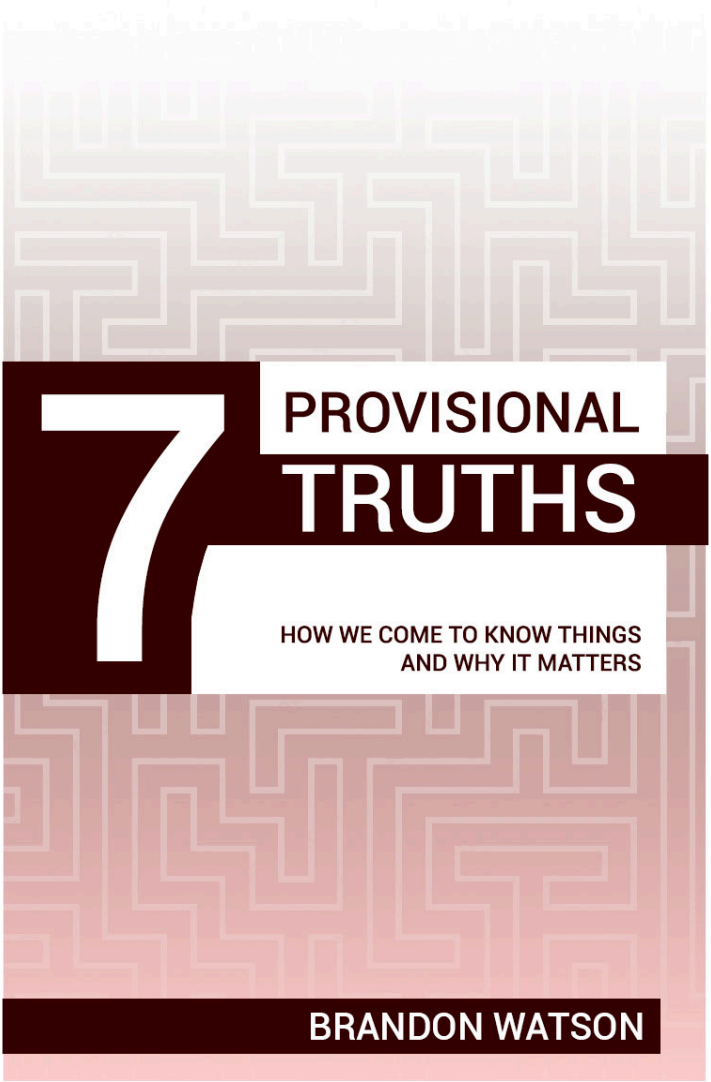
7
PROVISIONAL
TRUTHS
HOW WE COME TO KNOW THINGS
AND WHY IT MATTERS
BRANDON WATSON

7 PROVISIONAL TRUTHS

HOW WE COME TO KNOW THINGS,
AND WHY IT MATTERS

BRANDON WATSON

THE 7 (PROVISIONAL) TRUTHS

1.) MINDS DISCLOSE WORLDS

2.) KNOWLEDGE IS MOSTLY SITUATED COPING

3.) CATEGORIES ARE ALWAYS CONTEXTUAL

4.) ALL PERSPECTIVES ARE PARTIAL

5.) INTELLECT SERVES INTUITION

6.) MOTIVATED REASONING IS THE NORM

7.) BELIEFS SERVE US BEST WHEN HELD LIGHTLY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the brilliant individuals whose ideas, insights, and contributions have greatly influenced the development of this book. While I have included a list of some of their works in the 'Additional Reading' section, I would like to highlight a few individuals in particular - Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosche - without whom this book wouldn't exist. Additionally, the insights of Ken Wilber, Hubert Dreyfus, and John Vervaeke were instrumental to the ideas contained within.

It has often been said that all intellectual contributions are made atop the shoulders of giants; a notion keenly felt throughout the creation of this book. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for the knowledge that you've contributed about ourselves and our world.

- Brandon Watson -

INTRODUCTION

A Little Bit of Philosophy Can Be a Dangerous Thing

In this book we'll be taking a 'guided tour' of how minds acquire valid knowledge about Reality. The basic insight that will guide us on our journey is the importance of the living body to what minds are and how thought works. And the underlying intuition which we'll be exploring is that a more sophisticated understanding of what knowledge is can help us relate to our beliefs about Reality in healthier ways.

So if that's what we're aiming at, let's take a brief moment to lay out what this book is *not*. What this book *won't* do, dear reader, is try to convince you that you should learn to *think like a philosopher*. If it were my goal to add yet another volume to the pop-philosophy sphere, I might have opened this book by challenging you to take up the mantle of Socrates and admit that you know nothing. Or alternatively, I might have gone on to outline a laundry list of specific difficulties that individuals and societies face, and suggest that this or that set of ideas has the power to heal the world's many problems.

Well for better or worse, that's not going to be the approach of this book. Not because philosophy can't be relevant to the real world (quite the opposite in fact, as we'll be exploring throughout our journey), but because philosophy can end up distorting our understanding when applied to the real world in overly simplistic ways. Perhaps one of the best examples of this can be found in the infamous Trolly Problem thought

experiment, which has become a staple of both Intro to Philosophy courses and pop-philosophy.

If you're already familiar with the Trolley Problem feel free to skip ahead to the next paragraph, but for the uninitiated the exercise involves imagining an out of control trolley that's on a deadly collision course with a group of people down the track. The hypothetical choice that you're offered is whether you'd be willing to pull a lever to divert the trolley onto an alternate path with just one person on it, in effect sacrificing one person to save the many. The thought experiment then asks if your decision would remain the same if instead of pulling a lever you'd be willing to shove an extremely fat man onto the tracks to stop the trolley.

