

3/26/19

MOTS Chapter 33: Let There Be Light and that Brings Sight

Knowledge, to know its own nature here,
has become earth and the other elements;
spiraling up, back and turning round,
like a glowing twig it is ever turning.

Free translation:

As when a burning ember is twirled in a figure-eight movement and produces endless patterns, knowledge, in order to know its own potentials, modifies itself into endless eidetic modes, like earth and all such, and creates the phenomenal flux.

Considering the light in the title, Nitya doesn't say much directly about it. Bill was rightly baffled by the connection, and we pondered it for a time. Nitya is clearly quoting the Biblical God's very first commandment: Let there be light! The only thing I can imagine is that the light here is Knowledge, Narayana Guru's Absolute, and it creates everything—it becomes earth and the rest—which is the domain of sight, meaning awareness. If this is true, I might paraphrase the title as The Creative Impulse Brings a Sentient Universe into Existence.

In a sense, then, the universe is like a mirror, registering incoming light and reflecting it out in all directions, with distortions added in direct proportion to its configuration. If there is no light there is nothing to show. If there is light there is creation to be illuminated, which is ever a work under construction.

Deb opened the dialogue by saying that more than just pure light, what we normally see is its endlessly complex variations and possibilities, made all the more complicated because each of us is our own house of mirrors. Mirrors interacting with mirrors creates a most diabolic funhouse (Scott's interjection). Bill added that we don't just take in what we see, but we add our own modifications

based on our experience. The resultant complexity is incredibly daunting to unravel.

Deb agreed that this makes authentic experience a rare occasion, and she mused on all the conflicting interpretations we all have, how our memories differ of what happened between us, accusations of “You don’t love me,” and all that. She saw that the appearance of reality tricks us into being self-assured about our own positions, which leads to the butting of egos: the mirror seems static, and we seem static to ourselves, but it is all in constant motion. The very flow of time is in it.

The complexity can tempt us to surrender and give up looking for the exit from the funhouse, and the misery of being trapped further saps our strength, but for those who must keep trying, Nitya is willing to stand by and offer assistance. Since the seeming reality of what is seen in the mirror is illusory, Nitya begins by questioning it:

What is the validity of the space, forms, motion, and time that I experience in the mirror? They are not actual, they are virtual images of actual space, actual form, actual motion and actual time. Do I know what time, space, motion and the forms of things actually are? The time that I directly experience, the space that I directly perceive, and the forms of things that I come to know as concrete objects with my sight and touch are also images. They are reflected in a mirror within me. It is my own mind.

I’m sure we’re all familiar with Nitya’s analogy of the human mind as resembling a movie theater. Here he adds a touch of what’s backstage in the version with actual actors, the auditorium:

The mind is the most complex of all mirrors. It has an arrangement very much like that of a theater.... It has a public stage and a private rehearsal chamber. The public stage is the wakeful consciousness and the private chamber is a

windowless subjectivity. The private chamber has a number of cubicles in it for playing the endless hidden games of the psyche.

Nitya wants to heighten our awareness of the impediments to interpersonal as well as intrapersonal communication, so as to mitigate the illusion of reality imposed by what he later calls a house of mirrors. For those unfamiliar with the term, amusement parks often include a maze through a complex mirror-filled passage that you can get really lost in. They are simple enough that everyone gets out sooner or later, but in real life escape from a mental version is far more rare. Most people end up living permanently in a kind of house of mirrors, bouncing off one distorted reflection after another and eventually resigning themselves to accept their entrapment as reality. Nitya touches on this theme:

The auditorium of each person's mind is unique. The consciousness that appears on the public stage has no direct dealings with the persons and objects that are included in the mind's makeshift auditorium from time to time. All interpersonal and subject-object encounters are arranged through a series of reflections, echoes, and other duplicating devices. The author of this grand drama of life is God Itself, who is hiding away from all, and yet is present within all to watch the comic tragedies and tragic comedies that are unfolding day and night. The director is jiva—a combination of Freud's id, ego and libido.

I'm not sure why Nitya uses libido in place of superego to complete the Freudian trinity. The libido is one of the main impulses of the ego. It may be a simple mistake. In any case, all the forces, like libido, that push us this way and that fall under the directorship of the jiva or individual creature, and are more or less at odds with the purity of the underlying template, which Nitya

here attributes to God. It's a perfect use of the controversial term, but then every term for such a primary principle is controversial. See Part II. And if you need a good laugh about the house of mirrors, you can check out Charlie Chaplin in one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G09dfRrUxUM>.

Nitya makes his point about how we are easily fooled perfectly clear, though it rarely gets across to us in its fully dire reality:

The mirror arrangement is intricate and very complicated, but the way in which it works is so simple and flows so smoothly that no one notices the mirror's existence at all. The manipulation is done with such amazing dexterity that no one suspects the effects to be anything other than reality. All the same it can cause awe in the mind of anyone who has given any attention to the mirroring devices of the mind.

