

JANAKA: Who is that Self?

YAJNAVALKYA: The Self, pure awareness, shines as the light within the heart,

surrounded by the senses. Only seeming to think, seeming to move, the Self neither sleeps nor wakes nor dreams. He is the truth; he is the Self supreme. You are that, Shvetaketu; you are that” (*Brihadarankyaka Upanishad*, Eknath Easwaran, 4.2-4.7).

As we can see, there’s a progression to determining what the light of man is. At first, external objects such as the sun, moon, and fire serve as the light of man. For our purposes, these answers are rather inconsequential, though they do help to show a progression from more obvious answers to less obvious ones. Next, speech is said to be the light of man. This answer is a bit surprising since typically in Indian philosophy, the mind is explicitly stated to be the forerunner to awareness. We’ll see this in the Bhagawad Gita, Shankara, and Maharshi. But here, speech is stated to be the forerunner to awareness. The way I interpret the line regarding “speech” is that it’s referring to mind through language and thought. This is stated in an ‘internal’ way and ‘external’ way. The ‘internal’ way is that “speech is our light, for by that we sit, work, go out, and come back.” When we sit, work, go out, and come back, this is done through the internal mechanics of language and thought. We have a thought “I want to sit” so we sit. We have a thought “I have to go to work” so we go out to work. Thus, internal speech is what guides our actions. The ‘external’ way that speech is our light is that the speech and thought of others affects us. For example, we can hear what is said and move toward the person speaking. Speech doesn’t primarily refer to the sense of the ear but rather language and thought.

Last, the Self or pure awareness, is stated to be the “light of man.” Pure awareness is the base layer of man. Pure awareness is surrounded by the senses, which again in

Indian philosophy includes the mind/thought. Pure awareness “only seem[s] to think” and “seem[s] to move.” Let’s examine these statements. When thoughts happen, we are usually identified as the thinker. We identify in this way: “I am the thinker. I am the one thinking these thoughts.” However, from a Vedantic perspective, there are thoughts but there isn’t a thinker. When we look for the thinker, through directing attention towards the supposed thinker, we don’t find it. Instead, we find pure awareness. Pure awareness is that which is aware of thoughts. Even still, we can get contracted into thinking. When this happens, it can seem as though we are the thinker and thus seems that we are thinking. But in actuality, we are the pure awareness which is aware of thinking. Thus, we aren’t actually thinking. It only seems like we are thinking. We’re actually in more of an open witnessing position that’s aware of the thinking. And the same goes with moving. It seems that “I am the mover” when we’re identified with the body and as the thinker. But again, pure awareness is that which is aware of the body moving. Thus, through identification with the body we can seem to move. But we’re actually not moving since pure awareness doesn’t move. Pure awareness doesn’t move because it’s more of an open witnessing position that’s aware of the body moving.

This concludes our exploration of the Upanishads. There are two main takeaways. The first is that the Self/Being/pure awareness, constitutes everything. The second is that the Self is our true nature and that this can be directly recognized. On the first point, that Being is everything, this is similar to Parmenides, the founder of Western metaphysics. This point is found within the Chandogya Upanishad. On the second point, that the Self is our true nature and that this can be directly recognized, this connects metaphysical claims about the nature of everything to the nature of the self. The claim that the Self is our true

nature and can be directly recognized is made within the Brihadarankyaka Upanishad by stating that the Self is “pure awareness” or “pure consciousness.” In the next section, we’ll cover the Bhagavad Gita, which is considered a summary of the Upanishads.

3.2. The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is perhaps the most important text to come from India and was written between 200-500BCE (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 1,3). As Ravi Ravindra states, “It is sometimes considered to be the paradigmatic source of perennial philosophy and traditional wisdom (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 1). Numerous philosophers, including Western philosophers such as Henry David Thoreau, have praised the Gita.

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt that if philosophy is not referred to a previous state of existence, so remote its sublimity from our conceptions (Thoreau, as cited in Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 1)

By most people in the world, likely including most philosophers, the Gita is considered a religious text. But as with the Upanishads, the Gita isn’t a religious text. While it can be read as a religious text, this isn’t the best way to read it. If one reads the Gita as a religious text, they’re missing the underlying point of the Gita. The Gita is best read as “a

map and guidebook” to have us “know the knower” and fully live from this insight (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita*, 8,9).

Within Hinduism, “the Bhagavad Gita is regarded as *smṛti* (that which is remembered) rather than a *śruti* (that which is revealed²⁵) text, and therefore is not considered to be ultimately authoritative like the Vedas and the Upanishads (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 2). However, it’s important to note two things. First, that this is the Hindu orthodox interpretation of what counts as ultimately authoritative and it’s important for each one of us “to find our own attitude” towards what we deem authoritative and not authoritative (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 2). Second, “the Bhagavad Gita is also called *Gītopaniṣad* as well as *Yogopaniṣad*, implying its status as an Upanishad” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 3). Moreover, “[s]ince the Bhagavad Gita represents a summary of the Upanishadic teachings, it is also called the Upanishad of Upanishads” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 3). Thus, within Indian philosophy the status of Bhagavad Gita holds great importance.

²⁵ “Revealed” is a loaded term which holds many connotations. When the word “revealed” is used this makes it seem otherworldly. It makes it seem like there was some kind of divine revelation whereby a personal god, such as a blue ten-armed man-god, came down from the sky and “revealed” something to philosophers/sages at the time. I would suggest that the word “revealed” here and in many other cases, actually means Being or pure consciousness, which is typically covered up, revealing itself. The word “revealed” can be useful because it implies a movement from more true to less true. Within this more precise framework, Being is more true than the thinker. Moreover, Being is the doer and the thinker is a false doer; the thinker does nothing since it fundamentally doesn’t exist (this gets into problems surrounding free will but we’ll leave that aside for the purposes of this thesis). Since Being is more true and is the doer compared to the Thinker which is less true and isn’t the doer, any “insights” that are made only come from the more true – Being. Thus, the word “revealed” can be useful because it implies a movement from higher or more true to lower or less true. But the word “revealed” is also not useful since it carries a lot of conceptual baggage, which can make understanding the term more difficult. On the other hand, the word “insight” almost implies a movement from lower to higher, whereby it’s the thinker that has insight into Being. But in actuality, it’s Being that reveals itself and there’s no thinker to have the insight. That being said, the word “insight” can be useful because it carries less conceptual baggage than “revealed” and thus seems more intellectually respectable. Thus, my preference would be to use the word “insight” over “revealed”. I’d suggest to others who have a similar inclination to mentally switch the word “revealed” for “insight.” Thus, for the above section of bracketed text, instead stating “that which is revealed” one can mentally switch this to “that which there has been insight into” or “that which is known through insight.”

The Bhagavad Gita is part of the large epic, the Mahabharata. The story of the Gita is set on a battle “between two families of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 3-4). This battle may have been a historical event, or it may have been a literary device (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 3-4). For philosophical purposes, it doesn’t matter which is correct. While the battle is outwardly set in the story, the battle actually refers to an inward battle (4). This inward battle refers to the struggle between “*asuiric* (demonic) and *daivic* (divine) tendencies in the same person” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 4). This internal battle is a battle “for the possession of our entire psychosomatic complex...which is what we call a human being” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 5).

After setting up the context of the battle in the first chapter, the Gita gets into philosophy. Arjuna, who is a prince on the Pandavas side (the ‘good’ side), talks to his advisor and chariot driver, Krishna, about philosophical questions (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 4). Arjuna represents our surface self, the self, and Krishna represents our deepest self, the Self (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 5). Eknath Easwaran, another scholar, says the same as Ravindra, stating, “the Gita is not an external dialogue but an internal one: between the ordinary human personality, full of questions about the meaning of life, and our deepest Self” (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 21). Easwaran further states:

“If I could offer only one key to understand this divine dialogue, it would be to remember that it takes place in the depths of consciousness and that Krishna is not some external being, human or superhuman, but the spark of divinity that lies at the core of human personality (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 21).

The use of the word “divinity” can be a bit off-putting, especially considering that Easwaran tells us that Krishna is “not superhuman” and that the dialogue “takes place in the depths of consciousness”, but we can put aside this word choice for the time. The important point to remember is that, as Easwaran points out, there’s nothing superhuman or magical taking place. Krishna is *not* some external being. Krishna is *not* some blue haired, magical, otherworldly, young child-god.²⁶ Krishna is the true “I”. Krishna is the Self/Being/pure consciousness/awareness. With this point in mind, for the rest of the thesis I will substitute the word “Being” for the word “Krishna.” The reason I do this is so that it’s clear that Krishna is not some external entity. Also, the word “Being” is filled with fewer connotations so it’ll be more useful.

As Ravindra points out, all the great Indian philosophers “have taken the battle in the Gita to be an internal one” and the same goes for the conversation between Arjuna and Being (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 4-5). Within the circles of scholarship and serious insight-based practitioners, this interpretation of the Gita is known and obvious. But outside of this circle, at more popular levels, the text is often read as an external dialogue between a person and God/a god. While it can be easy to look down on this this popular understanding, the point behind (seemingly) externalizing the story is so that there’s “transmission of culture from one generation to another” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 5). If that vast majority of the public has no connection to a text, then it’s likely that text will be forgotten over time. This is the case with most philosophy texts.²⁷ Thus, (some)

²⁶ This is typically how he is depicted in Indian art.

²⁷ It could be claimed that certain texts in philosophy haven’t been forgotten, such as Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Descartes’s *Meditations*, etc. But compared to “religious texts” such as *The Bible* or the *Bhagavad Gita* these texts largely have been forgotten. Or, more likely, these philosophy books weren’t even read or known by most people when they came out. This is because most people don’t know or care about philosophy, at least compared to religion, and this seems to have always been the case. To go deeper on this point, there’s usually a trade-off between intellectual rigour and accessibility. When a

religious texts strive to be accessible and put “internal and subtle realities...into material form through the use of images, symbol, stories, and metaphors” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 5). This makes more people have a connection to the text, which increases the probability that the text will last longer. Unfortunately, this method is a double-edged sword and has the downside of leading to misinterpretation. And, more unfortunately still, this had historically led to much violence and killing.

This is also why getting a good translation of the Bhagavad Gita is important. Certain translations, such as the popular translation “Bhagavad Gita: As It Is” by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada offer an externalized account of the dialogue. Instead of stating that Krishna is Being, which is the true “I”, this translation offers a dualistic account where Arjuna is man, and Krishna is a completely separate omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, God. The dialogue is externalized and religious worship of Krishna is encouraged. In contrast, with scholarly translations such as Ravindra’s and Easwaran’s, it’s made clear that the dialogue is internal, and there is a more nondual framing, where Krishna and Arjuna are higher and lower aspects of consciousness.

Yoga means “to unite.” What yoga attempts to do is unite ‘lower’ aspects of us with ‘higher’ aspects of us (Ravindra, *Whispers* 26). Within the West, yoga is typically understood as doing physical postures to make the body more flexible and feel good. To be sure, this is a kind of yoga, and it’s called *hatha yoga*. But *hatha yoga* is just one kind of yoga for within the Indian tradition there are many kinds of yoga. For the purposes of this thesis, there are four yogas that we’ll cover because these are the yogas that are

text is highly intellectually rigorous, such as the aforementioned philosophy books, there’s a decrease in accessibility. When there’s a decrease in accessibility, fewer people will read it. When fewer people read the text, the text is more likely to be forgotten over time.

covered within the Bhagavad Gita. But we'll focus on one yoga in particular, *jnana yoga*, because it's the one that is the most philosophically coherent and is intended for intellectual types.

3.2.1. The Four Yogas

The four yogas are: *jnana yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *karma yoga*, and *raja yoga*. There are four yogas because within the Indian tradition it's understood that there are different personality types, and that each personality type will have a certain style of uniting the 'lower' with 'higher.'

In *Bhakti yoga*, the yoga of devotion, people know the Self "by identifying themselves completely with the Lord in love" (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 49).

This type of yoga is the popular form of how most religion is practiced. Statues or some type of physical embodiment of God are set up and prayed to or prayed through. These statues can be Hindu gods such as Shiva, statues of Buddha, crosses with Jesus on them, and even the Muslim Kaaba.²⁸ Thus, bhakti is a devotional yoga where the concept of God is set up within a person's consciousness and that person prays to that concept. This

²⁸ Some religious people might want to claim they are not praying to the statue but are rather praying through the statue. For example, a Christian might claim that they're not praying to the statue of Christ but that they're using the statue of Christ as mechanism to pray to Christ himself. In other words, they'd claim they're using a physical tool (the statue) to get to the non-physical entity of God. I'd claim that whatever form it is, it's still statue worship. The only difference is in the degree where the latter is subtler than the former. I'd make a similar argument with Muslim worship toward the Kaaba (the statue/stone building in Mecca, Saudi Arabia). Muslims around the world pray towards the Kaaba. I'd argue that this is a subtle form of idol worship. By directionally pointing towards a physical object, the Kaaba, this is showing a subtle belief that a connection to God can be established through some physical mechanism. If God is omnipresent, which is the Muslim and typical religious view, then there'd be no need to point towards a physical object. If God is omnipresent, pointing everywhere would be equally fine and there'd be no need to point anywhere to pray. But since there's a pointing towards a physical object, the Kaaba, this shows a subtle belief that a connection can be established to God through some physical mechanism. Thus, it's a subtle form of idol worship.

concept of God, *if used correctly*,²⁹ can prove highly useful to people. The concept of God, which is set up as an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent, entity, serves to protect people from psychological suffering and make them more loving. When people have problems they can divert these problems to God which protects them from psychological suffering. For example, if someone is having financial troubles and has their mind (thoughts) spinning out of control in worry, the concept of God that has been set up in their consciousness fixes their mind through coming in and saying something like “This is all apart of God’s plan. He loves you and will provide for you.” This causes unhelpful thoughts to dispel and the person can productively focus on fixing their problem and be more peaceful. Of course, the person who believes in God and has faith in God doesn’t view God as a concept. They view God as a literal metaphysically existent entity. But this is actually helpful for practical purposes since it makes the concept of God work more efficiently in their consciousness. Within this system, it’s also useful to set up God as an external entity. In other words, it’s useful to set up God dualistically (two), where there is man and there is God. This runs in contrast to nondual (not two) framings of God/Self, which say that man and God are not two. *Bhakti yoga* tends to set up God externally whereas *jnana yoga* tends to set up God internally. It’s useful to set up God as an external entity within *Bhakti yoga* because it’s easier to love an external entity than to love oneself. If one wants to truly love oneself, one must first know what the nature of self is. But this requires self-inquiry and the insight-based process of *jnana* which is more suited for intellectual types. Thus, within *Bhakti yoga* God is externalized

²⁹ Historically and in contemporary times this concept hasn’t been used correctly, at least in its full form, in the vast majority of cases. The concept of God seems to have caused a lot of division, suffering, and death because of people operating under unhelpful concepts of God.

and loved. But since this is all taking place within one's consciousness, what happens is one starts to become more loving towards themselves and others. According to the sage Ramana Maharshi, in the last stage of *Bhakti yoga*, the view that God is external collapses, and God is realized as Self. Thus, at this last stage the love of *bhakti* converges with the wisdom of *jnana*.

In *karma yoga*, the yoga of action, the method is to dissolve "identification with body and mind by identifying with the whole of life, forgetting the finite self in the service of others" (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 49). In most cases if not all cases, when we perform actions, we believe "I did that action." When we believe, "I did that action" we're referring to either the thinker, which is the finite self, or the body, which is just a larger form of the finite self. In other words, when we perform actions by being identified with our mind (the thinker) and the body, there's a belief that "I'm the doer." But within *karma yoga* and the other yogas too, the view is that the body-mind³⁰ isn't the doer. The body-mind responds to natural forces, *gunas*, which cause the body-mind to act (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 66). After the action is performed, the apparent thinker takes credit for the action, but this isn't actually what happened. The true doer is the Self, but we have the false belief that we as body-mind organisms are the true doers (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 68). The doership of the Self isn't where another entity is doing through us. It's more akin to the flow of Being or Life, that's doing which is impersonal. Another way to put this is that "one is engaged in action, but without attachment to the fruits of action" (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 101). By not being attached to the fruits of action, the

³⁰ Within Indian philosophy, the body and mind are viewed as fundamentally the same entity. The mind (thoughts and the apparent thinker) are a part of the body. Thinking is viewed as a kind of 6th sense within Indian philosophy. Thus, the term body-mind is commonly used. The body-mind refers to the self while the Self refers to pure consciousness, which includes the body-mind but isn't limited to it.

thinker isn't able to take credit or blame for the action. This leads to a gradual diminishment of the self and a move towards the Self (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 101).

In *raja yoga*, the yoga of meditation, the method is to “discipline the mind and senses until the mind-process is suspended in a healing stillness [so practitioners] merge in the Self” (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 49). As anyone who has tried meditation knows, the mind (thoughts) are constantly bouncing all over the place. When one first tries to meditate, it's often difficult to even meditate for ten minutes and it's an unpleasant experience. Whenever we try to focus on our intended object of meditation, the breath for example, we're able to do this for a few moments but then helplessly get carried away by thought. Then we remember that we're supposed to focus on the breath and this process continues. By continuing to practice meditation, we discipline our mind. It becomes easier to focus on the breath for longer periods of time without getting distracted by thought. Developing our attentional flow leads to peaceful emotional states and we start to enjoy meditation. And the same applies to the senses. When we first start meditation, our senses (ex. aches, pains, itches) can be very distracting. But as we progress in our practice, we, as the meditator, are able to gain control over the power of sensations to distract us. When a sensation is noticed as just that, a sensation without a mental story attached to it (ex. “My nose is so itchy. Oh man, this is itchy terrible. I need to scratch it so bad. I want to stop this stupid meditation.”), then we gain control over our senses. As Easwaran states, “[b]y its very nature the untrained mind is restless, constantly wandering here and there trying to fulfill its desires. It flickers wildly like a flame in a storm – never completely blown out, yet at the mercy of the wind. Whenever the mind wanders, [Being] says, it must be brought back to its source; it must learn to rest in the

Self' (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 137). This statement also strikes to the core of meditation, learning to rest in the Self. By gradually controlling the mind, the mind becomes calmer and more still. At a certain point of stillness, which is complete stillness, this is resting in the Self. This is because the most base layer of mind (empty mind) is the Self. Thus, the self is healed through resting in the Self and thus also moves towards being the Self.