The simple scenario presented by this thought experiment is meant to pose questions about the reasoning behind our ethical decisions (*i.e., why does pulling the lever not feel like murder when pushing the fat man onto the tracks does?*) And as an engaging and accessible way to spark someone's curiosity about ethics, the Trolley Problem works well enough. The only problem is that it's about as far removed from how ethics is actually practiced in the real world as controlling a video game character is from learning a martial art. For it gives the mistaken impression that ethics is primarily a form of detached intellectual *reasoning*, rather than an emotionally grounded *capacity* that one cultivates through practice. Consequently, this has the unintended consequence of painting a highly distorted picture of the domain that the Trolley Problem thought experiment is meant to illuminate. And the Trolley Problem is far from the only offender when it comes to how the misapplication of philosophy can leave us more rather than less ignorant, a subject we'll be exploring in some depth over the course of our journey.

In addition, because you know the emotional intricacies of your own life far better than I ever could, this is also not going to be a self-help book. The self-help sphere is already well populated by people far more qualified than I, and also by a motley crew of quacks and grifters. For myself, I have no desire to throw my own hat into that crowded arena.

What this book will offer you is a window into more sophisticated ways of understanding your own mind, along with some practices to begin cultivating more flexible ways of knowing and being. To that end, another one of the aims of this book is to do my small part to help relegate *if-only* ways of thinking to the trash bin, for their eventual destruction at the city incinerator.

We've all come across this sort of *if-only* framing whenever we've encountered black and white thinking about a particular subject. And if we're being honest with ourselves, just about all of us have fallen into the *if-only* trap at various points in our life. I know I certainly have on occasions where my emotional investment in a particular viewpoint has made it difficult to see the partiality of my own perspective. The recipe for *if-only* ways of thinking tend to go like this: you're presented with a complex issue that has many root causes and several potential avenues for ways that it could be addressed. Then you attempt to squeeze the issue at hand down to the more emotionally satisfying confines of an *if-only* framework.

"*If-only* organized religion were to go away…,". Or: "*If-only* we could finally throw off the shackles of global capitalism". Or: "*If-only* our nation would go back to embrace its traditional values…". Or: "*If-only* we could expose the activities of the nefarious cabal that's actually ruling the world…"

You get the picture. The common thread being something along the lines of: *"If-only everyone else had the good sense to see things from my perspective, then the world would be sane and just."*

Problem is, the real world usually doesn't work this way, as it's quite rare for large societal problems to have just a single root cause. Rather, complex problems tend to be the result of a confluence of interrelated factors. This is itself a consequence of living in a world that works through evolving *systems* which interact with one another in complex and non-obvious ways. What makes *if-only* ways of thinking misguided and potentially dangerous is that they tempt us into thinking that we know far more than we actually do about the world, which can blind us to the unintended consequences of the actions we take.

That's all very well and good, you may be thinking, *but what does any of this have to do with how our minds work?*

Well, part of my *motivated reasoning* for writing this book (more on motivated reasoning later) has to do with the ways that an inability to see the *partiality* of one's own perspective feeds into these one-dimensional ways of thinking. While it's not difficult to come up with examples of perspectives that are dangerously disconnected from Reality, what's far more challenging is the recognition that perspectives can be *true but partial.* When we say that something is true but partial, what we mean is that it may be true in a limited or qualified sense while misconstruing what's relevant for the issue at hand; either by leaving out something that's important, or by bringing in and treating as important something that's irrelevant.

To use an example from science, Newtonian mechanics are *true* in the sense that they give a good approximation of how the macroscopic objects that we interact with in our daily lives behave. But it is also *partial* in the sense that it doesn't help us make sense of the subatomic world, or why objects gain mass as they approach the speed of light.

Fortunately a more nuanced understanding of perspectives can be cultivated, and it begins by learning how to understand the partiality of one's own perspective. Which lends itself to a more sophisticated understanding of how minds work; in particular, how your own mind works.

While the discipline of philosophy has had much to say about what minds are and how thought works, unfortunately, much of what the Western philosophical tradition has to say on this topic has been very partial indeed. This broad trend towards partially also includes how philosophy as a discipline has come to be understood in the broader culture, insofar as it paints a misleading picture of what philosophy, when it's at its best, is all about. Far too much attention is usually given to the ideas and works of long dead great thinkers within the tradition, at the expense of philosophy as a *living practice* that one actively engages in. Or to put it another way: philosophy isn't just something you read or listen to, it's something you *do*.

Mind you, this isn't a problem that's intrinsic to philosophy everywhere it's been practiced. In Eastern wisdom traditions such as Buddhism and Vedanta, philosophical theory has always been coupled to living *practices* designed to cultivate insight, such as meditation and yoga. Furthermore, these practices would typically take place among a *community* of practitioners, which emphasizes the ways that philosophy is also a social activity that's meant to be engaged in *with* other

people. Without a similar tradition of practice to ground one's theorizing, much of what philosophy *is* in the West has largely been a form of abstract theorizing; which is a remarkably *partial* approach to philosophy.

Throughout the course of our journey we'll be emphasizing how the accretion of one layer of abstract ideas on top of another can hinder rather than facilitate understanding. We'll also be investigating how an overemphasis of our rational faculties at the expense of the emotions that our rationality is grounded in paints a highly misleading picture of how we use our minds to navigate Reality. Needless to say, abstract theorizing divorced from the directness of our lived experience is not the approach we'll be taking in this book. Rather, the themes we'll be exploring have been crafted with an eye towards our interactions with the everyday world, in all its wonder and mundaneness.

Instead of theory crafting, we'll be starting with our subjective, moment to moment experience and carefully scrutinizing the implicit assumptions we attach to that experience. In doing so, we will be drawing upon the insights of a subset of philosophy known as **phenomenology**, which seeks to understand how our minds interface with Reality by scrutinizing the assumptions we attach to our direct experience. The domain that we'll be exploring with this approach is known as **epistemology,** which concerns itself with theories of knowledge, particularly with *what constitutes valid knowledge*.