We only appreciate how complex the presentation in the mirror is if we stop to take a good close look, and it is truly awesome. No matter how fast we turn our head, everything remains in its place as an apparently incontrovertible reality. We can't duck under it or jump over it. It's layers and layers deep, much more than just a superficial appearance. Bill noticed that Nitya brings in the broad layers of the gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas, near the end, under his favored English terms transparent, translucent and opaque:

The vast uncharted depth of the psyche has in it many hidden worlds of transparent brilliance, translucent complexity and opaque contrivance. When the mind mirrors the transparent inner light, the sight and the seer have no separation from the source of illumination. When it mirrors the translucent complexity of the hidden psyche, it does more than simply reflect: it has the strange power to create highly energetic gestures of reaction which masquerade as symbols. When the mirror is opaque, one never knows what is hidden but

experiences only vague fears and insecurities of the unknown, the hatred of the hidden other, and a sense of remorse over what appears to be missing.

It's always good to keep in mind the Gita's instruction to transcend all the gunas, and not just try to be "more sattvic," otherwise we fall into the trap of "mirror-polishing Zen." When caught in a madhouse of mirrors, we aren't aiming to clean them up and get them perfectly adjusted so they work better, but to break out entirely.

Obviously it's better to be in resonance with the original Light, but polishing isn't the way to accomplish this. That last sentence really hit me as accurately describing the mental state of millions of panicked humans these days, whose vague fears and insecurities are once again being blown into warlike manias using hatred of the imaginary other and a sense of remorse for the lost "good old days" that never were. Humans as a whole are trapped in the cycle of sattva-rajas-tamas, and the only good thing about becoming fully tamasic is that after the explosion is sattva's best chance of permeating what's left. Round and round we go.

Deb wondered how we can ever step back from it? Since it is light alone, how do we participate in it? How can we even understand anything?

Moni has been inspired by this reading through Meditations on the Self to think about how the mind develops from what Nitya calls here the Blue Room at the entrance to the house of mirrors, the emptiness prior to becoming mired in manifestation. She has been observing babies, how their minds start working, which is similar to starting with nothing and slowly adding bits and pieces until a recognizable form begins to show itself. Each stage is a delight to the onlookers, eager to have another being join the party. Moni has been amazed at how advanced even an infant is already, and how much is involved with each small step.

Her tale of wonder prompted me to reprise the general idea of the glowing twig, from the verse. Its tip is a spark of firelight

swirling through the air and leaving a visible trail that exists only in our mind. Implied in the image is the entire ensemble of the present with its memory trail tagging along and gradually fading out. The glow of the Now captures our attention, but it is always moving, so if we try to catch hold of it we can only touch the evanescent aftermath. It's a symbol for how we need to detach from our conditioning to apprehend the new, and actually watching a twirling twig makes a liberating meditation on precisely that, next time you have a campfire.

Curiously, in Peter O's new book (previewed in Part II), he combines Atmo verses 30 & 31. In *Meditations on the Self*, Nitya pairs verses 31 & 32. But as we began to talk about verse 33, I could see how it needed to be combined with verse 32. There was a sense that knowledge becomes *real* as earth and all the elements, and 33 in isolation does sound that way. The problem is that in the previous verse Narayana Guru categorically denied the reality of the elements. Here they are together:

32) What is known is not that in which all qualities inhere,
only the qualities;
as this, in which all qualities are said to inhere, is not visible;
earth and all else do not exist;
remember that there is only a form in knowledge which
supports.

33) Knowledge, to know its own nature here,
has become earth and the other elements;
spiraling up, back and turning round,
like a glowing twig it is ever turning.

So knowledge seems to become all this, but it is never anything other than knowledge, so does it really? The mirroring mind is a very real function, even if what it shows isn't exactly real at all. It's something to think about, anyway.

Scotty told us about his dad, who had lots of epiphanies. One of them was to produce a book with mirrors on every page, accompanied by adages like “I’m enjoying the child within me.” You’d read the words of wisdom and then look at yourself while thinking about them. Cool idea—rather like the mirror Narayana Guru installed in a temple where the deity should have been: you are the deity. Whoever looks in the deity mirror is a deity. I’m going to go look in a mirror and say “I’m enjoying the child within me,” right after I finish writing. It’s a powerful idea.

All these rishis—Scotty’s dad, Nitya and Narayana Guru—are trying to shake us loose from our drearily limited ways of looking, using mirrors. Narayana Guru’s contemporaries would habitually look for the expected god or goddess in the temple, yet he was shouting at them, it’s You! Scotty’s dad wanted us to really get the meaning of common sayings, instead of being content with the mild buzz of identification we feel when we read something we already “know.” And Nitya keeps telling us that what we are seeing is actually a mirror pressed so close to our face that it’s actually within our heads, but we forget as soon as the next moving image catches our attention. Nice try, anyway.

We had time for a substantial meditation, prompted to linger in the emptiness of the blue room instead of attending to any reflections in the house of mirrors waiting in the wings.