Jnana yoga is typically called the path of knowledge (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 48). But I would suggest that a better translation of *jnana yoga* would be the path of insight. The reason for this is because the kind of “knowledge” that is referred to in *jnana yoga* is not an acquisition of textbook knowledge. The “knowledge” that is referred to in *jnana* is a direct knowledge, a knowing, that cuts through false beliefs. It’s direct knowledge of the Self which comes through self-inquiry. This knowledge doesn’t come through *dianoia* – thinking, although thinking is necessary in this path. This knowledge comes through *nous* – a recognition, an insight. Thus, I would suggest that understanding *jnana yoga* as the path of insight would be more appropriate since it makes clearer that *jnana* is not about accumulating textbook facts. As Ravindra states:

In India, what is required is the removal of ignorance by appealing to a direct and subtle knowing, *jnana* or *vidya*, subtler and more intimate than what is usually called “knowledge”. This sacred knowledge, *jnana*, is a radically different kind than scientific or philosophic or scriptural knowledge. There are several words in the religious literature of India that refer to this special kind of knowledge: *vidya* (the root of this word also leads to the English words *video* and *vision*,

emphasizing direct seeing), *jnana* (cognate with the Greek word *gnosis*, invoking subtler knowing than accepting something simply on faith), *bodhi* (the root of this word is the same as that of *buddha*, namely, *budh*, meaning “awakening” or “discernment”), and *prajna* (insight, used in the title of the classical Buddhist text *Prajna Parmita*, usually translated as *Wisdom of the Other Shore*) (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 95).

Thus, since “knowledge” can easily be misinterpreted within the English language, I would suggest that understanding *jnana* as insight is best. There are two main ways to engage in *jnana yoga*. In *jnana yoga*, inquirers use discrimination and insight to understand that they are not the body, senses, or mind, until they know they are the Self (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 48-49). *Jnana yoga* emphasizes that ignorance is source of our suffering (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 94). This ignorance is not knowing what we truly are and falsely identifying with the body, senses, and especially mind. *Jnana yoga* seeks for the “removal of ignorance by appealing to a direct and subtle knowing” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 95). This method for knowing the nature of Self is for curious, open-minded, intellectual types, who have a “questioning and learning mind” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 96). In this method, nothing is taken on faith, and one comes to know the nature of the Self through insight. For the purposes of this thesis, I’ll focus on this yoga as opposed to others. The reason for this is that *jnana yoga* is best suited for philosophical types who are open-minded. Since this is a philosophy thesis and readers are likely to be philosophical types, it’s best to focus on this yoga.

3.2.2. Interpreting the Gita

The Gita can be divided into four sections. The first on *karma yoga*, the second on *jnana yoga*, the third on *raja yoga*, and the fourth on *bhakti yoga* (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 48-49).³¹ This classification can be interpreted in three different ways. First, it can be interpreted as a progression from lesser yoga to greater yoga (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 188-190). Second, it can be interpreted as each yoga being its own distinct method, all of which are equally viable (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 190). Or third, it can be interpreted as having a primary yoga (e.g., *jnana*) and interpreting all the other yogas as versions of that yoga (e.g., *karma yoga*, *raja yoga*, and *bhakti yoga*, as versions of *jnana*). As Easwaran points out, “for two thousand years each of the major school of Indian philosophy has quoted the Gita in defence of its particular claims” (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 49). This statement explains the third interpretation, placing one yoga as the prime yogas with others supporting it. Each school of the four schools of yoga has done this. Thus, the importance of translation comes in again. Depending on who’s writing the translation, there’s a certain spin put on how the four yogas relate to each other. For example, people who favour the *bhakti method*, in its dualistic idol worship form, will claim the Gita encourages idol worship of Krishna. Moreover, all other sections of the Gita will be translated in a way to favour this interpretation. The “Bhagavad Gita: As it Is” is an example of this dualistic *bhakti* style translation. Other translations, such as “The Holy Geeta” by Swami Chinmayananda, who favoured *jnana*,

³¹ In Indian philosophy, it’s debated whether three or four yogas are described in the Bhagavad Gita (Eknath Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita* 48). *Raja yoga*, the yoga of meditation, is sometimes listed as the fourth but other times it’s left out. Rather oddly, Easwaran includes *Raja yoga* as a classification on pages 48 and halfway through page 49 but then drops the classification of *raja yoga* on the bottom half of page 49 where he states that there are “three six-chapter parts” in the Gita and doesn’t mention *Raja yoga*. For consistencies and simplicities sake, I thus state there are four sections and include *raja yoga*.

translate the Gita in a way where *jnana*, self-inquiry and self-knowledge, is the prime yoga. This effects both the translation and the interpretation. *Jnana* schools are more likely to interpret *bhakti* as devotion to truth or devotion to Self, which is nondual. Similarly, *jnani*s will interpret *raja yoga* as resting (meditating, being) in the Self only after there's been insight into the Self through *jnana*. And the same goes with *karma yoga* by interpreting it as not being attached to the fruits of one's action, which comes naturally after having insight into the self through *jnana*.

My view is that the Gita can be reasonably interpreted in any one of these four main ways. This is because I believe the main point of Gita is to mitigate or possibly eliminate psychological suffering. Just as in medicine, different pills are needed for different people. The Gita provides different pills to provide for all personality types and even provides evidence that 'the one pill is the best pill' for all four pills/yogas, as some may need this belief structure for that pill to fully work. Since this thesis is philosophically inclined, I'll interpret the Gita according to *jnana* and favour translations which state that Being or pure consciousness exists and that there can be insight into this.³²

Throughout the Gita but especially in Chapter 2, which is called by Ravindra "The Yoga of Awareness" Being teaches Arjuna about *buddhi yoga* and calls on him to practice it (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 42). *Buddhi yoga*, "the yoga of integrated intelligence or awareness" can be understood as a subset of *jnana yoga* (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 43). Being tells Arjuna to "seek refuge in buddhi" (Ravindra Gita 2.49)

³² Despite favouring *jnana*, I don't use the Swami Chinmayananda translation. The reason for this is because I find Chinmayananda translation to be a bit dogmatic, wordy, and unclear, when compared to the Ravindra and Easwaran translations.

and later Being says “Devote yourself fully to Me as the Supreme, renounce all your actions to Me; take refuge in buddhi yoga, be always one with Me in heart and mind (Ravindra Gita 18.57). Buddhi is “the integrated intelligence” in between mind (thought) and Being (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 44). Ravindra states:

“[b]uddhi derives from the root *budh* meaning “to wake up” in sense of discerning, becoming aware. In the Gita, buddhi is clearly distinguished from *manas* (mind), which is the faculty of thinking. Manas stands in a hierarchical order of subtlety and priority between the senses and buddhi. Manas is fickle, unsteady, impetuous, and difficult to control – as difficult as the wind (3.40; 6.34). However, manas can be controlled and brought to rest in the real Self by buddhi through buddhi yoga. Buddhi is an integrated intelligence in which the intellect, heart, and will are in their proper places; it is mindfulness and a special quality of attention. It is the great lookout of awareness from where one can perceive the great scenery on the subtle side of reality (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 44).”

As Ravindra further states, our buddhi is normally “fragmented and multibranching” but “what is required is a unified and resolute buddhi” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 44-45). The point of this is that *buddhi* is normally jumping all over the place because our thoughts are normally jumping all over the place. This can be seen experimentally if one meditates and sees that their attention helplessly goes towards thoughts. This is happening most of the time without us realizing it because it’s the only operating system we (seemingly)

know. Thus, we see the world through a lens that's covered by thought. Whenever thought jumps in front of us and attention happens to attach to that thought, we see the world through that thought. But when *buddhi* becomes unified it can function as insight. In other words, there can be awareness of insight into Being. When *Buddhi* is integrated or sharpened it can cut through thoughts and the apparent thinker to see one's true nature of Being or pure consciousness. Moreover, the word "insight" is specifically used in Ravindra's translation within Chapter 2:

When a person...is contented with the Self in the self, then that person is said to be of steady insight (2.55-2.57)...When a person completely withdraws the senses from the sense-objects, as a tortoise withdraws its limbs, insight is firmly established. The objects of the senses recede from the person who abstains from feeding on them. A state for such thing persists; but that taste also recedes when the highest has been seen (2.58-2.59). The turbulent senses forcibly carry away the mind...Restraining all the senses, such a person should remain disciplined intent on Me. Awareness [buddhi] is steady in those whose senses are controlled" (Ravindra Bhagavad Gita 2.55-2.59).

This shows how through steady insight one becomes contented with the Self in the self. In other words, through steady insight, one becomes content with resting in the Self. Controlling senses and the mind are important because they can distract *buddhi*. But with steady insight, one can remain in the Self. Chapter 4 of the Bhagavad Gita focuses on

jnana (insight/sacred³³ knowledge), *svadhyaya* (self-inquiry), and *yajna* (sacrifice). All these terms are in interplay with each other. A key section in chapter 4 states:

Brahman is the act of offering and Brahman is the oblation; by Brahman it is offered into the Brahman-fire...Some yogis undertake *yajna* for the devas; others practice *yajna* in the Brahman-fire with *yajna* itself. While some offer sound and other sense-objects to the fires of the senses, some offer senses like hearing in the fire of discipline. Some others offer all the actions of the senses and all actions of the vital force [*prana*] into the fire of the yoga of self-control kindled by sacred knowledge. There are some who practice *yajna* by offering their material goods, others who undertake austere efforts and practice of yoga as *yajna*; and for still others, with serious vows, *yajna* consists of self-inquiry [*svadhyaya*] and sacred knowledge [*jnana*]...Greater than the *yajna* involving material goods is the *yajna* of sacred knowledge...it is in sacred knowledge [*jnana*] that all actions without exception culminate...when you have learned this, you will never be deluded again; for by this you will see all beings, without exception, in the Self and in Me. Just as fire reduces kindling to ashes, O Arjuna, the fire of sacred knowledge turns all works to ashes. Nothing in the world is equal to sacred knowledge as purifier...The person of *shraddha* [faith, trust] who is devoted to this sacred knowledge and who has controlled the senses attains it; having attained the sacred knowledge, this one comes quickly to the supreme peace...Therefore, O Bharata, take up you sword of sacred knowledge [*jnana*], and cleave asunder this doubt

³³ Ravindra translates *jnana* as “sacred knowledge.” I would suggest ignoring the “sacred” since this word is too loaded. Again, this is why I prefer the word “insight” for translating *jnana*.

that has arisen out of ignorance [ajñana] and has occupied your heart. Be firm in yoga and arise! (4.24-4.42).

“Brahman” is another term for the Self, Being, pure consciousness, or awareness.³⁴ As Ravindra puts it, “A yogi sees everything as Brahman.” Put otherwise, this means that a yogi sees everything as pure consciousness. There are different ways to come closer to this recognition, have this recognition, and act on it. Thus, there are different *yajnas*, whereby one “sacrifice[s] any attachment to their usual level of awareness” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 93). These *yajnas* correspond to different types of people (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 93). As Ravindra states, “[s]ome practice yajna with singing and chanting [in praise of God], some with austerity of one kind or another by controlling one or another sense, or by breath regulation (*pranayama*), or by controlling food intake. Some practice yajna by offering material goods in charity” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 93). By singing in praise of God, one is temporarily giving up their attachment to lower levels of awareness, which are focused on pettiness, worry, regret, anger, etc. By focusing attention on one thing – singing – they’re closer to resting in pure consciousness. The same goes for those who meditate on the breath where attention focuses one thing. For those who prefer to give to charity, they are lessening attachment to the self’s desires and are thus closer to resting in pure consciousness which has no desires. But, Being is clear that “for those with serious vows, yajna consists of self-inquiry (*svadhyaya*) and sacred knowledge (*jñana*) (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 4.28). This part on *svadhyaya* and *jñana* is what we’re interested in.

³⁴ In the Gita, sometimes the word “Brahman” is used, sometimes “the Self”, sometimes “awareness”. All terms have the same referent.

Svadhya can be translated as “self-inquiry, self-knowledge, self-study, self-observation, [or] self-realization” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 93). I’d suggest that self-inquiry, self-study, or self-observation are the best translations. Self-observation begins at the individual level, where one observes actions such as their “tone of voice, gesture, postures, attitude to oneself or to parents or to others,” etc. (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 93). This reveals the movements of self and how we’re easily captured by them. Self-observation reveals “more and more of ourselves and clarif[ies] deeper tensions and motivations” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 93). “Self-study may begin as a study of very personal and quite particular likes and dislikes, but very soon we discover that self-study is in fact a study of the human condition as it is expressed in our individual situations” (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 93). As self-observation deepens, there’s a movement towards *looking at* or *directing attention towards* more fundamental questions, such as “who’s doing the looking?” or “what am I?”. This can lead to *jnana*, “a knowing by direct perception” of the nature of Self (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 94). Again, *jnana* is *not* knowledge through thought (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 94). *Jnana* is knowledge through insight (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 94).

In Indian philosophy, “the root cause of all our predicaments is *avidya* or *ajnana*, both meaning ignorance. Essentially, ignorance constitutes seeing the non-Self as the Self (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 94). The removal of ignorance is *jnana*, whereby there is direct perception into the Self. A key part of ignorance constitutes the mind (the thinker) and identification with the thinker. Throughout the Gita, Being constantly calls on Arjuna to fix the mind in the Self (3.42-43; 6.24-26, 6.34, 18.65). Another way to put this is that Being cannot be thought of because it’s that which sees thought. Being must be directly

known and then the mind (the thinker) must rest within Being. This can be frustrating to hear, especially for philosophers since we're trained in contemporary philosophy where the only way to do philosophy is through thinking. *Jnana* purifies the self through insight into the Self. Once there's insight into the Self, being devoted to this recognition is important. This is because when attention moves out of the Self and into the self, this further propagates the illusory nature of the self. In contrast, when attention rests in the Self this strengthens the truth of the Self and casts away doubts arising from the self.

Chapter 18 is the last chapter of the Gita and in it the essence of the teaching is given. The following *shlokas* (verses) "are considered to be the *param vakya*, the ultimate or highest enunciations expressing [Being's] supreme teaching" (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 94). In Chapter 18, Being states:

I have expounded to you the sacred knowledge which is profounder than the most profound knowledge...Fix your mind on Me, be My lover and worshipper, sacrifice to Me, bow to Me; you will come to Me. This is My firm pledge to you, for you are dear to Me. Abandon all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone. I will deliver you from all evil, do not be troubled. (18.63-18.66).

Here, the call is to know the Self and love the Self. Another way to put this is to know pure consciousness and love pure consciousness. There's a call for a "complete, wholehearted love for [Being], a total surrender" (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 253). As Ravindra points out, "[Being] does not ask for Arjuna's obedience to his will, but for his understanding" (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 253). Blind faith isn't what Being calls for.

Knowing is what Being calls for. Next, Being's call to "abandon all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone" is a radical statement to abandon all teachings (dharmas) and take refuge in Being alone. Being is saying that we should trust and rest in the one thing we know to be true – I am. Ravindra states, "[t]he call to abandon all dharmas implies that Arjuna should abandon all supports – of scripture, tradition, society, position, status, external weapons – and take refuge exclusively in the deepest Self" (Ravindra, *Bhagavad Gita* 254). Thus, Being is essentially calling on the reader to throw Being's teachings out once they've served their purpose. In other words, once insight into Being has happened and is fully established, the pointers aren't needed anymore. Once the map has served its purpose it can be thrown out.

3.3. Shankara

Adi Shankara was an Indian philosopher in 700CE and was the systematiser of Advaita Vedanta (Dalal). Advaita Vedanta is the nondual school of Indian philosophy which emphasises *jnana* (insight) and is based on nondual interpretations of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita (Dalal).³⁵ Advaita Vedanta states that the Self is the reality of all things and that the Self is pure consciousness. This is same as what's found in the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. For our purposes, Shankara's contribution is based on exposition rather than content. Shankara makes arguments, primarily through negation, to show that the self is pure consciousness (Dalal). This is called the "neti-neti" approach which means "not this, not that" to show that we're not the body, component parts of the body

³⁵ Dalal states that the interpretation is based on the Upanishads. However, we can reasonably say that the views of Advaita Vedanta are also based on the Bhagavad Gita since the Gita precedes Shankara by 1200 years, since Shankara wrote a commentary on it, and since the Gita is considered a summary of the Upanishads.

(ex. arms, legs, etc.), emotions, sensations, life forces (breath, blood, etc.), or mind (the thinker), and that we're actually pure consciousness, which can't be linguistically communicated because pure consciousness isn't objectifiable (Dalal). And this isn't to be known on a purely intellectual level – there must be direct insight. Shankara's use of negative language “attempts to avoid defining absolute reality as a thing in the world. To give positive predicates would reify the absolute to a finite entity” (Dalal). This is why words like “awareness” or “pure consciousness” can be misleading. These words are objectifiable so it sets us into a subject-object divide (ex. I have awareness) rather than an expression of pure subject (I = awareness). Moreover, words like “awareness” make us believe we can think about awareness, which we can't since it's more fundamental than thinking. In describing pure consciousness, the contemporary Advaita Vedanta practitioner and philosopher Neil Dalal states:

Pure consciousness matches the nature of nondual existence as free of name and form. Consciousness is “pure”, in that it is free from any relation, predication, or intentionality. Consciousness is unlike any object because it is unobjectifiable. It is ultimately not even subject to time or space, which are themselves objects of the witness. Like pure existence, consciousness is self-established. It has no parts, is irreducible, and stands outside of causation and dependence relations.

Consciousness is a constant unchanging presence, the only continuity of existence persisting through the process of infinite object reductions in searching for an object's metaphysical ground. It resists qualification, eliminative reduction, or dependence on a second thing. (Dalal)

Personal identity (e.g., I am Tejas) is an error and is the seeming differentiation of nondual consciousness (Dalal). Nondual consciousness connects to a particular body-mind organism which creates a false “I” or self (Dalal). This false “I” has the view I am this body-mind organism (Dalal). Another way to view this is that nondual consciousness (the subject) connects to the body-mind (an object) which then leads to an apparent personal identity which believes consciousness is in the mind (Dalal). As Dalal states, “[w]e assume the mind intrinsically possesses consciousness, and that consciousness is subject to the mind-body’s limitations, like one may mistake a scratch in the mirror as actually marring one’s face” (Dalal).³⁶

³⁶ Some contemporary Advaita practitioners and philosophers such as Salvatore Poe, believe that the personal identity which is formed (I am the body-mind) which is separate from nondual consciousness is what “original sin” actually refers to in Christianity (Poe 24-27). “Sin” in Hebrew means “missing the mark”. In the original Hebrew, sin doesn’t refer to performing a taboo sexual act, as it commonly refers to today. The term has been distorted throughout history. Thus, the “original sin” that Adam and Eve committed in the bible was mistaking themselves as separate selves (I am the body-mind) apart from nondual consciousness (God). This original error kicks them out of the peaceful Garden of Eden (the peace of nondual consciousness) and into the space of suffering (I am the body-mind). The story of Adam and Eve is used as an analogy for the predicament of all humans. Thus, the view is that all humans start in the Garden of Eden (nondual consciousness which is free of suffering and is peaceful) when we’re born. We then make the “original sin” – missing the mark – of identifying as separate limited selves (I am the body-mind) which leads to suffering. We spend our whole lives knowingly or unknowingly trying to get back into the Garden of Eden, through seeking pleasure, success, relationships, achievement, knowledge – objects that appear within consciousness. But this is mistaken since all objects come and go within consciousness. Consciousness itself, the subject, the Garden of Eden, is where true peace lies. This view of the Garden of Eden also helps us make sense of statements from Jesus such as, “unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:3 as cited in Ravindra 53, Whispers). The Kingdom of Heaven refers to pure consciousness which hasn’t contracted into a separate self. This is our original state as children, but we still possess it. This is why we must “turn round” (from objects) to enter the “Kingdom of Heaven” (Self or pure consciousness). As Ravindra states, “the Greek word which is translated as *repentance*” in the New Testament is *metanoia*; it literally means *change of mind*. This is another way to say the same thing. The mind which originally starts as empty and pure seemingly gets contracted into a self. Thus, the mind must be (seemingly) changed to rest in this base layer of mind, essential mind which is pure and empty.