The overall structure of this book is organized around *seven central themes*, with each theme being built atop the structure of the ones beneath it, like the floors of a seven story building. The executive suite which resides on the top floor is all about how to cultivate a healthier relationship with our beliefs, but the

metaphorical elevator we'll be using to get there will need to pass through all of the lower stories first.

In addition, each central theme will be introduced with an *orienting metaphor* that ties the ideas which are under consideration to a relatable everyday context. It's my hope that this will provide a gentle onramp for those who are interested in understanding more about how the mind works, but haven't had the time or patience to delve into books that have been written with very little consideration for non-specialists.

One last point, but it's an important one. While it's my sincere hope that you'll find this book valuable and useful, the flipside of that is that *nothing in this book should be taken on faith*. Rather, my intention is that you test these ideas out for yourself in the laboratory of your direct experience, and see if they hold any validity for you. As such, the ongoing theme in this work that *all perspectives are partial* also applies to the perspective of this book.

An *iconoclast* is a term used to describe someone who tears down holy idols, and demonstrates that the sacred beliefs which others have invested themselves in are false. My own ambitions aren't nearly so grandiose. If this book sparks your interest enough to want to cultivate more sophisticated ways of understanding some of your taken for granted beliefs, and if you're able to relate to the world with a bit more flexibility as a result, I'll take that as a win.

Brandon Watson,
2023

GLOSSARY OF PHILOSOPHICAL JARGON

NOTE: While I've gone out of my way to reduce this book's reliance on jargon, in sections where terms from philosophy do show up their meanings will be explained as they're introduced. In addition, I've also included this glossary for your ease of reference; feel free to earmark this page and return to it as necessary. Terms with an entry in the glossary will be written in ***bold.***

Absolutization
Misconstruing something that's relative and perspectival into an ironclad law of Reality.

Adaptive System
An unified entity which is capable of changing its behavior in response to environmental feedback.

Affordance
An 'invitation' for interacting with something in a particular way. For example, chairs offer *affordances* for sitting, while ovens offer *affordances* for cooking.

Axiom
Refers to the foundational assumptions that are accepted as self-evident, which serve as a starting point within a particular framework of thought. 'I think, therefore I am' is an example of an axiom.

Autopoiesis
The capability of living systems to produce and maintain their own parts.

Being
Refers to our most basic ways of understanding people, places, and things ***as*** people, places, and things. When we say that something ***is*** a type of thing, we are referring to its Being.

Being-In-The-World
Refers to how our active and concernful participation in the world is a central and necessary aspect of the human condition. In practice, the term is used to highlight how engaging with the world in a direct and pre-reflective way is inseparable from what kind of beings we are.

Care
Our concernful absorption within a world whose outcomes *matter to us* in some way.

Category Error
Occurs when something is misconstrued to be something that's incompatible with what it truly is. Mistaking a painting of an apple as a piece of food that you can pick up and eat is an example of a category error.

Conceptual Knowledge
Refers to representational categories, classifications, and ideas that form the basis of deliberative modes of thought (such as logic and reason).

Construct

A category or boundary that our minds create and sustain, that's coupled to some observation about ourselves or our world.

Construct Collapse
Refers to the process through which *social constructs* become untenable, and are eventually abandoned. This can happen as a result of their own internal contradictions, mounting external pressures, or some combination thereof.

Coping
A way of orienting oneself to an activity or set of activities that one is involved in.

Domain
A subset of the larger world that's organized around a particular category of things, ideas, or activities.

Embedded
The proposal that the question of how a mind functions can't be considered in isolation from what a life form does within its environment.

Embodied
The proposal that minds and bodies form an integrated system, and that the question of what minds are and how they function can't be meaningfully answered without also considering how minds are structurally linked to a physiological body.

Emergent Novelty
New and unexpected behavioral domains which arise from the *structured* combination and interaction of less complex entities.

Enactivism

A paradigm within cognitive science and philosophy that emphasizes the ways in which minds are inherently embodied and embedded.

Epistemology

A subset of philosophy that concerns itself with theories of knowledge, particularly with *what constitutes valid knowledge*.

Horizon of Significance

The background framework of meaning and importance that's informed by a shared biology and culture, around which individuals construct their identity.

Magical Thinking

A highly egocentric form of world disclosure where all of Reality is thought to revolve around one's personal perspective, and where one's ideas and desires are believed to control the course of events in the material world.

Metaphysics

What the overall structure of Reality is thought to be. Scientific materialism (the idea that Reality consists of matter and energy) and solipsism (the idea that only your own mind exists) are both examples of metaphysics.

Neologism

A newly coined term or expression that was created to fulfill a specific need, which has yet to be widely adopted into mainstream language.

Ontogeny

A term from biology which refers to the development of an organism over the course of its lifespan.

Ontology
A subset of philosophy that concerns itself with questions of Being. The difference between ontology and epistemology can be a bit hard to spot, so here's a tip for distinguishing between the two: *while epistemology asks what constitutes a valid knowledge claim, ontology concerns itself with how knowledge about Reality is possible at all.*

Paradigm
A paradigm is an agreed upon set of methodological standards, practices and verification criteria for a particular domain. What is or isn't considered a relevant fact, and what does or does not constitute a valid methodology for generating knowledge is governed by the paradigm one is operating under.

Performative Contradiction
Refers to an inconsistency within a viewpoint that goes unaddressed, because it's fundamentally unanswerable; and thus inconvenient to those who advocate for that viewpoint.

Phenomenology
A methodology for examining the mind that begins with closely scrutinizing our subjective, lived experience.

Purposive Context
Refers to activities, interests, and goals that can only be made sense of from within a given situation.

