

Chapter 4

The Contemplative Approach to Truth

Scientific research entails an objectification of our perceptions into impersonal “facts” that are then ordered into ongoing knowledge. In addition to science, there is another approach to truth that focuses our consciousness on the processes of consciousness itself as experienced in our interior being. Ken Wilber calls this the “I” approach to truth and distinguishes it from the scientific approach which he calls the “It” approach.¹ In this reference “It” is a symbol for the outward, impersonal, and rational formulation of the scientist’s objective facts.

Clear scientific thinking need not dismiss the “I” approach to truth. By being objective in its approach, science is intentionally *silent* about interior truth. This vow of silence about the subjectivity of the scientist reveals the presence of and the need for another approach to truth. Ken Wilber called this approach the “I” approach to truth. I like that, and I will also use the phrase “the contemplative approach to truth.” The term “contemplative inquiry” is also useful.

The psychologist A. H. Almaas has given considerable clarity to the term “inquiry.” “Contemplative inquiry” can be defined as consciousness viewing the dynamics of consciousness itself. If we define “mind” as what consciousness experiences of the brains’ workings from the inside, then contemplative inquiry means consciousness using the symbol-using mind to point beyond those symbols to the process of consciousness itself.

The field of psychology illustrates the presence of both the scientific and contemplative approaches to truth. In a strictly scientific approach to the human psyche only human behavior and human reports of interior experience are studied. There is no way to objectively look “inside” at the consciousness of another human being. When we think we see another’s consciousness, we are actually looking inside our own consciousness and making comparisons with what we observe about another person’s behaviors and that person’s reports about their inner experience. Psychology is a field of study that straddles the scientific approach to truth and the contemplative approach to truth. The “It” aspects of psychology are glorified in the behavioral schools of psychology, and the “I” aspects of psychology are glorified in the depth psychology schools. But all schools of psychology use both approaches to truth. If they did not, they would have no way to study the human psyche.

When we read psychology, we find it meaningful to the extent that it illuminates our own interior experience. Art is another aspect of human culture that came into being to illuminate our interior experience. Unlike psychology, art does not need to even pretend to be scientific. Indeed, art needs to be liberated from objectified reason. Artists need to feel free to use wildly expressive forms of symbolism – myth, ritual, dance, song, poem, painting, sculpture, and architectural design. The truth of artistic expression is not the truth of science. It is part of an approach to truth I am calling “contemplative inquiry” or the “I” approach to truth.

Outer and Inner Time

In the contemplative approach to truth, the essence of time is experienced differently than the way we experience time in the scientific approach. In the scientific (or “It”) approach to truth, time is pictured as a line representing past, present, and future. This line is divided up into years, hours, seconds, milliseconds, and other measurable “lengths” of time. Time is viewed as a dimension of reality in the same

¹ Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995). I am not following Wilber’s models exactly, but I credit him with inspiring me in constructing the models I will use.

sense that there are three dimensions of space. The scientist can locate events as occurring at some space/time coordinate. The most mysterious aspect of time from the scientific point of view is the present. The past can be ordered into plausible stories. The future can be predicted in terms of more plausible or less plausible, likely or unlikely outcomes. But the present is viewed as a point on a line that divides past from future – an infinitesimal nothingness that is neither past nor future.

But in our contemplative approach to truth, we do not experience the present as nothing. Indeed, from the contemplative perspective the present is the only time there is. The past is only a memory – a memory experienced in the present. And the future is only anticipation – an anticipation experienced in the present. In the contemplative approach to truth, the time is always NOW. (I will capitalize NOW in order to symbolize the felt lastingness of our conscious experience of time.) Our contemplative inquiry is inquiry into the NOW of consciously being conscious of the contents of consciousness. This does not mean that there is no time. Rather, time is experienced as a flow, as a ceaseless changing of content. This flowing content is coming into being and going out of being in each moment of experience. This flow can include the relative continuation of some aspects of our experience while other aspects of our experience begin or end with relative abruptness. Consciousness is a flow. And our consciousness of consciousness is a flow. And this flow is taking place through an enduring stillness we call “NOW.”