Part II

Peter Oppenheimer kindly sent us a copy of his new book hot off the Narayana Gurukula Press in Varkala, *Windows Mirrors and Doors*, a collection of his musings on the Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction, Narayana Guru’s Atmopadesa Satakam, written during his online study with Nancy Yeilding of *That Alone: The Core of Wisdom*. (If he reads this he may send us ordering instructions.) Happily the very beginning of the first verse speaks to the issue of Knowledge, and I shared it with the class, including Narayana Guru’s famous first verse:

Permeating the knowledge which brilliantly shines
at once within and without the knower
is the *karu*; to that, with the five senses withheld,
prostrate again and again with devotion and chant.

A man from Russia is currently staying here at the Varkala Gurukula. He has been here for 3-4 months. The other day, he told me that he finally figured out what is going on here. He said that the classes and books all seemed to be about philosophy but that the tone and tenor of the rituals (e.g. morning and evening “Prayer” and weekly Fire Ceremony) seemed to be religious. What he had come up with was that indeed what is going on here is like religion, but that the object of worship is not some god or deity but Knowledge itself. I’ve been chewing on that since he said it. I think he’s on to something.

Certainly, he could use this first verse of Atmopadesa Satakam as evidence, what with its talk of prostrations, devotions and chantings. And what is the object of this worship? None other than *Arivu* (Knowledge—the knowledge which brilliantly shines as both the inner and outer worlds that are known).

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After reading out Peter’s excellent opening motif, I fleshed it out with some hints from a wonderful new discovery, Frans de Waal’s *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, published in 2013. The author is a primatologist and expert in animal behavior, and perceives the origins of human religious sentiments in the emotions of social animals. In other words, his divine principle is Knowledge also, not some pie in the sky. This has led him to see the same fallacies within atheism that pain me too, the dogmatic insistence on knowing the unknowable. De Waal’s and my positions are

agnostic: since the first cause is unknowable, or at least unknown, it's ridiculous to argue about it. Here are some tasty tidbits from a subchapter titled The Atheist Dilemma, beginning on page 17.

According to most philosophers, we reason ourselves toward moral truths. Even if they don't invoke God, they're still proposing a top-down process in which we formulate the principles and then impose them on human conduct. But do moral deliberations really take place at such an elevated plane? Don't they need to be anchored in who and what we are?

After introducing the neo-atheists, the self-styled "brights," who support this top-down engineering based on rationalism alone, de Waal points out:

We scientists are good at finding out why things are the way they are, or how they work, and I do believe that biology helps us understand why morality looks the way it does. But to go from there to offering moral advice is a stretch.

He adds that atheist morality is solidly grounded in religion, and: "Everything humans have accomplished anywhere—from architecture to music, from art to science—developed hand in hand with religion, never separately. It is impossible, therefore, to know what morality would look like without religion."

De Waal thinks the question of the existence or not of God is "monumentally uninteresting," and quotes philosopher Alain de Botton as calling the question "most boring and unproductive." De Waal chides, "For some this remains the only issue they can talk about. How did we reach this small-mindedness, as if we've joined a debating club, where all one can do is win or lose?"

Moreover, de Waal in school "learned about the 'naturalistic fallacy' and how it would be the zenith of arrogance for scientists to think that their work could illuminate the distinction between

right and wrong.” This was in the wake of WWII, before and during which thousands of scientists had eagerly participated in “unimaginable experiments.” De Waal wonders, “How did we move from deep distrust to naive optimism?” He concludes the section by admitting, “I am profoundly skeptical of the moral purity of science, and feel that its role should never exceed that of morality’s handmaiden.” I wonder if he had in mind Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*—quite likely.

So here’s where the concept of Knowledge per Narayana Guru goes beyond the lower case version de Waal is also denigrating:

The confusion seems to stem from the illusion that all we need for a good society is more knowledge. Once we have figured out the central algorithm of morality, so the thinking goes, we can safely hand things over to science.... Even if science helps us appreciate how morality works, this doesn’t mean it can guide it anymore than that someone who knows how eggs should taste can be expected to lay one.

The view of morality as a set of immutable principles, or laws, that are ours to discover ultimately comes from religion. It doesn’t really matter whether it is God, human reason, or science that formulates these laws. All of these approaches share a top-down orientation, their chief premise being that humans don’t know how to behave and that someone must tell them. But what if morality is created in day-to-day social interaction, not at some abstract mental level?

De Waal sees this socially-grounded morality in animal behavior at its best, sharing numerous wonderful examples he has seen firsthand, and suggests we should look to the examples of animals as a way to broaden our attitude:

This approach deserves attention at a time in which even avowed atheists are unable to wean themselves from a semireligious morality, thinking that the world would be a better place if only a white-coated priesthood could take over from the frocked one.

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Interestingly, Pradeep also shared an article on the same subject this week. Could it be the hand of God at work? This is very nice also, short and thoughtful:

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/atheism-is-inconsistent-with-the-scientific-method-prizewinning-physicist-says/>

Part III

A nice comment arrived from Paisley:

I thought "Let there be light" was a perfect lead-in. It's the opening line of the Genesis equivalent to the verse. The creation of light being the first step in the whole process whereby the primal intelligence creates the phenomenal universe. Though the Hebrew doesn't explicitly say its purpose is to know itself. We are the vehicle, the recognizer. Our purpose is to fulfil that knowledge seeking knowledge. That through our experience of the Everything we might know what we are.