Reductionism
A means of simplifying something that's complex for the purposes of making it easier to understand and navigate. All scientific and philosophical models are forms of reductionism.

Relevance Realization

A way of focusing in on what is relevant for a mind's interests and purposes that doesn't rely on rules to guide behavior.

Representationalism
A conception of mind whose roots lie in the European Enlightenment, which posits that minds are mostly passive receivers of an external Reality with pre-existing features, and that our perceptual experiences are fundamentally separated from physical Reality.

Schema
Refers to an organizational structure that's constructed to represent and interpret information within a particular domain.

Situated
Tied to the opportunities and demands of a particular context or set of circumstances.

Situated Coping
A type of nonconceptual, embodied familiarity with the world, from which our conceptual and rational faculties are derived.

Somatic
A term which refers to ideas and practices that deal with the living, physiological body.

World
A world refers to a cumulative whole of meaningful boundaries, patterns, and relationships for a living Being. Or to put it slightly differently, *what Reality **is** on an experiential level for a living Being.*

World Disclosure

Refers to the process by which minds turn Reality into a meaningful world for a living being.

MINDS DISCLOSE WORLDS

Orienting Metaphor :

World disclosure is the mind's way of constructing a home for us within Reality.

What Is A World?
And What Do Worlds Have To Do With Minds?

If, as was alluded to in the Preface, the structure of this book is like a seven story building where the executive suite on the top floor represents more sophisticated ways of relating to our beliefs about Reality, then the ground floor for the rest of our guided tour is all about how minds *disclose worlds*. The orienting metaphor that we'll be returning to throughout this section is that of a *home*, and the main premise of our first 'Provisional Truth' is that a central part of what minds do is to create homes for us within Reality.

And just like a house is constructed to be compatible with the lifestyle of human beings (houses aren't built underwater, nor are their doorways accessed from the ceiling), minds construct a version of Reality for us to live within that comes *pre-arranged in terms of our needs and capacities*. The process by which minds turn Reality into a home for us to reside within is called **world disclosure.**

What a **world** refers to is a cumulative whole of meaningful boundaries, patterns, and relationships *for* a living Being. We can think of a world as what Reality *is* on an experiential level for an individual. To **disclose** is to reveal or uncover something. So world disclosure is the process of revealing a meaningful world within the whole of Reality.

SIDE NOTE: The way we are using the term *world* denotes a more specific meaning than what's normally meant by '*the world*'. *'A world'* refers to an individual's experiential world. While '*the world*' is a cumulation of the broader social, cultural, and ecological environments that exist on our planet. What's being referred to here is the former rather than the latter.

The *meaningful* aspect of world disclosure is the really important part. As living beings that experience and understand things, we do not and could not reside within a bare Reality. What we reside within is a *meaningful world*. Another way of referring to this meaningful world is as *our lived Reality*.

In our metaphor of home construction, houses of course don't build themselves, but are constructed *with* building materials that are actively put together *through* the labor of people. Likewise, minds disclose worlds in accordance *with* the opportunities and demands of a particular environment, *through* the structural organization that's provided by a mind's connection to a living body with *survival needs*.

Accordingly, it is only *through* a living body that a mind has access to a world of people, places, and things. Which is to say, minds are inherently **embodied.** So when we speak of a mind

we're also necessarily speaking of a living body as well, because the question of how a mind functions can't be meaningfully answered without also considering the particulars of how that mind is embodied. The term **somatic** is used to describe ideas and practices that deal with our direct experience of the living body**.** The theory of mind which grounds the themes of this book is a *somatic theory of mind.*

Later on we'll be considering some of the reasons why the importance of the living body to the mind is an area that has largely been neglected throughout Western philosophy (though with a handful of exceptions, which we'll also be exploring). As we do so, we'll also be articulating the challenge that this somatic view poses to *disembodied* conceptions of mind which stretch back to the European Enlightenment. And how these conceptions are still influential to this day, despite how archaic they've become in the light of scientifically informed knowledge. For our present purposes, when we mention that minds are inherently embodied, what we are emphasizing is the importance of the *structural organization* that's provided by a living body to what a mind is.

Importantly, minds do not 'invent' worlds independently from the living body, nor does world disclosure take place in isolation from the totality of the shared Reality that you, I, and everyone else participates in. (In contrast, the idea that minds independently 'create' the whole of Reality and that nothing outside of one's own mind exists is a philosophical hypothesis known as solipsism, which this book unambiguously rejects).

And just in case the distinction between an *environment* and a *world* is still a bit unclear, when we mention an *environment,* what we are referring to are the physical and social spaces

which exert evolutionary selection pressures on a life form. And when we refer to a *world,* what we're referring to are the meaningful boundaries, patterns, and relationships that a mind *experiences* over the course of its life.

Worlds can also be thought of as what environments *become* through minds which are hardwired to experience meaningful things and situations. Or to return to our guiding metaphor for this chapter, the difference between an environment and a world can be likened to the difference between a house and a home. As all of us know, a home isn't just a physical space, but a *significant place* which has been suffused with a rich tapestry of familiarity and meaning.

The upshot of all this is that minds aren't passive spectators that are parachuted into a preexisting world with fixed features. Rather, minds play an *active role* in determining the features of the worlds they come to inhabit. However, this is not to say that minds are free to inhabit just any type of world, nor are the specifics of world disclosure a 'choice' that an individual makes (consciously or otherwise).

Instead, the specifics of world disclosure are in large part a consequence of the *organizational structure* that's provided through a body which is subject to the evolutionary selection pressures of an environment. Which is to say that both body and environment *predispose minds* to different forms of world disclosure, and thus to different types of lived Realities.