Further, consciousness is not merely a passive attentiveness to the flow of the NOW. Consciousness can interrupt or redirect this flow. Consciousness is a capacity for taking initiative, a capacity for intentionality, a capacity for choosing aspects of reality to focus upon. We choose memories of the past to interpret. We choose anticipations of the future to embrace or avoid. Consciousness includes making decisions in the present to move the flow of Reality in chosen directions through employing the powers of consciousness, intelligence, body movements, as well as our social accumulation of historical power that is currently allotted to the subject doing the contemplating. All this attention and intention takes place in the NOW of consciousness. The future NOW is being affected by conscious choices, and also that future is going to be a surprise beyond the control of consciousness.

When we are using the scientific approach to truth, we view time objectively as a line extending backward into the past and forward into the future. Strange as this may seem, we do not have to choose between our scientific knowledge of time and our personal experience of time. Both are valid in their own way. We confront a seeming contradiction between these two approaches to truth because the finite human mind is attempting to describe a truth that is beyond the mind's capacity. Neither of these two approaches is wrong; nor is either all-inclusive in the sense that it can dismiss the validity of the other approach. Perhaps this situation is similar to how contemporary physics views light as both waves and particles. We have these contradictory images of light because the actuality of light is more than what can be contained in either picture. Similarly, the actuality of time is more than what can be pictured by the human mind in one consistent picture.

Outer and Inner Space

Our three-dimensional picture of outer space works well for our navigation in the world, but here again we have a different awareness when we focus on the contents of contemplative inquiry. In contemplative inquiry we do not have a subject viewing an object that is external to the viewer. The “subject” doing the inquiry is also the “object” of the inquiry. Some philosopher might argue that the “subject” is seeing his or her consciousness as an “object” that existed in the past, but this view is inadequate, for

memory and anticipation are part of what is happening NOW to the "I" of consciousness. This means that when we have opted for the process of contemplative inquiry the dualism of subject and object has been replaced. A subject ("I") is inquiring into the contents of an inner space knowing only to that "I" and that inner space is present only NOW. There is no "objective experience" in the scientific sense. Inner space is a construction of the "I" in the here and now.

The scientist, using the scientific approach to truth, can realize the he or she is a subjective "I" that observes objective inputs that are not the subjective person doing the observing. But this scientific observer keeps a distance from the things observed. That is part of what it means to call science the "It" approach. Science does not study the conscious "I," even though the scientist is clearly a conscious "I" studying some specific realm of "Its." Science can correlate the reports and behaviors of conscious beings with the brain functions that can be studied in an objective laboratory. Scientific theories can be formulated to say which functionings of the human brain correspond with which reports from a sample of brain owners who are reporting their feelings of fear or joy or whatever.

In the "I" approach to truth there is no inquiry into the brain as an outwardly experienced entity, and there is no "need" for correlating inward reports with brain functions. Rather, the "I" approach focuses on the solitary person's experience of his or her own consciousness. If the word "brain" is used in the contemplative context it means inwardly noticing subtle feelings in the head area. The word "mind" is the word most used for our inward experience of brain functioning.

In the "I" approach to truth we can notice the operation of something we call "mind" handling images and symbols. We can notice how mind correlates these elements of thought with sensory inputs that are directly impressed upon the inner being as contents of consciousness. "Sensory inputs" is a scientific metaphor. When we use the term "sensory inputs" as contents within the field of consciousness, we are pointing to an inner experience of specific sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and touches. These sensations are movements within the field of consciousness. Thoughts are also movements within the field of consciousness. Emotional feelings are likewise movements within this field of consciousness. Everything in inner space is part of a flow though the ever-present NOW.

As we attempt to describe how different the "I" approach is from the "it" approach a confusion also arises about the meaning of the word "objects." Neither scientific research nor contemplative inquiry observes objects. Scientists observe sensory inputs. Objects are mental creations that give meaning to these sensory inputs. No one has actually seen an electron or a proton or an atom. These are all inventions of the human mind to hold some very carefully gathered sensory inputs. We could say the same for the object "cat." We have created "cat" to hold in our minds our experiences of a certain set of moving, jumping, meowing sensations. Similarly, when the contemplative approach is observing our interior subjectivity, we have only our conscious noticings. We are inventing with our minds whatever interior "objects" we say we notice. For example, states of feelings or patterns of thought are just a set of noticings to which we have given defining names. This is a surprising insight only because our mind is always at work to help us with our inputs and noticings. We have to slow our mind down to a very slow walk to notice how much of what we assume to exist has been created by our busy minds. Obviously, we intend for our mental creations to have helpful correspondence with what we actually experience, but we can notice that we create this correspondence and recreate it again and again. Unless we pay attention to this dynamic, we will drift into some humanly invented unreality from which perspective we then flee or fight with what is Real.