Like the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita, Shankara claims that ignorance, *avidya*, is the root cause of suffering (Dalal). Ignorance is the epistemic mistake of viewing ourselves as the body-mind and not as pure consciousness (Dalal). As Dalal states:

[Ignorance]...produces a baseline of fear and anxiety due to assuming one's self as a limited being subject to sorrow, sickness, and death. Based on this error, individuals seek wholeness, happiness, and limitlessness through known ends like material gains, social status, hedonic pleasures, or reaching heavenly worlds; however, such endeavors are perpetually bound to fail because results of finite actions are limited, transient, and dependent. They may provide temporary reprieves or happy mental states, but do not provide the limitless wholeness of liberation. Only the direct understanding of one's self as nondual *brahman* [Being] negates the error of superimposition, and frees one from...suffering. One's cluster of mistaken self-identities and the whole psychological scaffolding that perpetuates suffering collapses only by removing the kingpin of ignorance. Then only nondual consciousness remains standing. Upon recognizing this reality, the mind rests in its own intrinsic being with absolute fullness, peacefulness, and tranquility (Dalal).

From the nondual perspective, there's a paradox. We're already pure consciousness so when we seek to be pure consciousness, this is going in the wrong direction (Dalal). One cannot 'attain' pure consciousness since they're already that. But paradoxically, it doesn't seem like we're pure consciousnesses because we've mistakenly identified with the

body-mind (Dalal). Recognizing oneself as pure consciousness appears to be a future attainment, but it's actually "a recognition of present reality" (Dalal). Thus, even if one recognizes themselves as pure consciousness, "no change occurs in reality" because we're already that. Shankara's solution to this paradox is "purely self-knowledge, a radical epistemic shift in perspective by which one simultaneously sheds limited self-identities and recognizes their existence as nondual consciousness. Only this direct immediate recognition of nonduality defeats the error of superimposition" (Dalal). Shankara explains this paradox through the "tenth man story":

"Ten children cross a river and then regroup to count each other. Each child counts only nine, and they sorrowfully conclude that the missing tenth child must have drowned. A passerby sees their plight and states, "you are the tenth!" They then realize they simply forgot to count themselves. The tenth child was never truly lost or gained" (Dalal)

The primary source we'll examine is Shankara's *Nirvanashatkam* which means "Song of the Self."³⁷ This text provides in concise form the *neti neti* (not this, not that) negation logic to argue the Self is pure consciousness. Below are the most important sections of the text:

I am not any aspect of the mind like the intellect, the ego or the memory,

I am not the organs of hearing, tasting, smelling or seeing,

³⁷ This text is sometimes called *Atmashatakam*. Both *Nirvanashatkam* and *Atmashatakam* refer to the same text.

I am not the space, nor the earth, nor fire, nor air, I am the form of consciousness and bliss...

I am not the Vital Life Energy (Prana)...

I am not any of the body parts, like the mouth, the hands, the feet, etc., I am the form of consciousness and bliss...

I am devoid of duality, my form is formlessness... pervading all senses,

I am neither attached, neither free nor limited, I am the form of consciousness and bliss. (Shankara)

As we can see, Shankara makes clear that “I” isn’t any aspect of the body or mind. Rather, “I” is consciousness which, when recognized, leads to bliss or peace. The negations that Shankara goes through on the body are intuitive. In terms of our subjective experience, most of us feel that we *have* bodies rather than *being* bodies. We feel that we’re floating somewhere around in our bodies, usually behind the eyes. Thus, we feel that we have a mouth, hands, feet, etc., and that overall we have a body, not that we are the body. Moreover, we feel that we hear, taste, smell, and see, not that we are hearing, tasting, smelling, and seeing. And the same goes for breath where we feel that we are breathing rather than we are the breath. So it’s clear we’re not the body or any part of the body. The next move is less intuitive as it focuses on the mind. In terms of our subjective experience, most of us feel like we’re our minds. The mind refers to the thinker or the ego. We feel like we’re the ones thinking the thoughts, the doers with free will, and that we’re the ones who can choose to move our bodies. In specific terms, this refers to the sense that we exist somewhere behind our eyes. This sense of self refers to our sense of

personal identity or ego. For me, since my name is ‘Tejas’ mind refers to ‘Tejas’. But according to Shankara, this sense of personal identity through the mind doesn’t fundamentally exist. Thus, if the mind as Tejas said “I am, I exist” that wouldn’t be true. This is because “I” isn’t fundamentally the mind and is pure consciousness. Shankara states pure consciousness is “devoid of duality” and “pervad[es] all senses.” This means that although the self is pure consciousness, it pervades the mind and the body. Thus, mind and body are forms of consciousness but aren’t as fundamental as pure consciousness. In other parts of his work, Shankara gives the analogy of the clay pot. A lump of clay can be used to make a pot which can then be used to make a plate and so on and so forth (Dalal). Everything that’s made has a name and form (ex. pot) but it’s fundamentally made of clay (Dalal). The clay, the substance, persists through each change and is thus more fundamental than the changing forms it constitutes (Dalal). It’s the same with pure consciousness, which is the fundamental substance of everything, including the body and mind, but is more fundamental than forms such as the body and mind. Thus, formless pure consciousness makes formed entities such as the body and mind. This is the paradoxical framing of nonduality.

3.3.1. Is The Self in Part a Thinking Thing?

Shankara’s analogy of the clay pot is useful for understanding whether the self is in part a thinking thing or not a thinking thing at all. The self, pure consciousness, represents clay, and the thinker represents the pot or other objects that clay can manifest into. From a certain standpoint, it could be said that only clay exists and there’s no such thing as a pot because the pot is only a manifestation of clay. This would represent the perspective that

the self is not a thinking thing at all, since the apparent thinker is only a manifestation of pure consciousness. This is the perspective that Shankara seems to take, which is in direct contrast to Descartes' position of the self being a discrete thinker. Another way to view the analogy of the clay pot is that both the clay and the pot exist. Clay exists since it's the fundamental constituent of objects (e.g. the pot). But objects (e.g. the pot) also exist since they *appear* to exist. From this standpoint, it seems ridiculous to deny the existence of the pot since it appears to exist and since from a practical standpoint we must, in part, operate in the world from the standpoint of appearance. This represents the perspective that the self is in part a thinking thing. Even if the fundamental non-existence of the thinker is seen through by insight, the thinker will still appear. Thus, from this standpoint it seems ridiculous to fully deny the existence of the thinker since it appears to exist. Again, this is because we must, in part, operate in the world from the standpoint of appearance. Thus, from one perspective it could be argued that only clay (pure consciousness) exists and from another perspective it could be argued that both the clay (pure consciousness) and the pot (the thinker) exist. Interestingly, this analogy is similar to the ocean-wave analogy used in Buddhism. Ocean represents pure consciousness/emptiness, and wave represents the thinker/form. From one standpoint, it could be argued that only ocean exists. From another standpoint, it could be argued that both ocean and wave exist. Regardless of the analogy used, I leave it to future work as to whether the self is in part a thinking thing or not a thinking thing at all.

My personal view is that this debate will never be solved. This is because it can be endlessly argued whether only clay exists or whether clay and pots exist. In my view, the reason why some traditions/philosophers such as Shankara argue that there's only

clay (pure consciousness) is as a teaching tool to make the insight into the nature of self as pure consciousness happen. If it was said the nature of self is both pure consciousness and the thinker, then this 'waffling' would make insight into pure consciousness harder. The analogy of the clay pot can help to make this point clearer. Initially, we start off believing that there's only the pot (the thinker). This is a real problem since identifying as the thinker causes most if not all of our psychological suffering. By identifying as the thinker, we identify with a self-story which originates through experiences that our body-mind undergoes. This self-story has a lot of suffering attached to it. For example, "my girlfriend broke up with me 2 years ago and life sucks without her. I'm unlovable." Or "I've only achieved a,b,c, in life while my colleagues have achieved more. I'm a failure." Or "if I get that new car in the future, then I'll be happy." Now, in reality, these are just thoughts. However, because we misidentify as the thinker, a personal self, these thoughts which are only discrete thoughts, spin themselves into a seeming reality which we believe. This is *maya* - illusion. This self-story is a highly compelling illusion, and it seems 100% real, but there's no substance to it: it's only thought. *Maya* is usually associated with psychological suffering, to varying degrees. This is why Eastern philosophers/sages stress that the self is not a thinking thing (the pot) and is only pure consciousness (clay). They are trying to provoke insight so that *maya* may be seen through.

Seeing through *maya* once isn't enough because repeatedly falling for it has become a highly compelling habit for us. This is why we must see past *maya*, to pure consciousness repeatedly. Within the space of pure consciousness, there is no psychological suffering because there is no thinker and no thought. Pure consciousness

has a certain 'purifying' aspect to it because it is free of psychological suffering. As attention rests more and more in pure consciousness, then naturally one becomes more free of psychological suffering. This is why it's useful to say there is no thinker. When it's said there is no thinker, the thinker doesn't have the opportunity to engage in propagating *maya* (stories that cause suffering). If some leeway is given to thinker initially, and it's said that we're both the thinker and pure consciousness, then this gives an excuse to the thinker to continue to propagate stories which cause psychological suffering. So there's a real practical point to saying "there's no thinker," and it's based on mitigating psychological suffering.

Maya, illusion, represents the view that only the pot exists. The illusion isn't that the pot appears to exist; it's the view that *only* the pot exists. We fall for this illusion when we have the view that only the thinker exists. The solution to this is *to know*, via insight, that the clay, exists more fundamentally than the pot. This is direct experiential knowledge that the self exists more fundamentally as pure consciousness than as the thinker. That way, even when the self as the thinker arises and causes psychological suffering, it can be directly known that the thinker is only a ghost. This insight can immediately break the chain of psychological suffering which stems identifying as the thinker.

The only problem with this is that if one believes one is pure consciousness only one would not be able to function in the world. If one were only operating from the standpoint of pure consciousness, one would just sit around as lumps. To operate in the world one must operate from the standpoint of a self (thinking thing) and not only pure consciousness. So for people who have had insight into pure consciousness (claimed at

least) like Vedantic and Buddhist philosophers/sages, these people have recognized that fundamentally they are not thinking things. And that in fact the thinking thing that seemingly exists does not actually exist (that is, their personal identity as e.g. Shankara doesn't actually exist). However, given the way things are, one must operate in the world from the standpoint of personal identity. So there's still maintenance of likes, preferences, relationships, etc., because we must operate from the standpoint of how things appear (the standpoint that there is a concrete self). This also allows for living life normally but from a standpoint that is more mentally healthy. This is why a teaching might say that the self exists as both pure consciousness and as a thinking thing. This methodology attempts to prevent the problem of one not being able to function in the world.

In my view, it's best to incorporate both methods. It's useful for a teaching, at the beginning, to insist that we're only pure consciousness until the insight happens. After the insight happens and sufficiently stabilizes, it's useful to say that we're both pure consciousness and a thinking thing.

3.4. Ramana Maharshi

Ramana Maharshi was an Indian philosopher/sage of the 20th century. Like the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Shankara, Maharshi claims that the self is pure awareness. What makes Maharshi unique, is that he strips down the metaphysics even more than Shankara and is more clear and concise than Shankara. Moreover, his method is different from Shankara in that he doesn't primarily use *neti neti* (negation) to know the Self. This is because Maharshi claims that negation is an intellectual exercise that is

performed by the mind (thinking, *dianoia*).³⁸ Thus, even if through thinking we come to see that “I” is not the body-mind self and claim that we’re Brahman, the Self, Being, awareness, or pure consciousness, this is purely intellectual. For example, if someone thinks “I am the Self,” this isn’t any different from thinking “I am the body-mind” (Om 79-80) It’s simply replacing one thought with another while the operating system is based on the body-mind (Om 79-80). To have the operating system based on Being one must have *insight (buddhi, jnana, nous)* into Being. Thus, Maharshi proposes the method of self-inquiry through the meditative questions “who am I?” or “whence am I?” or “to whom do the thoughts arise?” to have direct insight into Being (Om 132, 143).³⁹

Maharshi is best known for his text “Who Am I?”. This text lays out Maharshi’s views in concise form. Thus, we’ll examine this primary source along with the secondary source “The Path of Sri Ramana” written by Maharshi’s primary student, Sri Sadhu Om. In “The Path of Sri Ramana” Maharshi’s metaphysical views are laid out in more detail. This includes his metaphysical views on the nature of awareness during dreamless sleep. I include the section on the nature of dreamless sleep because I believe Maharshi’s metaphysical views, while perhaps right, are speculative and aren’t based on insight. This is important because it shows the Advaita Vedanta system isn’t perfectly metaphysically coherent. But I’ll later argue that this largely doesn’t matter since the point of this teaching is to end/highly mitigate psychological suffering which is based on the false or

³⁸ Of course, Maharshi doesn’t use the word *dianoia* since it’s Ancient Greek. But it’s useful to use the word here so the parallels are clear to the Ancient Greek section.

³⁹ This method of self-inquiry is similar to Zen Koans which ask paradoxical questions such as “What is your original face?” to prompt insight into the not-self.

less accurate belief, I am solely the body-mind. To start, we'll look at key passages from "Who Am I?"⁴⁰:

"Every living being longs always to be happy, untainted by sorrow... in order to realize that inherent and untainted happiness... it is essential that he should know himself. For obtaining such knowledge the inquiry 'Who am I?' in quest of the Self is the best means.

Who am I?' I am not this physical body, nor am I the five organs of sense perception; I am not the five organs of external activity, nor am I the five vital forces, nor am I even the thinking mind. Neither am I that unconscious state of nescience which retains merely the subtle *vasanas* (latencies of the mind)... Therefore, summarily rejecting all the above-mentioned physical adjuncts and their functions, saying 'I am not this; no, nor am I this, nor this' — that which then remains separate and alone by itself, that pure Awareness is what I am. This Awareness is by its very nature Sat-Chit-Ananda (Existence-Consciousness-

⁴⁰ There are many translations of "Who Am I?". For example, there's a translation of "Who Am I?" in the appendix of Sri Saddhu Om's Book "The Path of Sri Ramana". There's also a more common question and answer translation by T.M.P Mahadevan. But the translation I'm using is from the website of a contemporary Advaita practitioner, Tom Das. I think this translation is best for two reasons. First, it uses language that better fits contemporary understanding (ex. "awareness" instead of "the Self"). Second, it's more metaphysically parsimonious and precise in certain sections. For example, one key passage in this translation states "[i]f the mind, which is the instrument of knowledge and is the basis of all activity, subsides, the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases." In other translations, such as Sadhu Om's translation, it states "[i]f the mind, which is the cause (and base) of all knowledge (all objective knowledge) and all action, subsides, the world (jagat-drishti) will cease." This and other translations make it seem like Maharshi is saying the world isn't real, that the world is *maya* (illusion). This is a common misunderstanding of Advaita. Advaita claims that the perception of the world as an objective reality is illusory and the world perceptually is actually subjective (all objects are manifestations of consciousness). Thus, when the word "perception" is used this is a more metaphysically parsimonious claim since perception can be different from reality. Even if a perceptual shift can occur this doesn't mean its metaphysically absolute reality. This is based on the standard appearance-reality distinction. Thus, the translation on the Tom Das website is able to account for the appearance-reality distinction by being precise with the language used.

Bliss). If the mind, which is the instrument of knowledge and is the basis of all activity, subsides, the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases. Unless the illusory perception of the serpent as the rope ceases, the rope on which the illusion is formed is not perceived as such. Similarly, unless the illusory nature of the perception of the world as a[n] objective reality ceases, the Vision of the true nature of the Self, on which the illusion is formed, is not obtained... That which arises in the physical body as 'I' is the mind... The first and foremost of all thoughts that arise in the mind is the primal 'I'-thought. It is only after the rise or origin of the 'I'-thought that innumerable other thoughts arise... Since every other thought can occur only after the rise of the 'I'-thought and since the mind is nothing but a bundle of thoughts, it is only through the inquiry 'Who am I?' that the mind subsides. Moreover, the integral 'I'-thought, implicit in such enquiry, having destroyed all other thoughts, gets itself destroyed or consumed, just as the stick used for stirring the burning funeral pyre gets consumed. Even when extraneous thoughts sprout up during such enquiry, do not seek to complete the rising thought, but instead, deeply enquire within, 'To whom has this thought occurred?' No matter how many thoughts thus occur to you, if you would with acute vigilance enquire immediately as and when each individual thought arises to whom it has occurred, you would find it is to 'me'... As and when thoughts occur, they should one and all be annihilated then and there, at the very place of their origin, by the method of enquiry in quest of the Self... All scriptures [philosophical texts] without any exception proclaim that for attaining Salvation [peace] the mind should be subdued; and once one knows that control

of the mind is their final aim it is futile to make an interminable study of them. What is required for such control is actual enquiry into oneself by self-interrogation: ‘Who am I?’ How can this enquiry in quest of the Self be made merely by means of a study of the scriptures [philosophical texts]?... To keep the mind constantly turned within, and to abide thus in the Self is alone *Atma-vichara* (Self enquiry)... Indeed, at some time, one will have to forget everything that has been learnt.” (Maharshi)

Maharshi starts by claiming that everyone wants to be happy and that to be happy we must know the nature of the self. He claims that the inquiry “Who Am I?” is the best way to know the nature of the self. Like Shankara, he starts with negation, analytically arguing that he’s not the body, thinking mind (the aspects of mind that are easier to be aware of), or *vasanas*. *Vasanas* are habitual tendencies of mind which compel us towards certain mental patterns and actions but operate at such a subtle level that it’s difficult to see them. An example of a *vasana* would be the tendency of a person to incessantly cut others off when they speak but the person with this tendency not being aware that they do this. After negating the body-mind, Maharshi states that our true nature is pure awareness. He claims that our true nature is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss).⁴¹ Maharshi then explains how the self (false self) rises and how the Self (true self) can be recognized. This part begins Maharshi’s more original contributions. Our usual state of identification with the mind (I-thought) makes us perceive the world as an

⁴¹ There are different ways to translate *Sat Chit Ananda*. The version I prefer is “Being-Knowing-Peace” or “Being knowing itself as peace.” The translation of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss essentially states the same thing, which says that our true nature is existence, consciousness, bliss. Whatever the translation, these three elements refer to the same thing. They’re three aspects of one.

objective reality. This makes basic subject-object divide where we have the sense that “I am here” and “the world is there.” In other words, I’m separate from the world.