Among the more significant aspects of human physiology for the types of world disclosure experienced by human beings are highly expressive and communicative faces, a bipedal posture that's oriented along a front-back axis, highly dexterous hands

that are used to manipulate our surroundings, and forward facing eyesight that serves as our primary navigational sense.

A World Of Affordances

Crucially, these structurally significant aspects of our physiology (our bipedalism, our hands, and our eyesight, to name just a few) play a role in determining the types of **affordances** that our worlds contain. An affordance can be thought of as an invitation to interact with something in some particular way. For example, a chair offers *affordances* for sitting, while a hammer offers *affordances* for hammering.

Importantly, affordances aren't something that we're consciously aware of most of the time; rather, they play a role in *how objects show up for us* in our lived experience. It's simply *obvious to us* that chairs are for sitting and hammers are for hammering. Of course, that's not to imply that objects invite us to interact with them in only one way. A hammer can be used to drive nails into wood, but it can also be used to cave in someone's skull. The particulars of what any given affordance will be aimed at will largely depend on the demands of the *situation* that one is absorbed in.

While this *situational* aspect of affordances will be covered in depth in our next chapter which is all about *Situated Coping*, for the time being what's worth noting about affordances is that they're first and foremost *flexible*. More specifically, affordances assist minds in navigating the complexity of Reality by offering a flexible means for focusing in on what's relevant for our needs and purposes within the situation we're involved in.

It's precisely because affordances are so flexible that an experiential world structured in terms of affordances is a world that's ripe for *improvisation*. And it's largely this *disclosive improvisational framework* which allows minds to adapt to the wide variety of situations that a living being encounters throughout the course of its life.

A good case study of the role that worlds structured in terms of affordances plays in our basic perceptions of Reality can be found in how *our perception of objects* is a consequence of this organizational structure. And it's to *objects* that we now turn.

Scrutinizing The Objective View of Objects

So far we've sketched out a rough outline for how our minds create homes for us within Reality via *world disclosure*. Along the way we've been introduced to the role that *affordances* play in how we relate to the types of things we come across in our environment. We've also briefly explored why experiential worlds that are arranged in terms of affordances are ripe for improvisation. And now we'll be using what we've learned about the active role that minds play in structuring our lived experience to begin scrutinizing some of our basic assumptions about Reality.

On this next leg of our 'guided tour', we'll be taking a visit to an exhibit that we can think of as '*The Hall of Objects'*. As indicated by the writing on our imagined signpost, what we'll be surveying here is the challenge that world disclosure poses to our commonsense conceptions about *what objects are*. Precisely

because object perception is so foundational to what Reality is for us on an experiential level, it makes for an excellent case study of how minds *construct* their lived Reality.

Let's begin by taking the time to spell out what this everyday, commonsense conception of objects actually entails. If we pay close attention to how we normally think about objects, we come to find that our everyday conceptions are grounded by an **absolutization** of objects. That is, by the implicit assumption that the objects we encounter in our lived experience exist *absolutely*. When we believe that something exists absolutely what we're intuiting is that the entity under consideration is *aperspectival,* or that it exists independently from the perceptions that our minds form about Reality. For convenience we'll refer to our everyday conceptual understanding of objects as the *objective view*; in that it's rooted in an implied objectivity which uses a 'view from nowhere' as a lens to contextualize what objects are.

Before proposing an alternative to the objective view, let's pour one out for good old fashioned common sense by clarifying what the objective view gets right; and why it's proven itself useful in spite of its limitations. Let no one say that common sense hasn't been given its fair due in this book, dear reader. As it's not my intention to bash common sense, but rather to better contextualize it by articulating both its utility and its limitations.

So what does the objective view accomplish for us? Well, quite a lot actually, as the objective view does point towards a *partial truth*, and a very important one at that. Which is that the objects we encounter have a 'realness' to them which extends beyond the immediacy of our perception; and that our individual perspective is not the center of Reality. Together, these two

intuitions are grounded by the more general observation that Reality doesn't seem to bend to our will in 'magical' ways. It should be relatively unsurprising then that the *objective view* is an antithesis to what's typically referred to as **magical thinking**. Magical thinking is the default form of world disclosure for young children, and elements of it can be found in the beliefs and mythologies of our ancestors whose lived experience of Reality was that of a 'spirit haunted world'.

A hallmark of magical forms of world disclosure is that they are highly *egocentric*, anchored as they are in a Self that's pre-differentiated from its surroundings. Individuals who are immersed in this form of world disclosure have yet to fully disentangle their thoughts and emotions from the shared Reality that everyone participates in. Patterns and phenomena that one experiences at this developmental stage tend to be highly anthropomorphized; everyday events given fantastical explanations. (*The sun rises every morning because that's when mommy takes me to school. The toy fell over because it was sad. Everyone in the world sees what I see and hears what I hear.)*

If a child's cognitive development proceeds normally, magical forms of thinking tend to be supplanted by something resembling the objective view by the time a person reaches adolescence. While the advantages of the objective view over magical thinking are fairly obvious, if stated explicitly they could be summarized as: (1) Access to much more reliable knowledge about Reality. (2) A greatly expanded ability to take the perspective of others.

So for most of our everyday purposes, the objective view of objects serves us perfectly well. Recall however that our embodied minds, just like every other aspect of our physiology,

is the result of a long and arduous series of survival adaptations to environmental selection pressures. And importantly, the adaptations that arise from selection pressures aren't necessarily 'optimal'. And they certainly aren't perfect. Rather, any given adaptation for a lifeform just has to be 'good enough' to be compatible with survival. For our present purposes, this also includes the default ways that our minds are primed to understand Reality. Of course, this doesn't mean that a more comprehensive understanding of Reality isn't possible. Human beings have done a great many things that go far beyond the scope of what one could reasonably deduce from natural selection. It's just that finding this more complete understanding of Reality will necessarily involve venturing beyond where common sense can take us.