Living with Contradictory Approaches to Truth

These two approaches to truth are quite different and contradictory in many ways, yet each of them includes a view of the other approach. When we opt for the “I” approach, we view the scientific approach to truth as nothing more than one of the processes conducted by the interior mind. Within the contemplative approach we see that the scientific line of past and future, divided by an infinitesimal point called the “present,” is merely a concept in the mind. This line of time can be viewed as a useful concept. The scientific concept of time is useful for ordering memory and for ordering anticipation. But if we remain in the contemplative approach to truth, we know that this memory and this anticipation is taking place NOW. From the point of view of the “I” approach, the “It” approach to truth is seen as a sophisticated mental tool for evaluating memories, assessing anticipations, and making decisions. From the contemplative view, the whole of science is seen as an activity in the NOW conducted by consciousness using the facilities of the mind.

When we use the “It” approach to truth to view the “I” approach to truth, we see contemplative inquiry as a means of providing reports that can be objectively evaluated. These reports can be viewed as “Its” for scientific theorizing. For the scientist, these reports about states of consciousness are “Its” – objectively conceived states that exist in living animals. A clear scientific philosophy will assert that science cannot say anything about consciousness directly, for science has no direct access to consciousness. Science can only observe the behaviors and reports of conscious beings. Within such an understanding, good science is respectfully silent about consciousness and waits for consciousness to make its reports. Some scientists and philosophers of science have presumed to tell us how consciousness emerges from the material body or how consciousness is able to initiate the actions of the physical body. But such topics are beyond the competence of science, for consciousness is an “I” not an “It,” and only “Its” exist in the realm of research for which science is competent.

If a scientist attempts to minimize or dismiss altogether the contemplative approach to truth (as some philosophers of science tend to do), the actual scientific person faces an enigma. As a human person the scientist is a subjective being, but in the *dedication* to be objective, the scientist must be *silent* about his or her own subjectivity. This intentional silence is a witness to the existence of subjectivity and to the need for an approach to truth that deals with it. This “other-than-scientific” approach to truth is what I am pointing to with the term “contemplative inquiry.”

On the other hand, if a dedicated contemplative inquirer attempts to minimize or dismiss altogether the scientific approach to truth (as some mystical philosophers tend to do), this contemplating person faces an enigma, his or her memory and anticipation would be without content if the objective (scientific) approach to truth were not also operative. The contemplative inquirer commonly accepts patterns of objectivity about past memories and about future anticipations. For example, notions about a Big Bang beginning or about galaxies, stars, planets, species of life, evolution, or human history could not have entered consciousness without the operation of the scientific approach to truth. I am using the phrase “scientific approach” very broadly. Humanity has always been “scientific” in the elemental sense of ordering sensory inputs. Contemporary science is a sophisticated version of a truth-seeking process that is essential to human mental functioning. Also, other species also do trial and error learning with what I will call “images” rather than word and mathematical symbols.

Humans also use their image-using mind in trial and error learning. Let us use the illustration of attempting to bat a baseball. Our image-using mind turns the sensory inputs of the approaching ball into a sequence of memories – into an imagined path that is curving or not curving and is heading toward some anticipated location as it passes

me, the batter. This elemental experience of the mind's working is a primitive aspect of the human mind's evolution, an aspect of mind functioning that we share with the dog catching a Frisbee. The conceptual complexities of contemporary scientific research is a sophisticated enhancement of the experience of that dog or that batter watching a ball approach the batter's box. Science is a sophisticated operation with symbols of this more primitive mental process present in both dogs and humans. From a memory of sensory inputs, science fashions theories about the behavior of reality and thereby anticipates the future in meaningful ways.

There is no escape from the scientific approach to truth. The most accomplished and dedicated mystic of contemplative excellence is still participating in the scientific approach to truth. Each human being is both scientist and contemplator. These two approaches to truth are unavoidable – even though many humans persist in a foolish attempt to make one of them their whole quest for truth.