Everything within my visual field is separate from me (and “me” is viewed as the body-mind). Maharshi claims that this appearance of an objective reality is an illusion. To see past this illusion, the mind (I-thought and all others’ thoughts) must subside. If this happens the illusory perception of the world as an objective reality ceases and it (seemingly) switches to a subjective reality where the Self encompasses everything.

To further explain this, Maharshi gives the classic Indian philosophy analogy of the “rope and snake”. This analogy is about a person looking at a rope and mistakenly believing it’s a snake. This mistake is based on ignorance since the person doesn’t know that what seems to be a snake is actually a rope. The person could go their entire life believing the rope is a snake and would likely suffer because of this. But if they inquired into the nature of the seeming snake, they’d see it’s a rope. Upon inquiring, at some point there would an immediate ‘click’ where they’d see the seeming snake is a rope. Thus, their perception would (seemingly) change from seeing a snake to seeing a rope. The “seeming” part is important because of course they were always seeing a rope but were seemingly perceiving a snake based on a mistake, ignorance. Maharshi claims that we make a similar error with our most basic perception of the world as an objective reality. He goes on to explain how this error occurs.

The mind (I-thought) arises in the body and gives the sense “I am the body-mind.” The “I-thought” is the most basic thought and gives the sense of there being a thinker behind the thoughts (which also believes I am the body-mind). Since the I-thought arises in the body, since the body has a particularized spatial location, and since

we're identified with the I-thought, this leads to mistaken perceptions of the world as an objective reality (I am here and the world is there). To correct this mistake, the mind (which is a bundle of thoughts) must subside. To make the mind subside, one must engage in the inquiry "Who Am I?" As inquiry deepens, thoughts lessen. Eventually, the core thought, the I-thought is found, and it is destroyed.⁴² During inquiry, Maharshi advises to not complete the rising thought. In other words, Maharshi advises to not let attention be carried away by thought. Instead, he advises to deeply inquire "to who has this thought occurred?" When we *deeply* inquire "to who has this thought occurred" we'll see that it's occurring to pure awareness (me). But to see this and to constantly rest as the Self, thoughts must be eliminated. Maharshi then claims all (classical Indian) philosophical texts on the nature of the self say the goal of inquiry is control of the mind through knowledge of the Self. Thus, if control of the mind through knowledge of the Self is reached, studying the philosophical texts is pointless. Essentially, Maharshi is pointing to the difference between *dianoia* (thought) and *nous* (insight). When there's been insight into the Self and the mind has become subdued through continued insight into the Self, there's no point in thinking about what the scriptures say. In other words, there's no point intellectualizing about insight when insight's known. True inquiry isn't intellectual inquiry but is inquiry through direct recognition.

The inquiry "Who Am I?" isn't about verbally repeating "Who Am I?" waiting for an insight to happen (Om 132-133). The inquiry "Who Am I?" is about Self-attention.

⁴² Personally, I believe Maharshi means *belief* in the I-thought is destroyed not that it's actually destroyed and never rises again. This is because if the I-thought within Maharshi was completely destroyed then he wouldn't even respond to his name (Ramana). But when people said his name, Ramana, he still responded to it. Thus, I believe Maharshi meant that *belief* in the I-thought as our self is destroyed if we see that the self is pure awareness.

It's about recognizing "I attention" where attention isn't focused on any object, including thoughts (Om 133-134). This "I" attention is the recognition "I am that I am" (Om 133).⁴³ "I" attention (pure consciousness) is the true first person (Om 133-134). Typically, we take 'the thinker' to be first person consciousness (Om 134). But this is an illusion since when we look for thinker we find it doesn't exist and pure consciousness is what exists (Om 134). To further elaborate, "Who Am I?" isn't a directed attention but is Being which is "the nature of not doing" (Om 129). Thus, in the method "Who Am I?" one "drowns effortlessly in his own real being" (Om 137).

In the inquiry, "Whence Am I?" one is inquiring "from where does the thinker rise?" (Om 137). It's important to note that finding a place in the body as the rising point of the thinker is *not* the objective of this phenomenological pointer (135). In fact, when one engages in this inquiry, it's found that the body exists within the Self (awareness), not the other way around (Om 135). Upon the inquiry, it's found that the thinker "rises from Self [awareness] which has no rising or setting." By following the thinker to see its rising point, it's found that the thinker has no existence and one "remains rooted in Self

⁴³ This is a reference to God within the Christian and Jewish tradition. In the Old testament, Moses goes up to a mountain to meet God. He sees God as a burning bush and asks God who he is. God says "I am that I am." Importantly, "I am that I am" isn't a thought and must be directly recognized (Om 132). It's a linguistic pointer that attempts to be as metaphysically thin as possible, which is why it comes off as mysterious. "I am that I am" attempts to communicate that Being Is which is pure subject with no object. Contemporary Advaita practitioner such as Maharshi and Poe, claim that God is telling Moses two things. First, God is saying that he is "I am that I am" (Poe 65). Second, God's trying to tell Moses who Moses is, which is also "I am that I am" (Poe 65). Both are the same statement and are different ways of looking at it. In one framework, which is the standard Judeo-Christian framework, God is setup as an external entity who can say "I am that I am." When someone prays to God, in a Bhakti (devotion) style, they begin loving God and then eventually recognize that they are God (Being). This framework is recognized in Christian works such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In this work, it's stated "thought cannot comprehend God. And so, I prefer to abandon all I can know, choosing rather to love Him who I cannot know. Though we cannot know Him, we can love Him. By love He may be touched and embraced but never by thought" (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 54 as cited in Ravindra 145 *Bhagavad Gita*). Through the unknowing of love one experiences "the naked being of God" (Loy 48,51) In a nondual Advaita framework, one inquires "Who Am I?" and through this inquiry they recognize "I am that I am" which is Being. This insight then leads to being more loving. Moreover, with God (Being) appearing as a burning bush this is similar to the "fire" of Self within the Bhagavad Gita. The "fire" of Self refers to the knowing quality of pure consciousness.

[pure consciousness]" (Om 135). The inquiry "Whence Am I?" is geared towards those who can't doubt "I am the thinker." This inquiry says "You can't doubt I am the thinker behind the thoughts? No problem. Let's inquire through *attention* and 'see' whether the thinker exists." Thus, this inquiry tacitly acknowledges the existence of the thinker to persuade one to actually 'look' for the thinker. Upon looking, one will find that the thinker doesn't exist and consequently recognize the Self. The important thing to note is that the inquiries "Who Am I" and "Whence Am I" are based on *attention, awareness, nous*, not thinking, not *dianoia*.

Maharshi says towards the end of his text to "abide thus in the Self" and to "forget everything that has been learnt." In other words, the call is to "abide thus in Being/pure consciousness" and to forget the teachings. This is the same call made at the end of Bhagavad Gita, where Being calls on Arjuna to "abandon all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone" (18.63-18.66).

Maharshi's contribution is adding a method of inquiry which increases the probability of insight and is less intellectual. His method is to direct attention towards the Self rather than negate all the aspects of non-self. Maharshi and his students used to use the following example to describe the difference between his positive method and traditional negation methods. Maharshi's positive method says to "Go West" (to the Self) (Om 127). Negation (*neti, neti*) methods say "Abandon the East" (abandon the non-self) (Om 127). Obviously, the more practical method in this analogy is to tell someone to go West if that's where their trying to go. Thus, when attention rests in the Self, it's not focused on the non-self and the suffering attached to the non-self. Maharshi's point is also relevant to academics who study the nature of the self. Intellectually arguing that we

are not-self or that we are the Self is completely different from having insight into this. Even if an intellectual perfectly negates the non-self through logic but hasn't recognized the Self and consequently is living from the standpoint of the non-self, in practical terms there's no point to their intellectual conclusions. Their conclusions remain dead theory if there's no insight. That being said, intellectual reasoning does bear an important role. As Maharshi's teachings state, "it is necessary first of all to have an intellectual conviction that these [five sheaths of physical body, vital forces, mental, intuition, peace] that these are not 'I' in order to practice Self-attention without losing our bearings" (Om 128). This intellectual conviction then encourages us to practice by fixing our attention on "I-consciousness" (the Self) which is "a witness to and aloof from these sheaths" (Om 128-129). While Maharshi's teaching is innovative and useful, a problem is that it requires the highest level of attention for the teaching to be beneficial. If someone hasn't recognized "I-consciousness" (pure awareness) then it's impossible for them to fix attention on "I-consciousness."

3.4.1. Maharshi's Metaphysical Views

Maharshi makes interesting metaphysical claims on the nature of the waking state, dreaming sleep state, and dreamless sleep state. His argument is that the Self (awareness) remains throughout all these state, but that what occurs *in* these states, the experiences, of having a physical body, having a dream body, and formless darkness, all come and go. Thus, the Self (awareness) is what's most real. And the experiences that occur in all these states are less real. The following logical inference underlies this point: "that which

seems to exist at one time and not at another time is actually non-existent even while it seems to exist.” (Om 64).

During the waking state, our everyday life of being in the world, it seems like we're a body. If we hold out a hand and someone asks, “what is that,” we reply, “my hand” (Om 58). Suppose this is applied to all other parts of the body (Om 58). In each case, we'll say “this is my foot, stomach, chest, etc. But in saying this, it becomes clear that we view ourselves as the possessor of the body, not the body (Om 58). Some people, however, may view themselves as the sum of the body and view that as “I” (Om 60). Maharshi's next step is to show we're not the physical body. He claims that during sleep the physical body metaphysically doesn't exist (Om 61-62). Maharshi's claim for this is that “I exist” while asleep but not as a body (Om 62). From a third-person point of view, we see the body of someone sleeping. But from the first-person point of view of the sleeping person, they don't have a body. Thus, Maharshi concludes that “I” isn't fundamentally the physical body since “I” can exist without it. Thus, although the body seems to exist during the waking state, it doesn't fundamentally exist because it doesn't exist during dreams and dreamless sleep.

Maharshi then moves to show how the true Self of awareness exists during dreams and dreamless sleep. During dreams, Maharshi states that the Self (awareness) exists without the physical body (Om 68). Instead, our true nature of awareness takes on a “subtle body” – the “dream body” (Om 68-69). The dream body is “a mental projection,” but through it we do all sorts of activities in dreams. Maharshi makes a similar claim about day-dreaming, pointing out that we may be sitting in a chair but then drift off into a dream realm talking to a friend, travel to another country, go through the

ups and downs of life, etc. (Om 69). Thus, even though during dreams we're fully convinced we're the dream body, we're actually not because the dream body is temporary. What's not temporary though, is awareness of the dream.

Maharshi claims that during dreamless sleep:

We have neither the gross [physical] nor subtle [dream] body. The mind having completely subsided we sink at rest in total darkness...When the mind rises again from this darkness, either dream or waking results. When we wake up from deep sleep, we remember our experience thus, 'I slept happily and did not have any dream'. That is, we know that we existed even in that state of seeming darkness in which there was not even a dream...We who know that we knew that we existed there, is the real I (Om 69).

Maharshi seems to be using inferential reasoning to conclude that "I" as awareness, exists during dreamless sleep. His argument seems to be that, since I knew I slept well, I must have existed during this time since I know I slept well. A similar argument is used by contemporary Advaita practitioners who say that awareness exists during dreamless sleep, because if the 'sleeping' person's name is called (e.g., Tejas) then that person will wake up. Thus, there must have been a seed amount of awareness for the 'sleeping' person to register that their bodies name is being called (Poe).

Thus, Maharshi's claim is that the Self (awareness) remains present throughout the waking state, dreaming state, and dreamless sleep state. Thus, the Self is metaphysically what's most real. In my view, this metaphysical view, while reasonable,

isn't without errors. I'll explain why during the analysis section, but the basic reason centres on Maharshi extracting too much metaphysics from first-person experience. Moreover, I'll argue that Maharshi himself didn't actually care about the metaphysics and was using this metaphysical framework as a tool to encourage people to practice. By practicing, which is comprised of recognizing oneself as awareness and resting as that, psychological suffering is relieved, which I'll later argue is the main point of these teachings. This perspective also concurs with Maharshi's statement that at some point one must "forget everything that has been learnt" (Maharshi). I take this to mean dropping the metaphysical framework that underlies these teachings.

Chapter 4: Buddhist Philosophy

4.1. Buddhism: The Story of the Buddha

In this chapter, I show how, according to Buddhist philosophy, insight plays a central role in understanding the true nature of the self. To do this, I look at the story of the Buddha, the Buddhist view of not-self, Dzogchen Buddhism and the various philosophers/sages in this tradition, and finally Zen Buddhism with a focus on Zen koans. I begin with briefly telling the story of the Buddha, as he is the central figure in Buddhism.

Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince in the 6th century BCE. The story of Siddhartha begins with a prediction after his birth that he'll either be a great emperor if he “stays in the world” or an enlightened being⁴⁴, a Buddha, if he “departs the world” (Amore 192). Siddhartha's father, the King, wanted his son to become a great emperor. Thus, the king decided to isolate Siddhartha from suffering “lest knowledge of life's inevitable suffering lead him to renounce the world and become a monk” (Amore 192). Thus, Siddhartha lives the life of a hyper-privileged prince up until age 30 (Amore 192). However, one day Siddhartha goes on a chariot ride throughout city and happens to see four sights that change his life (Amore 192). The first three sights are “a sick man, a suffering old man, and a dead man” (Amore 192). This “awaken[s] him to life's problems” (Amore 192). Siddhartha realizes that no matter what he does, he and every other human is subject to suffering and death (Amore 192). The fourth sight he sees is a tranquil ascetic whose way of living suggests there's a way to overcome suffering

⁴⁴ Again, I take “enlightened being” to mean someone who doesn't experience psychological suffering. Another world for enlightenment could simply be “healthy.”

(Amore 192). Upon returning home, Siddharatha contemplates what he saw and decides he must leave (Amore 193). That night, he flees the palace and starts his journey to conquer suffering (Amore 193). He trains under various ‘spiritual’ teachers and tries different practices but isn’t satisfied with their results as suffering still occurs (Amore 193). Thus, he decides to meditate under a tree and vows to stay there until he liberates himself from suffering (Amore 193). After the Buddha meditates awhile, Mara, the lord of the senses/the tempter/the lord of death, appears (Amore 193). Mara is like Satan within Christianity and tries to thwart the Buddha’s attempt at enlightenment. (Amore 193). Buddhist scholar Roy Amore describes the story well:

“Mara summons his daughters - whose names suggest greed, boredom, and desire – to tempt him. When that fails, Mara offers him any worldly wish...The bodhisattva refuses. Now Mara becomes violent. He sends in his sons – whose names suggest fear and anger – to assault the bodhisattva. But the bodhisattva’s spiritual power is so great that it surrounds and protects him from attack like a force field. Having failed in his efforts to tempt and threaten the bodhisattva, Mara challenges him to a debate. Mara himself claims to be the one worthy to sit on the Bodhi seat – the place of enlightenment...and he accuses the bodhisattva of being unworthy. With his sons and daughters cheering him on, Mara thinks he has the upper hand. But the bodhisattva has truth on his side...and he calls the Earth herself to stand witness on his behalf. The resulting earthquake drives Mara away” (Amore 194).

This story has nothing to do with otherworldly entities or magic. The brilliance of this story is that it describes cleaning the “mind’s deep impurities, which the bodhisattva must overcome before he can attain liberation” (Amore 194). Mara isn’t a demon with red horns as is often depicted in Buddhist artwork. Mara is the thinker, the false self, with all its various states. These are contracted states of consciousness: greed, boredom, desire, fear, anger, arrogance, etc. Thus, Mara represents our normal (not natural but normal) psychological state. If we’re honest, through self-inquiry we see that negative states regularly take over our consciousness. This happens so quickly that we don’t even notice it happening. Moreover, we’re so habituated to it that we take for granted that it needs to be this way. But the Buddha’s claim is that it doesn’t have to be this way. After Mara leaves, “the bodhisattva enters the state of complete awareness, of total insight into the nature of reality” (Amore 195). Now, Siddhartha is a buddha as he’s had “direct knowledge” (Amore 196). It’s important to note that Siddhartha is *a* buddha even though he’s typically referred to as *the* Buddha. This is because within Buddhism everyone can ‘become’ a Buddha through recognizing and living through their own Buddha-mind. Moreover, Buddhism acknowledges that there have been many buddhas but because of the way history’s unfolded, Siddhartha has become *the* Buddha within popular culture.

Now that Siddhartha is a buddha, he’s realized enlightenment/liberation/nirvana/true health – all terms for the same thing. Since “nirvana” is the term Amore uses, we’ll use that for now. Nirvana has a negative aspect and a positive aspect. “In its negative aspect nirvana has the sense of ‘putting out the fires’ of greed, hatred, and delusion” (Amore 196). In its positive aspect nirvana is the experience of peace (Amore 196). After this recognition, the Buddha wonders whether

the way to true health can be taught (Amore 196). He decides it can and because of compassion for others begins teaching (Amore 196).

Within Buddhism, as in Vedanta, “ignorance is the root of all evil and suffering” (Ravindra 39, Whispers). The main ignorance is that of the no-self/not-self. The Sanskrit term for not-self is *anatman* which means “without Atman” (Amore 201). At the surface, this seems to contrast with Vedantic teachings, which posit Atman – the Self. There’s controversy surrounding what the Buddha meant by not-self. On the one hand, some scholars such as Rahula in his famous book *What the Buddha Taught* say that “according to Buddhist philosophy there is no permanent, unchanging spirit which can be considered Self. This point has to be particularly emphasized, because a wrong notion that consciousness is a sort of Self or Soul that continues as a permanent substance through life, has persisted from the earliest time to the present day” (Rahula 23-24). Thus, a direct contrast is setup between Vedanta and Buddhism’s view of the self. On the other hand, scholars such as Ravindra use Buddhist quotes which speak of the Self to assert that Buddhism and Vedanta have essentially the same views (Ravindra 39, Whispers). For example, the Buddha said “Self is the lord of the self” (Dhammapada 160 as cited in Ravindra 39, Whispers) and advised his students to “take refuge in the Self” (*Samyutta-Nikaya* 111.143 as cited in Ravindra 39, Whispers). This scholarly debate on whether the Buddha said there was a Self or said there was no-self is endless. It won’t be solved here. For the purposes of this thesis, I’ll assume that the Buddha’s teachings of “not-self” were used as practical teachings to diminish our attachment to thinker which leads to suffering. The ‘parable of the arrow’ further clarifies how the Buddha viewed his teachings as practical tools to diminish and possibly end psychological suffering.

The parable also shows in a blistering way how intellectual activity or *dianoia*/thinking can sometimes be misguided. This is especially useful for intellectuals who, by their disposition, want to engage in endless metaphysical speculation, even when there might be more pressing priorities at play. The original version of the parable comes from the *Cūḷamālukya Sutta*. But we'll use the philosopher and meditation practitioner Sam Harris' paraphrased version. This version is useful because it includes Harris' own analysis and Harris' own analysis is useful because he comes from both an intellectual and practitioner background.