Note that I use the term 'complete' rather than 'accurate' because the primary limitation of the objective view isn't that it's *inaccurate*. Rather, its main limitation is that it's highly *partial*. Insofar as it doesn't adequately account for the active role that minds play in *constructing* what's observed, the objective view leaves out a hugely important aspect of what objects fundamentally are. This is perfectly fine for the objective view's intended purpose of allowing us to navigate and manipulate objects. However, it becomes a serious hindrance when weaved into grand theories of Reality that don't adequately take into account the constructive role that our minds play in object perception.

A useful analogy can perhaps be found in how Newton's laws of motion work perfectly well for a number of practical engineering purposes, despite the fact that Einsteinian relativity theory offers a more comprehensive model for how physical objects behave. However, if the overall goal of our journey is to gain a

deeper understanding of how minds acquire valid knowledge about Reality, then it behooves us to begin scrutinizing many of our common sense assumptions. And this includes the objective understanding of objects that we've been describing.

To that end, if we recall how minds depend upon the structural organization that's provided by a living body, we can start to get a sense of how an experiential world that's arranged in terms of discrete objects with fixed boundaries is a *survival adaptation*. The more comprehensive view that we're working towards involves an understanding of the *active role* that minds play in how objects show up for us. And it's to this more comprehensive view that we now turn.

Objects Are Mentally Constructed (But *Not* Imaginary)

As we continue our journey through the 'Hall Of Objects' exhibit, we'll start developing an alternative to what we've been calling *the objective view*. In contrast to the objective view, this alternative perspective is grounded in the process of world disclosure we've been exploring. For convenience, we'll refer to this alternative understanding of objects as the *disclosive view.*

The key insight behind the disclosive view is that far from being absolute features of a pre-existing world, objects are more akin to a *lens* that our mind uses to navigate Reality. Consequently, object perception is directly linked to the disclosive process by which our mind turns Reality into a home for us that's organized around our needs and capacities. The upshot of this is that a valid understanding of *what objects are* can't be attained without an exploration of *what minds do*.

Having laid out the basic insight that will guide us on this detour, let's get to the heart of the matter by articulating what we mean when we say that *objects are mentally constructed (but not imaginary)*. Because this is a subtle point that can easily be misconstrued, let's first take the time to clarify what a *mental construct* is. What a mental construct (or just a **construct**, for short) refers to is a category or boundary that our minds create and sustain, which is coupled to some observation about ourselves or the world.

So when we assert that objects are mentally constructed we're not insinuating that objects don't exist, nor are we saying that objects are 'imaginary'. If we think more deeply about what an object actually is, what we come to find is that it's our mind's way of drawing a boundary around a region of our local Reality. The advantage of carving up Reality in this way is that it allows us to relate to what's contained within a given boundary in a more concrete way (*as* a house or *as* a chair, for example). If we keep the survival purposes of world disclosure in mind, we can begin to make sense of the fact that where a boundary ends up being drawn is *not arbitrary*.

Rather, the mentally constructed borders that mark where one object ends and another begins are *functional* in nature. This is because objects are our mind's way of carving up an undifferentiated Reality into more manageable 'chunks' that we can interact with and navigate. As such, objects are our mind's way of packaging Reality into more concrete forms that we can readily understand. Hence, *objects are mentally constructed, but not imaginary*.

The Disclosive View As A Window Into Visual Perception

A useful case study for how the disclosive view helps us better understand an aspect of our perception can be found in an examination of how our *visual field* is organized. What we'll be articulating here is a *phenomenological* account of visual perception. As a quick reminder, **phenomenology** is a methodology for scrutinizing how things *show up for us* in the directness of our lived experience. What we'll be using phenomenology to untangle is how objects are disclosed to us through our visual field.

Of course, not having access to eyesight doesn't necessarily preclude someone from experiencing a world of objects. Such is the flexibility of our minds that a perceptual system deprived of vision has other avenues available for object disclosure, such as physical touch and audio cues. For our present purposes however, we'll stick with what's normally the primary means by which objects are disclosed to human beings, which is through vision. For those of us with access to functioning eyesight, our perceptual system includes a *visual field* that operates along a *subject-horizon* **schema** (a *schema* is just a fancy way of referring to a template by which something is organized).

How this *subject-horizon* schema works in practice is that whatever visual phenomena we happen to be paying attention to in any given moment is normally experienced as a 'foreground' (a subject) that's contrasted against a 'background' (a horizon). The boundary that marks where a

foreground ends and a background begins tends to show up for us in our visual field as *the edges of an object;* be that a blade of grass, or a printed word on a page. For things that extend beyond our field of vision, such as the interior of a room, the unified whole that we experience is more akin to a mental composite that's composed as we move our eyes around, taking in details. Details that are themselves experienced as types of objects through this subject-horizon schema.

Importantly, the particulars of how this subject-horizon boundary shows up for us through vision isn't predetermined. Rather, it has a degree of flexibility that's coupled to the context in which we're viewing something. A side effect of this system's inherent flexibility that most of us have experienced are optical illusions. Optical illusions aren't a case of our visual system 'malfunctioning', as common sense might attest. Instead, optical illusions are a consequence of the fact that our sense perception is tailored for coherence and intelligibility; not to recover fixed features from a supposedly 'neutral' Reality.

To expand upon this latter point, while contemporary common sense might tempt us to analogize our visual perception to the workings of a video camera, in actuality the embodiment of our minds and our perceptual system tells a very different story. The confusion behind this less than helpful metaphor stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of what perception is all about. As living beings our survival depends on being able to cope with the complexities of a dynamic environment in flexible ways. Accordingly, a perceptual system that acted like a mechanical recording device wouldn't be up to the task of giving us focused information that's *relevant* for our needs and purposes, as the overwhelming majority of what we might conceivably come across within Reality is irrelevant for us.