A man is struck in the chest with a poison arrow. A surgeon rushes to his side to begin the work of saving his life, but the man resists these ministrations. He first wants to know the name of fletcher who fashioned the arrow's shaft, the genus of the wood from which it was cut, the disposition of the man who shot it, the name of the horse upon which he rode, and a thousand other things that have no bearing upon his present suffering or his ultimate survival. The man needs to get his priorities straight. His commitment to *thinking about* the world results from a basic misunderstanding of his predicament. And though we may be only dimly aware of it, we, too have a problem that will not be solved by acquiring more conceptual knowledge (Harris 83).

The point made in the 'parable of the arrow' is that mere intellectualizing can get in the way of diminishing and possibly ending psychological suffering. The parable also shows how engaging in intellectual activity can sometimes be unwise. The contemporary

Buddhist monk, Thanissaro Bhikku of the Thai Forest tradition, makes a similar point and also grounds his arguments within the ancient Buddhist texts. As Thanissaro states, “[w]hen Vachagotta the wanderer asked him point-blank whether or not there is a self, the Buddha remained silent, which means that the question has no helpful answer” (*Samyutta Nikaya* 44.10 as cited in Bhikku). Moreover, in another text the Buddha advised his students to not get involved with metaphysical questions such as “What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?” since they lead to answers such as “I have a self” and “I have no self” (Bhikku). All these positions are a “thicket of views, a writing of views, a contortion of views” that get in the way of ceasing psychological suffering (*Majjhima Nikaya* 2 as cited in Bhikku). Furthermore, the Buddha advised his students not to get involved in metaphysical debates (*Sutta Nipata* 4.8 as cited in Bhikku) as were common in ancient India. As Bhikku states:

“There is no self is the granddaddy of fake Buddhist quotes. It has survived so long because of its superficial resemblance to the teaching on anatta, or not-self, which was one of the Buddha’s tools for putting an end to clinging. Even though he never affirmed nor denied the existence of a self, he did talk of the process by which the mind creates many senses of self – what he called ‘I making’ and ‘my-making’ as it pursues its desires” (Bhikku)

This is essentially the position I take towards “not-self.” “Not-self” is a tool to break the cycle of suffering. The “not-self” tool, like the other tools the Buddhas used, are best taken as practical devices to end psychological suffering, not absolute metaphysical

claims. The ‘parable of the raft’ comes from the *Majjhima Nikaya*. In my view, it represents how the Buddha’s teachings, *dharma*, should be used as practical tools to end psychological suffering. And that once these tools have served the purpose of ending psychological suffering, we can throw the teachings away and not cling to them as absolute metaphysical truth. Even if the teachings offer a more plausible metaphysical picture than other views, clinging to them as absolute metaphysical truth is pointless and subtly perpetuates psychological suffering. The ‘parable of the raft’ goes as follows:

Imagine, friends, a man in the course of a journey who arrives at a great expanse of water, whose near bank is dangerous and whose far bank offers safety. But there is no ferryboat or bridge to take him across the water. So he thinks: ‘What if I collected grass, twigs, branches and leaves and bound them together as a raft? Supported by the raft and by paddling with my hands and feet, I should then be able to reach the far bank.’

“He does this and succeeds in getting across.

“On arriving at the far bank, it might occur to him: ‘This raft has been very helpful indeed. What if I were to hoist it on my head or shoulders, then proceed on my journey?’ Now, what do you think? By carrying it with him, would that man be doing what should be done with a raft?’

“‘No, sir,’ replied his audience.

“‘So what should he do with the raft? Having arrived at the far bank, he might think: ‘Yes, this raft has been very useful, but now I should just haul it onto dry

land or leave it floating in the water, and then continue on my journey.’ In this way the man would be doing what should be done with that raft.

“The dharma too is like a raft. It serves the purpose of crossing over, not the purpose of grasping. (*Majjhima Nikaya 22* as cited in Batchelor)

So again, the Buddha’s teachings are best taken as tools to end psychological suffering, and this is demonstrated through the ‘parable of the raft.’ Rather interestingly, we can note that the Buddha’s call to let go of the raft, the *dharma* (teachings), after its served its purpose is similar to what Being says at the end of the *Bhagavad Gita*. To recall, Being says “Abandon all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone (*Bhagavad Gita* 18.63-18.66). This is almost the exact same as Buddha’s ‘parable of the raft.’

Now, to get back the Buddha’s use of the particular “not-self” tool and how it operates. I believe one of the purposes of this tool is to prevent reification of a Self. As Ramana Maharshi pointed out, thinking “I am the Self” is simply replacing one thought with another (Om 79-80). It’s simply replacing the thought “I am the body-mind” with the new thought “I am the Self” (Om 79-80). If there’s no insight into Self then the view “I am the Self” is useless. “The Self” can easily be reified. Since “the Self” is something that is positively asserted, something that is, it’s easier to think about. Thus, it’s easier for someone to believe they know what “the Self” is by thinking about it. Buddhism, in a reaction to seeing this, tries to prevent reification by saying there is “not-self”. “Not-self” is less glamorous, scary, fewer people want it, and, since it’s put in negative terms, it’s harder to think about. Thus, the term serves as a barrier to reification. My position is also that the term “not-self” points to the no-thingness of awareness. As we saw in Amore’s descriptions, the term “awareness” is used. For example, Amore states, [after Mara

leaves] the bodhisattva enters the state of complete awareness, of total insight into the nature of reality” (Amore 195). Moreover, as we’ll see in Dzogchen Buddhist texts, the term “awareness” is also used. This is because “awareness or the Self” is the same as “not-self.” The recognition is the same, but the terms used to describe the recognition are different.

There are many important concepts within Buddhism. For brevity’s sake, I’ll only focus on not-self. After briefly describing the not-self concept, I’ll focus on Dzogchen and Zen koans to explain how insight is grounded within Buddhism.

4.1.1. The Not-Self

The Not-Self can also be referred to as no-self or non-self (Amore 200, Bhikku, Siderits). I favour the translation of not-self or non-self since they indicate a more metaphysically neutral stance towards whether there’s a Self or not. However, depending on the writing, no-self may be used and this is the typical translation. I’ll use these terms interchangeably depending on the author, with the acknowledgement that there are different connotations to each term. The Buddhist perspective is that ‘I’ doesn’t refer to anything (Siderits). Our sense of ‘I’ comes “from our employment of the useful fiction represent by the concept of the person (Siderits). The Buddha uses various arguments for not-self. The most well-known is the argument from impermanence, which is the following:

- P1. If there were a self it would be permanent
- P2. None of the five kinds of psychophysical element is permanent
- C. There is no self (Siderits)

The absence of a premise stating that the five kinds of psychological elements are the only things that constitute a self is important (Siderits). This is because some use this as evidence to assert that the Buddha didn't "deny the existence of a self *tout court*" (Siderits). To further understand this argument, we'll now go over the five psychological elements which are also known as the five aggregates or five *skandas*.

The five *skandas* are similar to the five *koshas* (five sheaths) within Vedanta. But they are a bit different in their framing. The first *skanda* or aggregate is the physical body. This composes the "eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind" (Lions Roar Staff). Before proceeding further, it's important to explain the Buddhist view of "mind" (*manas*). Like Vedanta, Buddhism doesn't make a distinction between the body and mind. Moreover, like Vedanta, "mind is not spirit opposed to matter" (Rahula 21). It's important to not superficially impose a sense of Cartesian Dualism onto Buddhism. Within Buddhism, "mind is only a faculty or organ (*indriya*) like the eye or ear" (Rahula 21). Thus, mind is the sense which "senses the world of ideas and thoughts and mental objects" (Rahula 21). Our five physical senses can't sense the world of thought, but the sense of mind can. Mind isn't viewed as separate from the body, which is why in Buddhism, like Vedanta, the term 'body-mind' is often used. As Rahula states, "ideas and thoughts are not independent of the world experienced by these five physical sense faculties" (Rahula 21-22). Physical experiences produce thoughts and ideas in the mind (Rahula 22). Thus, the sixth sense of mind and five physical senses are intimately tied together. Within Western philosophy, this is called concept empiricism. As Aristotle and/or Thomas Aquinas said, "*nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu*" (as cited in Blackburn 319). This means, "nothing in the intellect unless first in sense" (Blackburn

319). The Buddhist view of the mind as a sixth sense has many practical implications. For example, “a person born blind cannot have ideas of colour, except through the analogy of sounds or some other things experienced through his other faculties” (Rahula 22).

The second aggregate is sensation. We experience sensations in the body. Some sensations are pleasurable, and others are painful (Lions Roar Staff). The third aggregate is perception. All our sense organs have objects (Lions Roar Staff). For example, the eye is connected with light, and nose is connected with smell (Lions Roar Staff). When this connection is made, there is perception (Lions Roar Staff). Perception can be physical (e.g., the nose and smell), or it can be mental (mind-thought) (Rahula 22). Thus, it’s important to note there can be *perception* of mental objects. This moves nicely into the fourth aggregate: mental formations. All concepts and thoughts “from the most mundane to the most grandiose” are formed in the mind (Lions Roar Staff). The *forming* of thought is different from the *perceiving* of thought. This is because a thought can be formed without perceiving it as a thought. Hence, the category of mental *formations*. The fifth and last aggregate is consciousness. This is awareness of aggregates 1-4 (Lions Roar Staff). The awareness spoken about here is awareness of an object (aggregates 1-4). Thus, the word “awareness” used here is *not* the same as the word “awareness” or “pure awareness” or “awareness of awareness” in Vedanta. The word “awareness” in Vedanta refers only to Subject or Being, while the word “awareness” in this particular Buddhist context refers to subject-object relation. It’s important to note that same word can be used but have different meanings depending on the context. This will get even more confusing when in Dzogchen Buddhism the word “awareness” has the same meaning as in Vedanta.

For further clarity's sake, a note on the aggregate of consciousness. The word "consciousness" here doesn't refer to "consciousness" or "pure consciousness" referred to in Vedanta. The word "consciousnesses" in Vedanta refers to Subject or Being. In this particular Buddhist sense, consciousness refers to a particular type of consciousness, such as visual consciousness. As Rahula states, "[w]hen the eye comes in contact with a colour, for instance blue, visual consciousness arises which simply is awareness of the presence of a colour; but it does not recognize that it is blue. There is no recognition at this stage. It is perception...that recognizes it is blue" (Rahula 23). Thus, seeing is different from recognizing (Rahula 23). The different forms of consciousness see but don't recognize. Again, it's important to note that the fifth aggregate of consciousness is not the same as "consciousness" within Vedanta. The word 'consciousnesses' in Vedanta refers to the Self while the word 'consciousness' in Buddhism is part of the not-self.

The five aggregates are all fleeting (Lions Roar Staff). All five aggregates "are subject to change and decay" (Lions Roar Staff). Thus, none of the five aggregates compose a self. They compose the not-self. It's important to note that this must be recognized through practice; it can't merely be understood at the intellectual level.

Within Buddhism, to truly see through the not-self there must be insight. Although there are sophisticated thought-based arguments for not-self within Buddhism, these arguments are more of a preparatory step for insight, which is a deeper understanding through direct experience. For example, as the 5th century BCE Buddhist philosopher Buddhaghosa writes in *The Path of Purification*, "correct seeing of mentality-materiality" is only possible after one has engaged in the "purification of consciousness" (meditative training) (Buddhaghosa 609). In other words, insight is

possible only after one has engaged in meditative training. Buddhaghosa says this after explaining thought-based arguments for the not-self in prior sections of the book. Thus, Buddhaghosa seems to be saying that there are different levels of understanding the not-self. There is understanding at the level of thinking which is a kind of pure intellectual level where there is no direct experience. Next, there is understanding at the meditative level which starts to shift the understanding to direct experience as one experiences the direct benefits of not-self for themselves as their consciousness is purified. Finally, there is understanding at the insight level where there is the direct experience of seeing through the not-self. These levels of understanding have different depths, and the insight level is the deepest. In terms of the larger methodological point, the main takeaway is that insight plays a central role in Buddhist philosophy.

4.2. Dzogchen

In this section, we'll cover Dzogchen Buddhism. But before we get to that, I'll give a brief explanation on the different kinds of Buddhism. There are three main branches of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajryana. Theravada Buddhism is the oldest branch and formed around the 4th-6th century BCE (Amore 205-206). Theravada Buddhism, "The Way of the Elders" is the most conservative branch and only accepts orthodox texts as legitimate (Amore 210-211). It believes that only a small group of special people can become "enlightened" (mentally healthy) and that ordinary people can't (Amore 206). Mahayana Buddhism, "The Greater Vehicle" formed around the 1st century CE and took a more liberal position than Theravada. Mahayana includes various non-orthodox texts and holds that ordinary people can become "enlightened" (mentally

healthy). Moreover, Mahayana “populated the heavens with bodhisattvas dedicated to helping all those who prayed to them for assistance” (Amore 218). This ran in contrast to Theravada beliefs of there being “no supernatural force on which humans could call...[and that] enlightenment and liberation was through personal effort” (Amore 218). Thus, Mahayana brought back idol worship and personal gods.⁴⁵ Varjyana Buddhism, which means both “diamond” and “thunderbolt” is the third branch (Amore 232). Diamond suggests something that can’t be broken, and thunderbolt suggests powerful insight which is “capable of shattering spiritual obstacles such as ignorance, greed, or hatred” (Amore 233-234). Vajrayana considers itself to be the culmination of Theravada and Mahayana (Amore 234). Tibetan Buddhism is the main sub-branch of Vajrayana (Amore 234). Within Tibetan Buddhism, Dzogchen teachings are typically considered the highest practice and philosophy. I take the standpoint that Dzogchen is the highest Buddhism and is the culmination of other types of Buddhism. I acknowledge that other vehicles of Buddhism work, insofar as mitigating or even stopping psychological suffering. I also acknowledge that some of these other vehicles and practices are even as

⁴⁵ This included physical statues and pictures of the Buddha. In Theravada Buddhism, it was assumed that “no physical form could or should depict him [the Buddha] (Amore 243). But 500 years later Mahayana Buddhism gradually disagreed and brought physical idols back (Amore 243). These include the images of the Buddha we’re familiar with today, such as the Buddha sitting in a meditation posture (Amore 243). It’s interesting how despite thousands of years of efforts to stamp out idol worship it always comes back. We see this in almost every religion in the world with cultures that didn’t have contact with each other. For example, certain Christians (e.g., Catholics) praying to saints and praying to crosses of Jesus. Muslims turning towards the Kaaba (black stone) to pray and making pilgrimages to walk around the Kaaba. Certain Hindus praying to idols such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Ganesh. Perhaps this speaks to how the path of *bhakti* or devotion is psychologically ingrained within certain people. Worshiping concepts through idols seems to be the preferred method for many worldwide. If this is the case, perhaps it calls for tolerance on the part of atheists and intellectuals who are (somewhat) tolerant of speaking about Being, Existence, pure consciousness, or awareness, but aren’t tolerant of “god-talk” since they view it as stupid. If worshiping concepts is something that many people are ‘wired-for’, works for them in terms of reducing psychological suffering, and has proved historically impossible to stamp out, perhaps it should be tolerated by everyone on all levels, even the intellectual level.

good as Dzogchen. The reason I choose to focus on Dzogchen is because of the clarity of expression and directness that is found in Dzogchen teachings.

Dzogchen is the highest Buddhism within Tibetan Buddhism. It's often called *Atiyoga*, which means "the Primordial Yoga" (Reynolds 4 as cited in Padmasmbhava). The direct translation of Dzogchen means "the Great Perfection" and refers to the essential nature of mind – one's "inherent Buddha-nature" (Reynolds 4 as cited in Padmasmbhava). It's important to note that when Buddhists use the term "mind" they usually aren't using it in the same way that Vedantists use it. When Buddhists use the words, "mind", "essential mind", or "nature of mind", they're referring to what Vedantists call the Self. Buddhists usually use the term "thought" and "mind" to refer to what Vedantists call "mind" and "Self" respectively. Understanding this terminological shift is important so there isn't confusion. The "nature of mind...transcends the specific contents of mind, that is, the incessant stream of thoughts continuous arising in the mind which reflect our psychological, cultural, and social conditioning" (Reynolds 4 as cited in Padmasmbhava). Thus, the nature of mind is empty and pure since it's free of this conditioning. Despite being empty, the nature of mind holds the capacity "to be aware" and this is called "*rigpa*" (Reynolds 5 as cited in Padmasmbhava). Thus, the essential nature of mind is free, pure, empty, and aware. This is different to our usual experience of mind, which has thoughts, objects of awareness, constantly rushing through. Not recognizing the essential nature of mind is called "ma rigpa, the absence of awareness and this ignorance is the source of attachment and of all the suffering experienced in Samsara" (Reynolds 5 as cited in Padmasmbhava). In other words, being identified with the *contents* of mind (thought, the thinker) is misidentification. This is ignorance because

it's not who we really are. This causes Samsara, the cycle of suffering where we endlessly bounce around thought-loops which cause suffering. In contrast, recognizing the *essence* of mind, which is awareness, frees us from suffering because it's recognized there's no self to suffer. Recognizing and having knowledge of the nature of mind "isn't mere intellectual knowledge that a scholar might acquire through pursuing his research in books; rather it indicates the state of intrinsic awareness" (Reynolds 5 as cited in Padmasmbhava). In other words, there must be *insight* into the nature of mind; it can't be intellectually known. Furthermore, Dzogchen makes clear that there *isn't* anything like "Knowing the One Mind, the Cosmic All Consciousness" (Reynolds 5 as cited in Padmasmbhava). This contrasts with the Vedantic perspective, which states that there's one consciousness (the Self) or to use Buddhists' words "One Mind". Dzogchen takes the view that there are many awarenesses and not one overarching awareness.

4.2.1. Garab Dorje

Garab Dorje founded Dzogchen in the 7th century CE. He's best known for three statements that "succinctly sum up the essential points of Dzogchen" (Reynolds 42 as cited in Padmasmbhava). The three statements are:

- 1) Direct introduction to one's own nature
- 2) Directly discovering this unique state
- 3) Directly continuing with confidence in liberation (Garab Dorje as cited in Reynolds 42)

As John Reynolds, who is both a scholar and practitioner of Dzogchen states, “these three statements epitomize all the myriads of volumes of Dzogchen” (Reynolds 42 as cited in Padmasmbhava). These statements mean the following. First, that one must be introduced to not-self/emptiness/awareness either spontaneously or through a teacher. Usually, this occurs through a teacher and happens through what’s called “pointing out instructions” which point, sometimes literally, to the not-self. This leads to stage two, which is where there’s a recognition or insight of not-self/emptiness/awareness. This counts as one directly discovering the unique state of *rigpa* (awareness), *sunyata* (emptiness), *anatman* (not-self), all different words for the same recognition. This isn’t an intellectual discovery based on *dianoia*. It’s based on *noesis*, insight. This leads to the last step which is “directly continuing with confidence in liberation.” Another way to put this is, abiding as not-self/emptiness/awareness. It’s hitting the recognition of not-self/emptiness/awareness constantly so that it becomes a way of living and the default state. This is what leads to liberation from psychological suffering.