As such, our perception is just as much a process of filtering out a near infinite stream of irrelevant stimuli as it is a process of presenting us with sights and sounds and tactile sensations. For vision in particular, the fact your nose isn't visible to you right now despite it lying within your visual field is a good demonstration of just how curated your visual perception is.

As it turns out, we're capable of attending to only a tiny part of our visual field at any given moment. The physiology of our eyes is such that while our entire field of view spans about 180 degrees horizontally and 135 degrees vertically, only about 2 degrees of that field consists of the highly detailed images that we associate with what it's like to have vision. This high detail portion of your visual field is associated with the *fovea centralis,* which is the region of your eyes where the light sensitive photoreceptor cells known as cones are most densely packed. The rest of your visual field gradually widens out into a low acuity no man's land of rough and tumble nebulosity, where we can't make out much more than some basic impressions of shapes, colors, and movement. If you doubt this, try affixing your eyesight on a focal point that's a few inches away from this page, and see if you're still able to make out any of the words in this paragraph.

In fact, if you make an effort to pay attention, it may be a bit surprising to discover just how small a portion of our visual field this high detail focal area actually is. Yet when everything is functioning as it should, this system works so well that the blurry no-man's land which takes up the majority of our visual field isn't a hindrance to us in practice. Rather, we're scarcely aware of it most of the time, which is perhaps the highest compliment that one can give a very well functioning system.

How Embodiment Grounds The Disclosive View

And with that, we've reached the end of our journey down 'The Hall of Objects'. At the heart of this exhibit has been a questioning of the common sense presupposition that objects are ready-made features that exist 'out there' in some 'external' Reality. Rather, our proposed alternative is that objects are more akin to a lens that we use to navigate Reality. For this purpose, we've explored how objects are *mentally constructed*. We've also articulated why mental constructs are not imaginary, but are instead the result of our mind creating a border around some real aspect of Reality.

Using our visual field as a case study, we've sketched out how objects are the outcome of a *relational process* that involves our minds, our perceptual system, and our surroundings. A recognition of the active role that our minds play in this process lies at the heart of what we've been calling the disclosive view of objects. What the disclosive view aims to integrate is the organizational role that *survival needs* play in how and why objects are disclosed to us through sense perception.

Going one step deeper, the guiding insight behind this phenomenological approach to objects is that Reality is always experienced *from* a particular point of view. While imaginatively projecting ourselves into a 'view from nowhere' can be a useful tool for forming broad generalizations that tend to hold true for many different points of view, at the end of the day we can never

fully abstract ourselves away from the directness of our lived experience.

What an understanding of objects that's grounded in world disclosure makes room for is a far more integrated perspective on Reality that doesn't artificially separate minds from the contents of what we see, hear, taste, and touch. Or to put it another way, the disclosive view serves to remind us that minds aren't islands that are separated from everything else, but are a fully integrated aspect of this rich tapestry that we call Reality.

Onwards To Ontology

As we continue onwards through this first part of our guided tour, what remains is to tie what we've learned about world disclosure to the directness of our lived experience within the world. To that end, what we'll be piecing together over the following pages is an investigation into **Being**. If your eyes glazed over at the mention of such a seemingly abstract subject, I'm right there with you dear reader. But if you'll indulge me, I'd like to make a case as to why an exploration of this subject doesn't have to be a form of armchair navel-gazing that's disconnected from everyday life. Rather, our own approach will be rooted in uncovering how an understanding of Being is foundational for comprehending Reality, and how this primordial form of knowledge connects to our ability to navigate daily life. What we'll come to discover is that far from being superfluous to the concerns of daily life, Being is instead a direct consequence of our concernful absorption within a world that *matters to us.* And that ultimately, Being is grounded in *care.*

Before we begin, let's take a moment to break down our overall approach to this topic with a bit more clarity. In particular, our methodology will be grounded in phenomenology rather than abstract metaphysical theory. What this means is that our investigation into Being will be based on the directness of our lived experience of the world, and not in armchair speculation into the nature of life, the universe, and everything.

The branch of philosophy that deals with questions of Being is known as **ontology.** What ontology concerns itself with are inquiries into what things ultimately *are*. When we assert that something *is* (or is not) a particular type of thing, we are making an ontological statement about its Being. For instance, what is it that makes something a house, or a person, or an ecosystem? Are viruses a form of life? Is a hot dog a sandwich? The content of ontological inquiries can include basically anything we might conceivably come across within Reality, from subatomic particles to junk food.

Within the practice of philosophy, very broadly speaking there have been two general approaches to ontology. We can think of these as the *metaphysical approach* and the *phenomenological approach*. What **metaphysics** refers to is speculation as to what the overall structure and purpose of Reality is thought to be. As an approach to ontology, in general it's the more abstract of these two branches, as it involves speculation into the underlying essence of entities. When Aristotle ventured that all objects were made of earth, water, air, and fire, he was pursuing what we've chosen to call a metaphysical approach to ontology. Or when religious believers proclaim that our true essence is housed in an immortal soul and atheists retort that souls don't exist, both sides in this debate are engaging in a type of metaphysical ontology.

It was this metaphysically oriented ontology that I was alluding to when I suggested that we would go out of our way to avoid armchair navel-gazing; though in all fairness what I was mainly poking fun at is the shallow application of this approach. When applied in a more thoughtful way, this type of speculation can lead to real insights about how things within Reality actually behave. The ancient Greeks for instance conceived of the idea of atoms long before humanity had a means of verifying this ontological intuition. Good metaphysical ontology can be thought of as an attempt to make sense of our observations about Reality, and at its best it can serve as a framing device for further empirical investigation. And without it, we wouldn't have had the sorts of intuitions that science has relied upon to generate many of its world changing discoveries.