4.2.2. *Padmasambhava*

We’ll now look at one of the foundational texts in Dzogchen. This text is called *Self Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness* and was written by one of the founders of Dzogchen, Padmasmbhava from the 8th century CE. This text is helpful since it fills in the gaps that the three essential statements leave implicit.

It is the single (nature of) mind which encompasses all of Samsara and Nirvana.

Even though its inherent nature has existed from the very beginning, you have not recognized it. Even though its clarity and presence has been uninterrupted, you

have not yet encountered its face...Therefore, this (direct introduction) is for the purpose of bringing you to self-recognition (Padmasmbhava 4). Even though that which is usually called "mind" is widely esteemed and much discussed. Still it is not understood or it is wrongly understood or it is understood in a one-sided manner only. Since it is not understood correctly just as it is in itself, There come into existence inconceivable numbers of philosophical ideas and assertions. Furthermore, since [most] individuals do not understand it, They do not recognize their own nature...and thus experience suffering. Therefore, not understanding your own mind is a very grievous fault. Even though the Sravakas and the Pratyekabuddhas wish to understand it in terms of the Anatman doctrine, Still they do not understand it as it is in itself. Also there exist others who, being attached to their own personal ideas and interpretations, Become fettered by these attachments and so do not perceive the Clear Light (Padmasmbhava 5)... With respect to its having a name, the various names that are applied to it are inconceivable (in their numbers). Some call it "the nature of the mind" or "mind itself." Some Tirthikas call it by the name Atman or "the Self." The Sravakas call it the doctrine of Anatman or "the absence of a self."... Some call it by the name "the Unique Sphere."... And some simply call it by the name "ordinary awareness." (Padmasmbhava 6).

This serves as a helpful introduction. The text explains how the nature of mind includes psychological states of Samsara (suffering) and Nirvana (non-suffering, peace of mind). By not recognizing what "I" refers to, we suffer. It's noted that there are different names for this self-recognition. Some refer to it as "the Self", others "the absence of a self",

others “the Unique Sphere”, and others “ordinary awareness.” This is important because it makes clear that these different names refer to the same recognition. This also implies that we shouldn’t get overly concerned about the terminology used. Next is section 7, which I include all of given its importance:

Now, when you are introduced (to your own intrinsic awareness), the method for entering into it involves three considerations: Thoughts in the past are clear and empty and leave no traces behind. Thoughts in the future are fresh and unconditioned by any thing. And in the present moment, when (your mind) remains in its own condition without constructing anything, Awareness at that moment in itself is quite ordinary. And when you look into yourself in this way nakedly (without any discursive thoughts), Since there is only this pure observing, there will be found a lucid clarity without anyone being there who is the observer; Only a naked manifest awareness is present. (This awareness) is empty and immaculately pure, not being created by anything whatsoever. It is authentic and unadulterated, without any duality of clarity and emptiness. It is not permanent and yet it is not created by anything. However, it is not a mere nothingness or something annihilated because it is lucid and present. It does not exist as a single entity because it is present and clear in terms of being many (On the other hand) it is not created as a multiplicity of things because it is inseparable and of a single flavor. This inherent self-awareness does not derive from anything out side itself. This is the real introduction to the actual condition of things (Padmasmbhava 7).

This section makes clear that ordinary awareness is empty. It is no-thing and contains no thoughts. This thoughtless state is the natural state of mind and our true nature. This might seem hard to believe since we're normally caught up in attending to endless thoughts, but this is the claim made here. Importantly, the text states "there is only this pure observing, there will be found a lucid clarity without anyone being there who is the observer." This is important since it can help to clarify the debates over Self vs not-self. From one point of view, since there's only pure observing it could be Self. But from another point of view, since there's no discrete self who is the observer, it can be called not-self. It is then stated:

When you are introduced in this way through this exceedingly powerful method for entering into the practice, (You discover directly) that your own immediate self-awareness is just this (and nothing else), And that it has an inherent self-clarity which is entirely unfabricated (Padmasmbhava 9)... It is certain that the nature of the mind is empty and without any foundation whatsoever. Your own mind is insubstantial like the empty sky. You should look at your own mind to see whether it is like that or not. Being without any view that decisively decides that it is empty, it is certain that self-originated primal awareness has been clear (and luminous) from the very beginning (Padmasmbhava 10). Since the Clear Light of your own intrinsic awareness is empty, it is the Dharmakaya; And this is like the sun rising in a cloudless illuminated sky. Even though (this light cannot be said) to possess a particular shape or form, nevertheless, it can be fully known (Padmasmbhava 12) Although it has wandered throughout Samsara, it has come

to no harm-amazing! Even though it has seen Buddhahood itself, it has not come to any benefit from this-amazing! (Padmasmbhava 13).

There are a few important points here. First, ordinary awareness is “just this.” It’s nothing special and is our direct experience, now, but without thought distracting us. Thoughts are like clouds and distract us from the nature of mind, which is like the sky.

Furthermore, the nature of mind is empty but has an inherent self-clarity. Another way of viewing this is that natural mind is empty and luminous. The empty quality refers to it as no-thing. The luminous quality refers to the knowing quality. Emptiness and luminosity aren’t separate and are interwoven aspects of natural mind. Natural mind, which is again what we really are, has been what we really are from the beginning. It has seen samsara (suffering) but has never suffered itself since it’s that which witnesses suffering of the body-mind. And again, this is our true nature of self. The next section further explains natural mind and how it seems.

This immediate intrinsic awareness is insubstantial and lucidly clear. Just this is the highest pinnacle among all views. It is all-encompassing, free of everything, and without any conceptions whatsoever: Just this is the highest pinnacle among all meditations. It is unfabricated and inexpressible in worldly terms (Padmasmbhava 14). Just this is the view (or the way of seeing) of the Great Perfection (Padmasmbhava 18). Intrinsic awareness...cannot be conceived of by the intellect and is free of all (conceptual) limitations from the very beginning (Padmasmbhava 22). Since it is aware and clear, it is understood to be like the sky. However, even though we employ the example of the sky to indicate the

nature of the mind, this is in fact only a metaphor or simile indicating things in a one-sided fashion. The nature of the mind, as well as being empty, is also intrinsically aware; everywhere it is clear. But the sky is without any awareness; it is empty as an inanimate corpse is empty. Therefore, the real meaning of "mind" is not indicated by the sky. So without distraction, simply allow (the mind) to remain in the state of being just as it is (Padmasmbhava 24). Everything that appears is but a manifestation of mind. Even though the entire external inanimate universe appears to you, it is but a manifestation of mind (Padmasmbhava 26).

Dzogchen states that “just this” is the highest view. The problem is it can be difficult to understand what this means. The text makes clear that ordinary awareness “cannot be conceived of by the intellect and is free of all (conceptual) limitations.” In other words, there must be insight into ordinary awareness. *Nous* is the way to know ordinary awareness. Thought, *dianoia*, can’t understand ordinary awareness. Thought, *dianoia*, can’t understand “just this.” From the standpoint of thought, “just this” will literally make no sense. There is also the claim that ordinary awareness is free of all (conceptual) limitations, which means it is non-conceptual. Last, is the statement that everything that appears is a manifestation of awareness. I take this to be a phenomenological claim about the state of resting in awareness and not a metaphysical claim. As might be noticed, this is similar to Ramana Maharshi’s claim that “the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases” and all is seen as the Self (Maharshi, Who Am I). Dzogchen says the same thing about how perception can shift, to a more accurate way of seeing things. But this doesn’t mean that this perceptual shift maps on to ultimate metaphysical truth.

4.2.3. *Ponlop Rinpoche*

Ponlop Rinpoche was born in 1965 and is a living Dzogchen teacher. He is a leading Tibetan Buddhist scholar and Dzogchen practitioner. Moreover, Rinpoche was taught by highly regarded Dzogchen teachers such as Tulku Urygen Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.⁴⁶ Ponlop Rinpoche is known for communicating Buddhist philosophy to Westerners in a clear, direct, and accessible way. Thus, it's helpful to explore his work to further understand Buddhist philosophy on the nature of mind/self. We'll look at excerpts from his book *Rebel Buddha*:

According to the Buddha, our freedom is never in question. We're born free...Our mind is always brilliantly awake and aware...Nevertheless, we're often plagued by painful thoughts and the emotional unrest that goes with them. We live in states of confusion and fear from which we see no escape. Our problem is that we don't see who we truly are at the deepest level...On this road [to freedom from suffering], what we free ourselves from is illusion, and what frees us from illusion is the discovery of truth. To make that discovery, we need to enlist the powerful intelligence of our own awake mind and turn it toward our goal of exposing, opposing, and overcoming deception (64). That is the essence and mission of 'rebel buddha: to free us from the illusions we create by ourselves, about ourselves...the word *buddha* simply means 'awake' or 'awakened'. It does not refer to a particular historical person or to a philosophy or religion. It refers to

⁴⁶ To the Western reader, all these names likely mean nothing. I encourage readers who are unfamiliar with these names to 'google them' to further understand their extensive training and credentials within the Eastern tradition.

your own mind. You know you have a mind, but what's it like? It's awake... Your mind is brilliantly clear, open, spacious, and full of excellent qualities...it's never distressed by the doubts, fears, and emotions that so often torture us. Instead, your true mind is a mind of joy, free of all suffering. That is who you really are...If this is true...then why aren't you happy all the time?...The reason is that even though the awakened state is the true nature of mind, most of us don't see it.

Why?...Something is blocking our view of it. Sure, we see bits of it here and there. But the moment we see it, something else pops into our mind – “what time is it?” Is it time for lunch?” Oh look, a butterfly – and our insight is gone.

Ironically, what blocks your view of your mind's true nature – your buddha mind – is also your own mind, the part of your mind that is always busy, constantly involved in a steady stream of thoughts, emotions, and concepts. This busy mind is who you think you are. For example, the thought you're thinking right now is more obvious to you than your awareness of that thought (65). When you get angry, you pay more attention to what you're angry about than to the actual source of your anger, where your anger is coming from. In other words, you notice what your mind is doing, but you don't see the mind itself. You identify yourself with the contents of this busy mind – your thoughts, emotions, ideas – and end up thinking that all of this stuff is ‘me’ and ‘how I am’. When you do that, it's like being asleep and dreaming, and believing that the dream images are true (66)...In the beginning [of seeing natural mind] we only glimpse this state, but those glimpses become increasingly familiar and stable. In the end freedom becomes our home ground (67).

Rinpoche states that ignorance of the true nature of mind is what causes suffering. We identify with the *contents* of mind (ex. thoughts) rather than the *essence* of mind (where the thoughts come from). Another way to put this is that we identify with *experience* rather than the fact that we're *experiencing*. Identifying with the contents of mind makes it seem like we're constantly thinking. Our thinking about what's happening isn't what's actually happening. This is like dreaming during sleep, since in a dream we believe what's happening even though it's not actually happening. Rinpoche further states:

When we don't pay attention, the conceptual world takes over our whole being. That's a pretty sad thing. We can't even enjoy a beautiful sunny day, watching leaves blowing in the wind. We have to label it all so we live in a concept of sun, a concept of wind, and a concept of moving leaves...Then it's "Oh yeah, it's good to be here. It's beautiful, but it would be better if the sun were shining from another angle." When we're walking, we're not really walking; a concept is walking. When we're eating, we're not really eating; a concept is eating...At some point, our whole world dissolves into concepts (68).

Rinpoche explains how concepts rule our lives. By constantly labelling things and thinking, we move away from the base layer of reality. The implicit claim is that if we perceive the sun, wind, leaves, all objects correctly, then we can't actually say what they are. By forming concepts about these phenomena it *seems* like we know what they are. But this is an illusion. From the proper vantage point, these phenomena are flows within experiencing and we can't pinpoint what they are. Rinpoche begins to point to the root

concept that we're slaves to – the self. Rinpoche implies that the self is a concept and this concept is what walks, talks, eats, acts, etc. But this concept, like all others, is an illusion.

Rinpoche further states:

Perceptual mind, conceptual mind, and emotional mind are three aspects of relative mind, our mundane consciousness, which we usually experience as a continuous stream. But in reality, perceptions, thoughts, and emotions last only for an instant. They're impermanent. They come and go so quickly that we're unaware of the discontinuity within this stream, of the space between each mental event. It's like watching a thirty-five-millimetre film. We know it's made up of many single frames, but due to the speed at which it moves, we never notice the end of one frame and the beginning of the next. We never see the imageless space between the frames, just as we never see the space of awareness between one thought and another. We end up living in a fabricated world made up of these aspects of relative mind...locked inside the prison walls of our conceptual world. The Buddha taught that what lies at the bottom of all this is ignorance: the state of not knowing who we truly are...This ignorance is a kind of blindness that leads us to believe that the movie we're watching is real. As I mentioned earlier, when we believe that this busy mind – this stream of emotions and concepts – is who we truly are, it's like being asleep and dreaming without knowing we're dreaming...The Buddha taught that the key to waking up and unlocking

the door of our prison is self-knowledge, which extinguishes ignorance like a light being turned on in a room.” (69-70)

Rinpoche explains how the *contents* of mind (perceptions, thoughts, and emotions) are ephemeral. For simplicity’s sake, we can focus on thoughts since for most of us it seems like we’re constantly thinking. But this isn’t what’s happening. Thoughts are popping in and out of existence so quickly that it creates the illusion of a stream of thinking. What isn’t seen is the space of awareness, our true nature, between each thought. This mistake causes suffering since the space of awareness is free of suffering.

“If knowledge is the key to our freedom, then how do we move from a state of unknowing to knowing? The logic of the Buddhist path is very simple. We begin from a state that is confused and dominated by ignorance; by cultivating knowledge and insight through study, contemplation, and meditation, we free ourselves from ignorance and arrive at a state of wisdom. Therefore, the essence of this path is the cultivation of our intelligence and the development of our insight. As we work with our intelligence, it becomes sharper and more penetrating; finally, it becomes so sharp that it cuts through the very concepts and ignorance that keep us bound to suffering. What we’re doing is training our mind to free itself; we’re exercising, working out, pumping up our rebel buddha...It requires great conviction because we’re challenging what is closest to us – our definition of self, both our personal self and the

self of others. Whether it's a suffering or a tyrannical self, it's what we know and have always cherished. But when you see the reality of your true self, you see it nakedly – stripped of all concepts. It's one thing to say, "The emperor has no clothes"; it's another thing to declare that and be the emperor yourself" (Rinpoche 73).

Rinpoche explains how to cure our ignorance. This is done through "cultivating knowledge and insight through study, contemplation, and meditation." There are a few things to notice here. First, knowledge *and* insight are necessary. Simply acquiring book-knowledge and analytical prowess isn't enough. In addition, insight is necessary. Knowledge is acquired through study and insight is acquired through contemplation and meditation. Contemplation usually has a different meaning in Eastern philosophy than Western philosophy. In Eastern philosophy, contemplation usually refers to "sitting-with" a problem or question. This is putting the question to the side of consciousness which allows space for insight to potentially happen. This is methodologically different to our typical analytical way of addressing questions, which centers the problem at the forefront of consciousness and tries to break the question down. To understand this difference, an analogy will be helpful. When we forget something there are two ways to address this. First, we can center our forgetfulness in our consciousness, and try to think through what we forgot. We can break down the steps before and after whatever we forgot, to try to 'see' what that space was. Sometimes this works, but other times it doesn't. Another way to address what we forgot is to (mostly) let the problem go – we allow whatever we forgot to move to the back of consciousness. This space provides fertile soil for an insight

to happen: “Oh yeah! Here’s what I was going to say!” or “Oh! That’s where my keys are!”.

Now, to briefly explain meditation. Meditation is training attention. This is different from analytical thinking. In meditation, we gradually ‘see’ the analytical thinking process for what it actually is. Meditation is a skill that needs to be trained so our attention gets gradually refined so we ‘see’ at more refined levels. It’s like training any skill. A good analytical thinker can ‘see’ the steps of an argument and the various directions it can go instantly. For those who are ‘slower’ they take more time to make the same conclusions and have difficulty ‘seeing’ how argumentative steps logically connect. Thus, both analytical thinking and meditation are skills to be developed. Within Western philosophy, we’re familiar with analytical thinking. But we believe it’s the only method to do philosophy. What Rinpoche points out, is that attention-training (meditation) is another philosophical method that is required for knowing the true nature of self.

Rinpoche further states:

“According to the Buddha, what we’re clinging to is a myth. It’s just a thought that says ‘I,’ repeated so often that it creates an illusory self, like a hologram that we take to be solid and real. With every thought, every emotion, this “self” appears as a thinker and experiencer, yet it’s really just a fabrication of mind...and we quickly develop many other kinds of suffering on top of that. This ‘I’ becomes very proactive in protecting its own interests, because it immediately perceives “other”...the birth of our neurotic emotions and judgements is the result of clinging to “I”...We

think that to give up this thought of “I” would be crazy; we think our life depends on it. But actually, our freedom depends on letting it go (Rinpoche 73-74).

Here, Rinpoche cuts to the root problem: the illusion of self. A thinker is created by constantly attending to thoughts and believing them to be real. This creates a seemingly existent “I”, such as “I am Tejas”, “I am Duncan”, “I am Mark”, etc. It’s seemingly existent and appears to be totally real, but Rinpoche’s point is this “I” doesn’t fundamentally exist. “I” is the root clinging, the root ignorance, and this clinging causes clinging to a range of other clinging’s. Thus, this root mistake is what causes suffering. If it’s true and directly known that there’s no solid “I” there’s no place where suffering can attach. To be sure, pain, the biological response, can and will still arise within the body. But pain can’t create suffering, a psychological story on top of pain, if there’s no solid entity that story can attach to. If this is the case, then there’s simply the flow of experience.

4.3. Zen Koans

Now we’ll briefly focus on Zen Buddhism with a focus on Zen Koans. This is because Zen offers a unique method of pointing towards emptiness or awareness through what are called “koans.” Koans are pithy questions that try to prompt insight into emptiness. They are usually inscrutable, confusing, and may even seem nonsensical to Western philosophers (Cheng 77). For example, there is the famous koan, “Show me your original face before you were born” (Cheng 87). This and other koans may seem nonsensical but there’s an underlying logic to them. To understand this underlying logic, we’ll look at

Chung-Ying Cheng's paper "On Zen (Ch'an) Language and Zen Paradoxes." While not well known within the broader sphere of Western philosophy, Cheng is one of the founders of formalizing Chinese philosophy in the United States. In his paper, Cheng makes clear that explaining the underlying logic of Koans "is not intended to be substituted for the experience [insight] itself" (84). The experience or insight is different from the rational explanation of the experience. To further understand this distinction, Cheng gives the example of looking at a painting: "A piece of painting can be enjoyed as an exquisite work of art on the one hand, and on the other can be examined or studied in terms of scientific concepts. Each activity cannot be substituted for the other or made identical with the other" (Cheng 84). For our purposes, the "theoretical rational explanation" of koans serves to open the mind of Western philosophers that there might be something to koans and that they're not just nonsense. To truly understand koans, one would have to engage in the training. But before engaging in the training, one must believe there might be something to the training. And for logically oriented people, explaining how there might be something to the training in a logical way is necessary.

Zen, like all other Buddhist branches, holds that rationality and the intellect can't capture not-self/emptiness (Cheng 77). Given this, "it is not surprising that Zen *must* mislead and mystify modern philosophers who emphasize such virtues as conceptual clarity, logical consistency and semantic meaningfulness" (Cheng 78). In contrast to the linguistic logical clarity of Western analytic philosophy, koans use language in a creative way to prompt insight which "transcend[s] both language and reason" (Cheng 78). After koans serve their purpose of prompting insight, they are meant to be thrown out (Cheng 81). One shouldn't cling to the words of the koan as metaphysical truth but rather what

the koan shows (Cheng 81). As we may recall, this is similar to Being's call in the Bhagavad Gita to "abandon all Dharmas and take refuge in Me alone" (18.63-18.66). To further understand koans, here are a few more examples:

- 1) "I am him and yet he is not me."
- 2) "A long time ago, a man kept a goose in a bottle and it grew larger and larger until it could not get out of the bottle any longer; he did not want to break the bottle, nor did he wish to hurt the goose; how would you get the goose out?"
- 3) "I see mountain not as mountain; and I see water not as water."
- 4) "What is gained is what is not gained."
- 5) "Don't speak about being and don't speak about non-being." (Cheng 87)

I suggest keeping the original example in mind, "Show me your original face before you were born?" This is because, in my view, it's the most clear. Furthermore, it ties into Douglas Harding's recognition of "headlessness" well, which we'll cover soon. Nevertheless, these other examples are helpful since they show the variety of koans. Cheng's basic view of how koans work is the following:

"Zen puzzles and paradoxes generally arise from an intentional breakdown of the link or connection between the surface semantic meaning and the deep ontological reference in the Zen dialogic exchanges. In such a breakdown the language with the surface semantic meaning is devoid of its referential framework so that it loses its ontological referent in an ultimate sense. But at the same time

the same Zen language can be seen to acquire freely new semantic meanings or to give rise freely to new language forms with new surface meanings but to the same ontological reference, that is, the ontological reference with no specific ontological referent whatsoever” (Cheng 77)

Let’s break this down in simple terms. Koans have a surface meaning, which is usually seemingly nonsensical. For example, in “show me your original face before you were born?” we initially have the thought like “well how could I have a face *before* I was born? This koan is stupid!” In the surface understanding, for this particular koan, there’s a subtle assumption that “I am the body-mind.” This assumption is so subtle and commonplace that it’s overlooked. Moreover, in the surface understanding, there’s a subtle conflation between “your” in “your original face” and “you” in “before you were born.” The “your” refers to our true nature, emptiness, and the “you” refers to the thinker. This is the “deep ontological reference” that Cheng refers to, which is the recognition of our true nature. In the surface understanding, this isn’t understood so the koan seemingly makes no sense. The point of the koan is to frustrate the mind’s understanding of the surface meaning (surface semantic meaning) so that an insight to the deeper meaning (deep ontological reference) can potentially happen. It’s a brilliant way to point to emptiness, the deep ontological reference, since emptiness “has no specific ontological referent whatsoever” (Cheng 77). Cheng further explains the “deep ontological referent” as “a framework in which no reference to any category of things is made. It is a framework which does not admit any description of things according to a framework of specific categories or paradigms” (Cheng 91). In other words, emptiness or awareness,

whatever words we want to use, is no-thing so it can't be described. Cheng further describes the mechanics of what's happening to the mind:

“Thus the mind of the hearer is pulled apart by the semantic force (demand of the semantic structure) on the one hand and the ontic pressure (emptiness of the ontological reference) on the other. In order for it to unite or link these two structures of the sentence, the mind is forced by the conceptual conflict it experiences to make an ontological jump, that is, to gain an ontological insight : namely to forego all ontological commitments to all possible semantic categories, in the light of which the question of the ontological commitment for *this* semantic structure will not arise. With this ontological insight, both the conceptual conflict of the mind and the paradoxicality of the imperative vanish simultaneously” (Cheng 92).

When we hear a koan our minds are conflicted. On the one hand, we're trying to mentally figure out what the koan means. We're using *dianoia*, thinking, to try to understand the koan. On the other hand, there's the pull of the truth of emptiness, the base layer of mind which we already are, that's pulling us towards having *nous*, insight. This conceptual conflict places a lot of pressure on the mind. Usually, this occurs through using thinking through the koan to no avail. This pressure gives rise to an “ontological jump” an “ontological insight” into emptiness. This jump occurs instantly which dissolves conflict in the mind and paradoxicality of the koan. Cheng's breakdown of koans logically explains how insight works. Notice that there's nothing mystical or magical about Cheng's explanation. This explanation also clarifies talk of “spontaneous awakening”.

Spontaneous awakening simply refers to instantly recognizing that the base layer of mind or self is emptiness, which is beyond our conceptual understandings of self. Again, talk of “spontaneous awakening” might seem odd to Western philosophers, and seem magical, but there’s a logical way of understanding these terms. In the final paragraph we’ll look at, Cheng explains how all language must be dropped (this includes my language) to have insight into emptiness:

In the spirit of this doctrine, the semantic incongruity (the breakdown of the link between the semantic surface structure and the standard framework of reference) in a Zen paradox leads the mind of the hearer to a state where he realizes that he could not and should not attach any reference to the given semantic structure, and for that matter, to any semantic structure, and thus should directly look into an uncategorizable ontological structure of no specific reference which has been referred to as the ultimate reality of self-nature or mind. The paradoxicality of the Zen paradox therefore forces the mind of the hearer to acquire an ontological insight into the ultimate reality of things and this insight is acquired by foregoing *all* ontological commitments to all semantic structures or semantic categories of language. Clearly this insight is a generalization based on the abandonment of ontological commitment to a specific semantic structure in a given Zen paradox. Without this ontological generalization or jump one cannot be said to have reached Enlightenment or to have resolved the paradoxicality of the given Zen paradox. Because it is in virtue of this ontological generalization or jump that *this* particular semantic structure loses its claim on truth and meaning in comparison with other possible semantic structures and that the emptiness of reference for *this*

ontological structure is justified by the emptiness of reference for the totality of ontological structures (91-92).

There are two things to notice here. First, Cheng points out that the “uncategorizable ontological structure of no specific reference [emptiness]...has been referred to as the ultimate reality or self-nature or mind” (Cheng 92). While some people refer to the insight of emptiness, awareness, Self, not-self, etc., as “ultimate reality” I want to make clear that I don’t hold this view. Talks of “ultimate reality” don’t just occur in Cheng’s paper but in various other books and articles regarding this subject matter. While the insight into emptiness may be ultimate reality, we can’t definitively say it is. This is because of the appearance–reality distinction and debates concerning rationalism vs empiricism. Simply put, just because something appears to be real doesn’t mean it is. Thus, metaphysical agnosticism is the more appropriate view. Referring to this insight as showing true self-nature or the base layer of mind is more appropriate and the view I hold. These terms are far more ontologically parsimonious than claims of “ultimate reality”. While it’s possible that the insight of emptiness doesn’t show true self-nature, I hold it’s *more* metaphysically true than our current understanding and experience of self as the thinker. And that this more metaphysically true view can be known through insight, which also has the indescribable value of highly mitigating and possibly ending psychological suffering.

The second point to notice is that after insight is made the “particular [koan] semantic structure loses its claim on truth...and that the emptiness of reference for *this* [koan] ontological structure is justified by the emptiness of reference for the totality of ontological structures” (91-92). This is saying that after a koan is used it needs to be

thrown out. This is because any words *about* an ontological structure that has no reference (emptiness) *aren't actually* the ontological structure that has no reference (emptiness). Thus, any clinging to a linguistic structure, a koan, prevents the insight of emptiness from flourishing. Thus, the koan needs to be thrown out after it serves its purpose.

Chapter 5: Douglas Harding's Headless Way

5.1. Douglas Harding

In this chapter, we'll directly explore the insight of the self as awareness. So far, this thesis has operated at the level of *dianoia*, thought, to open the possibility that the self is not fundamentally the body-mind. The problem is, even if this is known intellectually it isn't known at the level of insight, at the level of *nous*. To possibly have insight into the true nature of self, this must be directly pointed out. This usually requires the work of a teacher who can directly point to the true nature of self. Having a live teacher is usually necessary so the teacher can dispel doubts the students. But the next best option, which is what we'll have to settle for here, is looking at the work of other teachers. We've already done this by looking at Shankara's *neti-neti* (negation) method, Maharshi's method of self-inquiry, Dzogchen pointers⁴⁷, and Zen Koans. Of course, all these methods must be actually *practiced*, and not simply intellectually explained. And the way to practice these methods is through the mechanism of attention. While all these methods are clear, in my opinion they are not the height of clarity. The height of clarity comes from the philosopher and sage, Douglas Harding, who invented "the Headless Way."⁴⁸ Harding's genius, is that he *literally points* to the true nature of self. This pointing experiment, along with numerous other experiments Harding developed, directly show the true nature of

⁴⁷ The Dzogchen pointers we looked at aren't the real Dzogchen pointing out instructions. Pointing out instructions directly point practitioners to the true nature of self. Real Dzogchen pointing out instructions are to be given by qualified teachers live. From my understanding, these instructions are not supposed to be written down or given in any random context. Thus, the Dzogchen pointers we looked at are more explanations rather than actual pointing out instructions.

⁴⁸ While I believe the Headless Way is the clearest way to introduce the true nature of self, I believe it's less strong in clearing up doubts. The Advaita method of self-inquiry with a live, legitimate, teacher seems to be the best at clearing up doubts.

self. Other methods of showing the true nature of self, are based on more intellectual methods, such as Zen Koans, which try to spark our discursive thinking mind into recognizing natural mind. Harding however, simply points to natural mind.

Before further explaining the Headless Way and directly showing the pointers Harding gave, I'll give an intellectual background to explain the legitimacy of Harding. The reason I do this is because Harding's pointers are so incredibly simple and clear that almost no one will see or understand "that's it." Almost no one will be able to see or understand that Harding's pointers show what the Upanishads, Bhagawad Gita, Dzogchen Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, etc., have been speaking about. Thus, I want to show via scholarly sources and meditation practitioners, that Harding is legitimate. I'll do this in two ways. First, I'll show a block quote from Huston Smith, who wrote the foreword to Harding's book, *On Having No Head*. Huston Smith was a philosopher and world-renowned religious studies scholar. Smith was unique among religious studies scholars in that he held a PhD in philosophy and more importantly, *actually practiced* the more sophisticated methods of various 'religions', some of which we've covered here. He also wrote the book *The Religions of Man/The World's Religions*.⁴⁹ As the New York Times states, this book has been the "standard textbook in college-level comparative religion classes for a half century" (Martin and Hevesi). Smith's opinion should be taken seriously.

The second way I'll explain Harding's legitimacy, is through Sam Harris. Harris is typically known as a public intellectual "new atheist" who aggressively attacks religion and defends atheism. But Harris is much more than this. He has a PhD in neuroscience, is

⁴⁹ The book's original title was *The Religions of Man* (1958) and was changed to *The World's Religions* (1991) to give the book a more gender neutral title.

a philosopher,⁵⁰ and Dzogchen practitioner. Harris spent over 10 years in India and Tibet learning eastern philosophy at the theoretical level, and more importantly learning and practicing dualistic and nondualist meditation.⁵¹ Harris is a direct student of Poonja-ji, who was a direct student of Ramana Maharshi. Thus, Harris was directly trained in the Advaita lineage of Ramana Maharshi.⁵² Moreover, Harris was directly trained in the Dzogchen Buddhist lineage of Tulku Urygen Rinpoche. Tulku Urygen Rinpoche was highly regarded within Dzogchen and taught others such as Ponlop Rinpoche, whom we covered. Moreover, Harris is the founder of the app “Waking Up” which is a nondual mindfulness app. The app “Waking Up” is a no-nonsense, nondual meditation app, which hosts teachers from Zen, Dzogchen, Advaita, the headless way, etc. Harris understands that Harding’s pointers are essentially the same as all these other traditions. Moreover,

⁵⁰ I take the view that one doesn’t have to be an academic philosopher to be a philosopher.

⁵¹ There are different levels of meditation. At the beginner level, there is dualistic mindfulness. This is the kind of meditation that Westerners are most familiar with. Dualistic mindfulness is based on standard subject-object divide, where a discrete subject, the thinker, focuses their attention on an external object. An example of this is focusing on the breath. In this case, a discrete subject focuses their attention on an object (the breath). More advanced meditation practices are that of Advaita and Dzogchen where there is nondual meditation. In nondual meditation the separate self is seen through and one meditates effortlessly. Nondual meditation isn’t a oneness experience where one has the sense that “I am the tree.” It’s more that the body-mind is seen as an object that is no different from other objects in perception, such as the tree, chair, etc. Also, it’s seen that awareness, the real subject, the real “I”, pervades the body-mind organism. There is a debate over whether awareness pervades other objects, such as trees, chairs, etc. Thus, nondual meditation, depending on how it’s framed, is either a switch in subject-object divide where the subject is seen to be expansive or that there’s only pure subject. My view of nondual meditation is the following: at first, awareness, the true “I”, is seen as a container holding all objects including the body-mind. This is necessary because awareness, which is inherently pure, ‘burns up’ psychological suffering of the body-mind. Thus, disidentification with the body-mind is necessary at this stage. But there’s a problem where one can get trapped with this view and become totally disengaged with the world. Then, as a *teaching tool*, not as a metaphysical statement, it’s pointed out that awareness pervades all objects, including the body-mind. This ensures that one can function as a normal human being. Then one can function as a normal human being while also having the occasional insight that the body-mind is an object (the previous stage) whenever psychological suffering arises. This flipping to the previous stage is a habit that’s built up which consciousness automatically switches to more and more and with less and less time, as psychological suffering arises.

⁵² There are debates of who is considered a “lineage holder.” Technically, Maharshi had no lineage as he didn’t have any formal students. There’s also a debate on whether Poonja-ji taught the same as Maharshi and even on whether he corrupted Maharshi’s teachings. I acknowledge these debates but put them aside for space sakes.

Harris and his story is good to mention, to show how a hardcore atheist, philosopher, and scientist, who is genuinely open-minded, can and has recognized the legitimacy of insight as a philosophical method and the true nature of self. And that there is nothing mysterious, special, or otherworldly about this.

I do this build-up not to be annoying, but to show that there really is something here and that ‘respectable’ figures have recognized it. This is important because when Harding’s pointers are directly introduced, there’s almost a 100% chance that it’ll make no sense or the reaction will be “so what?” That’s because one must have the eyes to see what Harding’s showing. Another way to put this is that one must have trained their attention in the proper way to see what Harding’s showing.

5.1.1. Huston Smith On Douglas Harding

This is what Huston Smith says for his foreword to *On Having No Head*:

It was 1961 and, returning from university lectures in Australia, I had scheduled a stop in Bangkok to discuss with John Blofeld his recently published translations of the *Zen Teachings of Huang Po* and the *Zen Teachings of Hui Hai*. We had scarcely settled into our conversation when...he reached for a slim volume...it was this book in hand. I remember vividly his enthusiasm for the book itself. ‘I have no idea who this Harding man is’, he said: ‘he may be a London cabbie for all I know. But he’s got it just right.’ The next day as I was saying my farewells Blofeld again reached for the book, this time insisting that I take it with me for flight reading...I had the opportunity to check out his assessment. It was accurate.

Harding had indeed gotten it just right. Not that the magic will work for everyone; one can never be sure that words will produce the effects they intend. But I know of no other piece of writing as concise as the opening chapter of this book that stands a better chance of shifting the reader's perception to a different register. And the reason is clear. Insight derives from images more than it does from reasoning and the image Harding hit on is a powerful one. "I have no head." Outrageous on first hearing, the author stays with the claim – circling it, returning to it, until (as with *ko-ans* that likewise sound absurd on first hearing) a barrier breaks and we see, not something different but in a different way...*Annata*, no self (read: no permanent, individual self) is not only the key to Buddhism; rightly understood, it is the key to life...Intrusively we see this; we know that we see better when stop standing in our own light. But it is one of those things that we know but never learn, so we need to be reminded of it repeatedly. Or better, we need to have it break over us in fresh ways, which is the prospect this book extends. We might think of Harding as approaching us as a *roshi* in a disguise, a teacher garbed, of all things, in book covers. If we are to be worthy students we must be prepared for instruction from any quarter (Smith as cited in Harding vi – viii).

Smith makes a few important points. First, "Harding had gotten it just right." This refers to the insight of not-self/Self. Second, Harding's pointing to not-self provokes the same insight of not-self that Buddhists speak about. Third, that the magic won't work for everyone. This means that Harding's pointing method won't provoke the insight in

everyone. Fourth, that Harding is “a *roshi* in disguise.” A respected teacher in Zen Buddhism is referred to as a *roshi*. Thus, Smith referring to Harding as “a *roshi* in disguise” signals Smith’s extreme respect for Harding.

5.1.2. Sam Harris on Douglas Harding

Here is what Harris says about Harding:

“[Harding] spent years on a journey of self-discovery that culminated in an insight he described as ‘having no head’. I never met Harding, but after reading his books, I have little doubt that he was attempting to introduce his students to the same understanding that is the basis of Dzogchen practice. Harding was led to his insight after seeing a self-portrait of the Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach, who had the clever idea of drawing himself as he appeared from a first-person point of view...Harding’s assertion that he has no head must be read in the first person sense; the man was not claiming to have been literally decapitated. From a first-person point of view, his emphasis on headlessness is a stroke of genius that offers an unusually clear description of what it’s like to glimpse the nonduality of consciousness...the truth is that most people are simply too distracted by their thoughts to have the selflessness of consciousness pointed out directly. And even if they are ready to glimpse it, they are unlikely to understand its significance. Harding confessed that many of his students recognize the state of ‘headlessness’ only to say, ‘so what?’ It is, in fact, very difficult to deal with this ‘so what?’ That is why certain traditions, like Dzogchen, consider teachings

about the intrinsic nonduality of consciousness to be secret, reserving them for students who have spent considerable time practicing other forms of meditation. On the one level, the requirement that a person have mastered other preliminary practices is purely pragmatic – for unless she has the requisite concentration and mindfulness to actually follow the teacher’s instructions, she is liable to be lost in thought and understand nothing at all. But there is another purpose to withholding these nondual teachings: Unless a person has spent some time seeking self-transcendence dualistically, she is unlikely to recognize that the brief glimpse of selflessness is actually the answer to her search. Having then said, ‘so what?’ in the face of the highest teachings, there is nothing for her to do but persist in her confusion (Harris 141-148).

Harris also explains the views of philosophers and scientists who didn’t understand what Harding was talking about:

It is both amusing and instructive to note that his teachings were singled out for a derision by the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter (in collaboration with my friend Daniel Dennet), a man of wide learning and great intelligence who, it would appear, did not understand what Harding was talking about (Harris 142)...Here are Hofstadter’s ‘reflections’ on Harding’s account: ‘We have here presented with a charmingly childish and solipsistic view of the human condition. It is something that, at an intellectual level, offends and appals us: can anyone sincerely entertain such notions without embarrassment? Yet to some primitive

level it speaks clearly. This is the level at which we cannot accept the notion of our own death.’ Having expressed his pity for batty old Harding, Hofstader proceeds to explain away his insights as a solipsistic denial of mortality – a perpetuation of the childish illusion that ‘I am a necessary ingredient of the universe.’ However, Harding’s point was that ‘I’ is not even an ingredient, necessary of otherwise, of his *own mind*. What Hofstader fails to realize is that Harding’s account contains a precise, empirical instructions: Look for whatever it is you are calling ‘I’ without being distracted by even the subtlest undercurrent of thought – and notice what happens the moment you turn consciousness upon itself. This illustrates a very common phenomenon in scientific and secular circles: We have a contemplative like Harding, who, to the eye of anyone familiar with the experience of self-transcendence has described it in a manner approaching perfect clarity; we also have a scholar like Hofstader, a celebrated contributor to our modern understanding of the mind, who dismisses him as a child. Before rejecting Harding’s account as merely silly, you should investigate this experience for yourself (Harris 142-143).

The main problem with intellectuals like Hofstader and Dennett, is that they criticize Harding’s position without having engaged in the proper method. Having (likely) not engaged in intense attention training through practices such as meditation, they have precisely no clue what Harding’s talking about. They aren’t able to see what Harding is pointing to, which as Harris states is a “precise empirical instruction.” Other eminent philosophers, such as John Searle, have made similar remarks to Hofstader and Dennett.

Searle has said, “we’ve had 500 years or however many years of using Buddhist methods of introspection, I don’t see the payoff” (Searle 1:06:30-1:06:40). Again, the problem is that someone like Searle (likely) hasn’t engaged in methods of attention training, so of course he doesn’t understand it.

The basic problem is that intellectuals, who are trained in a certain method, which is analytical thinking, use this method to criticize an insight that can’t be known through thinking. They are using the only tool they have, thinking, when it isn’t the right tool to use for this specific case. The appropriate response would be to engage in the methodology of contemplatives, which is attention training through methods like meditation. This would likely take years of training because training attention, like training thinking, is difficult. After sufficiently training in the field, just like after sufficiently training in academic fields, the intellectual would then try to understand the highest teachings. These would include trying to understand the pointers of the Harding’s Headless Way, Zen, Dzogchen, and Advaita, etc. After all this training, if they decided that meditation and the insights spoken about were nonsense, that would be more respectable. If these intellectuals were to engage in this process, it would be a mature, open-minded, well-reasoned approach. With the way these intellectuals currently have engaged in criticism, it’s sort of like asking a random person on the street to look at a high-level physics paper and them saying, “I don’t see the payoff of this paper! It makes no sense!” Of course, the high-level physics paper makes no sense to this person because they haven’t been trained physics. Training attention is hard, and it like any other field it requires diligent study. There’s a reason why traditions like Vedanta and Buddhism have stressed the importance of training attention for thousands of years.

5.2. Harding's Insight

Now we'll look at Ernst Mach's picture which prompted Harding's insight. This picture, Figure 1, directly shows "headlessness":

Figure 1: Ernst Mach's Picture of the First-Person Experience



This picture shows headlessness. As can be seen, from the viewpoint of our first-person experience, we don't have a head. Awareness, which is "I" covers our entire visual field, and all objects occur within "I". The headless pointer tries to show that the perception of being somewhere behind our eyes, looking out at the world, isn't accurate. Our typical perception of there being an objective world isn't accurate; it's illusory. When perceiving clearly, the world is subjective whereby all objects are appearing in us. This includes the object of the body-mind organism, which we typically take to be "I". This is like Maharshi's statement in "Who Am I?" where he states:

If the mind, which is the instrument of knowledge and is the basis of all activity, subsides, the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases. Unless the illusory perception of the serpent as the rope ceases, the rope on which the illusion is formed is not perceived as such. Similarly, unless the illusory nature of the perception of the world as a[n] objective reality ceases, the Vision of the true nature of the Self, on which the illusion is formed, is not obtained (Maharshi)

As can be seen in Mach's picture, the room is within the field of knowing. Thus, the room is within "I". The pointer that "I have no head" pushes us to drop identification with the body. After all, it's only an assumption that I'm a body or that I'm in a body. By saying "I have no head" it's *not* saying there's a body-mind organism that has no head. As Harris states, Harding was not "claiming to have literally been decapitated" (Harris 144). More accurately, Harris means Harding was not claiming that his body-mind organism was literally decapitated. Of course Harding would still acknowledge that his body-mind organism still had a head. But Harding did mean it when he said "I have no head". As Harding states:

The best day of my life – my rebirthday, so to speak – was when I found I had no head. This is not a literary gambit, a witticism designed to arouse interest at any cost. I mean it in all seriousness: I have no head" (Harding 1).

Harding is saying “I have no head” because he’s referring to “I” as awareness, pure consciousness, Self, not-self, emptiness, etc. And the statement “I have no head” is attempting to trigger insight into this for the student. Again, this acts like a Zen Koan. From the standpoint of our typical assumptions, the key one being ‘I am a body-mind’, the statement “I have no head” makes no sense. But when one sits with this statement for a longtime, insight may occur through the mechanisms explained in the section on Zen koans. This insight shows that one doesn’t have a head, when identification with the body-mind is seen through. The statement “I have no head” is also like the Zen Koan “Show me your original face before you were born” which we previously covered. The original face, refers to the no-face of the world. Again, refer to the Ernst Mach picture and see that we don’t see the face of the body-mind.

Of course, it could be claimed that we could look in a mirror to see our head. But this is again assuming that “I” is the body-mind. If we’re perceiving clearly, we’ll see that seeing is open and that the body-mind organism is equally known among all objects within the field of knowing (the true ‘I’). Our identification and attachment to the body-mind makes it seem like we’re floating around somewhere in the body. This is a compelling illusion, which is propagated by the flux of thoughts, sensations, and emotions which occur in the body-mind. These thoughts, sensations, and emotions, make it seem like there is an “I” having these thoughts, sensations, and emotions (ex. I am Tejas, I am Duncan, I am Mark). This can be called ‘the sense of I am’ which is a more contracted state of consciousness than ‘I am’ which is the field of knowing. “I am” which is open consciousness isn’t limited to the body-mind and is our true nature.

Cutting through the illusion of ‘the sense of I am’ is simple, yet difficult. It’s simple because the illusion is already an illusion and only needs to be seen through. Paradoxically, it’s already seen through since we’re already there, but it appears like we’re not. Again, the rope and snake analogy is helpful. The rope was always a rope; it only appeared to be a snake. On the other hand, which is more useful way to view the situation in 99% of cases, ‘the sense’ of I am is difficult to see through. The torrent of thoughts, which we identify with, thus forming a seeming thinker, makes glimpsing this state difficult for the vast majority of people. And even if it’s glimpsed, the “so what?” thought will occur for most people. This is why training in meditation is extremely useful. Meditation gradually shows practitioners that we’re not thoughts, sensations, and emotions. Meditation gradually drops identification with the body-mind. In other words, it gradually drops ‘the sense of I am’. In most cases, there won’t be insight in terms of an “ah-ha” instant moment where ‘the sense of I am’ is cut through. But this gradual dropping increases the probability there will be insight into ‘I am’ at some point. Or there may even be no insight, and identification with the body-mind is lessened to such a degree that it doesn’t matter there has been no insight. And on the other hand, even if there’s insight and a seeing through ‘the sense of I am’, this insight must be hit repeatedly so that one functionally operates from this insight. Stabilization must occur in the ‘direct path’ of insight, as Dzogchen stresses for example. Even if there’s insight, our *vasanas*,⁵³ habitual tendencies, which are within the body-mind, compel us to act in ways that are not in accordance with insight. There’s a lifetime of habit in identifying with the body-mind, so if it’s momentarily seen that the body-mind is not the true Self, misidentification

⁵³ This is a Vedantic term.

with the body-mind and its negative tendencies will happen. For these negative tendencies to lessen, the insight must occur more and more. In terms of the headless way, one must recognize their headless state repeatedly.

5.3. Harding's Pointing Experiment

To make Harding's insight clearer, we'll look at one of the experiments he developed. This experiment is called "the pointing experiment" which literally points to pure consciousness. I strongly encourage the reader to click on the link below. In it, Richard Lang, who was Douglas Harding's main student and is the current leader⁵⁴ of the Headless Way, leads the viewer through the pointing experiments:

Lang, Richard. "Pointing Experiment." *Youtube*, uploaded by Richard Lang, 13 Feb, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jYbDFyLhgl>.

I'll now explain the experiment in writing. When reading my explanation, readers should *not* merely intellectualize *about* the experiment; they must try it themselves. In the experiment, Lang starts by taking his finger and pointing to various objects (things) in the room. First, he points at a picture and notices it has shape and colour. It's a thing. Second, he points at a fireplace and notices it has shape and colour. It's a thing. Third, he points at the carpet and notices it has shape and colour. It's a thing. Fourth, he points at his foot

⁵⁴ The Headless Way has no leader and is adamant about this. The Headless Way asserts that everyone is their own authority and fiercely insists on egalitarianism between teacher-student. This is an admirable facet about the Headless Way, especially since many 'spiritual' groups have had instances where teachers indoctrinate and exploit students. I refer to Lang as "the current leader of the Headless Way" for purely practical purposes to communicate his credibility.

and notices it has shape and colour. It's a thing. Fifth, he points at his knee and notices it has shape and colour. It's a thing. Sixth, he points at his torso and notices it has shape and colour. It's a thing. Last, and most important, Lang points towards where others see his face, where he's looking out from. Lang asks whether we see our face, eyes, cheeks, mouth, colour, shape, or any-*thing* here. Lang asks us to put aside what we *think* we know and put aside all assumed beliefs. He asks us to look directly at our experience with a fresh look. Lang says that he and by implication others, if they are looking clearly, will see no-thing. We won't see our face, eyes, mouth, or head. We may see some fuzzy blob, but without referring to thought (memory) we can't say it says 'nose'. Instead, we see "emptiness...which is boundless, still, awake" (Lang). We then take our other hand and point out towards the world filled with things. With one finger pointing towards our nothingness and another pointing towards the world filled with things, we see there is no separation between the two. Thus, emptiness is also full (Lang). As Lang states, "my faceless consciousness merges with and becomes the world" (Lang).

As with Ernst Mach's picture and Harding's statement that "I have no head" this experiment will either work or not. And even if it works, it's highly likely the implications of this insight aren't seen which renders the insight functionally null. This moves nicely into the last chapter of this thesis which is on the methods of philosophy.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1. Insight and Thinking: Two Philosophical Methods

I've shown there have been two main philosophical methods in the history of philosophy that's been covered: insight and thinking. Western philosophy, beginning at least with Parmenides and Plato in the 6th century BCE, used methods of both insight (*nous*) and thinking (*dianoia*). But with modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes in the 17th century, thinking was the main method used, and insight was often times marginalized and ignored. Contemporary analytic philosophy, which is the dominant philosophical tradition in today's age, continues Descartes' philosophical method by viewing thinking as the main and often times best or only way to do philosophy. But as we can see when investigating the history of Western philosophy, insight has been viewed as a legitimate method in prior ages. In fact, insight was viewed as a legitimate method by the founders of Western philosophy.

Eastern philosophy, starting with Vedantic philosophy in the 8th century BCE, has viewed insight as a legitimate philosophical method. This continues in contemporary times, with philosophers/sages such as Ramana Maharshi, Ponlop Rinpoche, Chung-Ying Cheng, Sam Harris, and Douglas Harding, using methods of insight to do philosophy. These philosophers come from various traditions, including Advaita Vedanta, Dzogchen Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and the Headless Way. All these people and their traditions say that insight is a legitimate philosophical method. It's important to note that they're not saying anything radical; they're simply continuing a method that's been used for almost 4000 years. It might *seem* like they're advocating radical philosophical methods,

but this is only because of our current historical positioning. Our current historical and location-based positioning within the West, tells us that thinking is *the* way to do philosophy. But we only believe this because it's what we've been taught. If we look further and deeper, we see there are other ways to do philosophy.

6.2. Insight and Thinking on the Nature of the Self

When looking at the methods of philosophy, I've connected this to inquiry into the nature of the self. In other words, I've investigated how thinking and insight determine what "I" refers to.

Descartes uses thinking to determine the nature of the self. He famously attempts to discover what he can know without doubt and the method he uses to conduct this investigation is thinking. He concludes that the fundamental thing he can know is "I am, I exist" as a thinking thing. Put otherwise, the fundamental thing he concludes is "I am a thinking thing." And again, the method he uses is thinking to determine "I am a thinking thing."⁵⁵

Other philosophers, such as the Ancient Vedic philosophers, Shankara, Ramana Maharshi, the historical Buddha, Garab Dorje, Padmasambhava, Ponlop Rinpoche, Chung-Ying Cheng, Douglas Harding, and possibly Parmenides and Plato, use insight to determine the nature of self. They claim that what we normally take to be the self, the thinker behind the thoughts that Descartes' refers to, isn't the true self. They claim the thinker, is an illusion. The thinker is the sense of self that we commonly have. It's the

⁵⁵ As mentioned in the section on Descartes, arguably this gets close to or is question begging. Perhaps we could call this 'methodological question begging.' Of course Descartes concludes he's a thinking thing since the method he uses is thinking.

view that I am ____ name. For example, “I am Tejas”, or “I am Duncan”, or “I am Mark.” What these philosophers claim, is that “I am” is the true self. “I am” can be referred to as Being, pure consciousness, awareness, the Self, etc. This framing in positive terms is favoured by Vedantic philosophy. The negative framing is favoured by Buddhist philosophy. Buddhists use the terms: “not-self”, “non-self”, “no-self”, to negate the existence of the thinker. Thus, Buddhists claims of “not-self” refer to how there is no self in the body-mind organism. In other words, there is no thinker. The Buddhists are then metaphysically silent on the true nature of self. Whether there’s a positive framing or a negative framing, all agree that the true nature of self can’t be expressed; it’s ineffable. All traditions also agree that the true nature of self cannot be known through thought. There must be insight into the true nature of self.

6.3. Incorporating Attention Training as Philosophical Training

My aim in this thesis has been to demonstrate that insight is a useful but not infallible philosophical method for coming to conclusions about the true nature of the self. That being said, one limitation of my discussion is that talking about the issue of insight as a method is less convincing than *actually engaging in meditative training and experiencing the insight for oneself*. This training is *not* more thinking about the method of insight. It’s about engaging insight training on its own terms. Since insight is spontaneous, it can’t be trained directly. But there are ways to increase the probability of insight occurring and that’s through attention training. One way of training attention, which has been practiced for thousands of years in Eastern philosophy, is meditation. Training in meditation allows one to directly see the mechanics of their mind. As practice is deepened and attention gets

more refined, then higher practices such as Advaita Vedanta's self-inquiry, Dzogchen pointing out instructions, or Headless Way experiments, may be conducted. To see whether the 'higher practices' claims on the nature of self are true, in almost all cases one needs to spend time engaging with the 'lower practices' such as mindfulness meditation – focusing on the breath and body scans. These 'lower practices' must be mastered before one moves on to the 'higher practices'. Mastering 'lower practices' can take years of diligent work. Again, it's like training any skill; it takes time to master. One can't expect to immediately play high-level tennis without mastering the basics. Focusing on the basics, such as basic technique, footwork, and tactics, can be boring. But it's necessary to set the foundation for high-level tennis. Another example is traditional academic work. One can't expect to understand Quantum mechanics without understanding introductory physics. It's easy for someone who has no background in physics to look at a Quantum mechanics paper, understand nothing, and then declare "there's nothing here! It's all hogwash!". One needs to do the basic training before engaging in the high-level training.

Thus, philosophers should train attention. This is especially necessary for philosophers who do work on the nature of self. Attention training, meditation, should be taught within undergraduate and graduate philosophy programs. Although this might sound radical, it isn't. In Eastern philosophy, meditation has been taught for thousands of years and has been viewed as a legitimate philosophical method. And with Western philosophy, insight has been viewed as a legitimate philosophical method for thousands of years. While Western philosophy has acknowledged this, at least in historical terms, it's been less precise in showing *how* insight can be taught. This is understandable since provoking insight is difficult. This is where Western philosophy can learn from Eastern

philosophy, since Eastern philosophy has developed refined methods for training attention, thus increasing the probability of insight.⁵⁶

Eastern philosophy can learn from Western philosophy in terms of analytical precision. While insight is real, when the knowledge of insight is communicated in language it must be packed in a certain metaphysical framework. In other words, there's the core insight and then the metaphysical packaging. Eastern philosophy on the nature of the self, can sometimes make metaphysical claims that are dubious. These include Vedantic positions such as there's one consciousness, or that the self as awareness exists during dreamless sleep, or that the insight into the true nature of self constitutes ultimate reality. In my view, we can't make these metaphysical claims based on the insight. The more appropriate view is to remain metaphysically agnostic. In my view, many Eastern philosophers subtly acknowledge this, and that's why they claim to let go of the teachings after they've been used. They're saying to let go of the metaphysical framing around the insight, since the metaphysical framing doesn't really matter.

Western analytic methods, with its sharp sword of thinking, is good at pointing out when metaphysical claims stretch themselves. And the same even goes for insight into the self as awareness. Although the "not-self" or "Self" can be directly known, we can't say with 100% certainty that this is true. To be sure, it's more accurate than saying the self is the thinker, but we can't say with 100% certainty that it's true. We can only say it's *more true*. It's possible that there's further insight to be had or further layers of reality that we don't have epistemological access to. After doing philosophy for so long and seeing how basic views can be altered and even experientially shifted, we should be

⁵⁶ I won't get into details of how attention training should be conducted as that's outside the scope of this thesis. My aim is to setup the intellectual grounding to show it should be done.

metaphysically humble. Another way to put this is that we should be metaphysically quiet, at least for the most part. That being said, the recognition of the “not-self” or “Self” seems to be the most solid metaphysical grounding we have. It’s what can be known with the most certainty. This knowledge is a combination of Western and Eastern philosophy. It’s a combination of Descartes’ method to see what’s indubitable and coupling it with Eastern methods of insight. The true nature of self, which is whole, complete, and pure, is the birthright of all of us. It only needs to be recognized.

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