So that's the metaphysical approach. As for its counterpart, recall that **phenomenology** is a methodology that scrutinizes how the world shows up for us in the directness of our lived experience. If metaphysically oriented ontology takes an 'outside-in' path that begins with how a 'neutral' Reality behaves without our input, phenomenologically oriented ontology takes an 'inside-out' approach that begins with how Reality is always disclosed to us from within a lived perspective. How the difference between these two paths is felt in practice is that the phenomenological approach is far less concerned with speculating on *what* things are in any absolute sense in favor of scrutinizing the role that minds play in *how* we experience things.

As for which of these two broad approaches to ontology is 'better', well that's going to depend entirely on what it is that someone is trying to understand. For domains like physics, cell

biology, or computer science that lend themselves to empirical measurement, a metaphysical ontology can be perfectly adequate. But when this 'outside-in' approach is turned towards domains that deal with the messy complexity of minds that possess inner words, the metaphysical approach can become the equivalent of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Precisely because the purpose of our guided tour is to better understand the mind, our treatment of Being will be guided by the phenomenological approach. However, it's worth keeping in mind that the two broad approaches we've outlined are orienting generalizations. In practice, which of the two a particular ontological system makes use of tends to be a matter of emphasis. This is because phenomenological accounts almost always have some implied metaphysics, while metaphysical accounts need to account for the fact that our Reality contains living beings with subjective experience.

Having set the stage for our investigation, let's begin sketching a more detailed portrait of what this 'Being' thing is all about. Along the way we'll be connecting the dots that link this phenomenological account of Being to our main theme of how minds create homes for us within Reality through world disclosure.

Being. What Is It Good For?

To illustrate what it is that an understanding of Being actually does for us, let's return to our guiding metaphor of how our minds create homes for us within Reality. When we think of what a home is, what sorts of feelings do we normally associate

with it? Well, for those of us who are fortunate enough to have a relatively healthy living situation, a large part of what we tend to associate a home with is a sense of comfort and familiarity. Another way of stating this is that homes are a place that we can feel at ease within the world. Think of the effortlessness with which you're able to perform hundreds of ordinary interactions in your home every single day, whether that's turning on a light switch, brushing your teeth, or grabbing a snack from the kitchen. Actions that we're so habituated to that they're for all intents automatic.

Well there's a good reason for this, which has to do with how world disclosure grants us access to a prereflective and nonconceptual form of understanding which makes all of this *exceedingly easy for us*. What this imparts to us is an understanding of **Being.** Being can be thought of as the most foundational type of knowledge that it's possible to have about Reality, since it's what allows us to make basic discernments about what we come across within the world. It's through Being we're able to understand a tree *as* a tree or a person *as* a person, in a direct and immediate way.

As to what understanding a tree *as* a tree or a person *as* a person actually means, it's that trees and people are disclosed to us as *distinct entities* that we can relate to in some way, whereby they can become *meaningful* for us. When we mention *an understanding of Being*, this is what we're referring to.

Importantly, when we speak of the Being of trees or people we are *not* referring to the substances these entities happen to be made out of (in the way that molecules are made of atoms, for instance). This is because Being isn't a substance. Rather, it's far more accurate to think of Being as a form of understanding

for a particular someone. Put another way, Being is an aspect of *how we experience Reality.* Because of this, it can't exist outside of the immediacy of our lived experience anymore than our thoughts and emotions could.

The misconstrual of Being as synonymous with 'what things are made of' is at the heart of the *metaphysical approach* to ontology, which attempts to explain Being from an 'outside-in' vantage point. While understanding what things are made of is of course very useful knowledge to have, this represents but a very partial aspect of Being. This is because our observations about *what things are made of* is itself derived from a far more foundational form of knowledge which allows people, places, and things to be comprehensible as distinct entities in the first place. The advantage of this is that it allows us to understand a great deal about our surroundings prior to any willful effort on our part. Indeed, this primordial form of knowledge normally functions so well that it tends to be invisible to us. As such, Being informs much of the tacit knowledge that's foundational for navigating daily life.

For instance, assuming that you don't suffer from prosopagnosia, or face blindness, have you ever wondered how you're able to instantly and effortlessly recognize the faces of your friends and family? Or how, when you're surveying the contents of an unfamiliar dining room table, the question of which objects are food and which aren't is normally so immediately obvious that you never even think to question it? Or why interacting with doorknobs and chairs and eating utensils is normally so automatic that our interactions with these items tend to be transparent and thus invisible to us? [bookmark]

If we want to understand how such a wide range of interactions is so exceedingly easy for us, recall for a moment the guiding metaphor of this chapter, that minds turn Reality into a home for us through world disclosure. Also recall that the primary function of world disclosure is to create *meaningful worlds* that come pre-arranged in terms of our needs and capacities. Being, then, is the foundation for how the things we encounter within Reality become meaningful for us. Which is to say that doorknobs and tables and cups aren't just "neutral" things we happen to come across within a bare Reality. Rather, our understanding of the Being of these entities makes them *meaningful* to us.

Earlier we gave a brief explanation of how our worlds contain *affordances* that 'invite' us to interact with the things we come across in particular ways. In that chairs offer affordances for sitting, cups offer affordances for drinking, and so on. It's precisely because we understand the Being of chairs and cups, that these entities are *meaningful to us* in some way, that the affordances which arise out of these entities are possible at all.

For something to be *meaningful* to us, it must be both *intelligible*, or clearly identifiable as a distinct type of thing, and *relevant* to us in some way. (*For our present purposes, we can also think of ideas, processes, and events as types of 'things'*). Yet the truth of the matter is that the vast majority of things that we could conceivably encounter within Reality fulfill neither of these criteria; thus they tend to be excluded from the types of world disclosure we normally experience.

Scientific knowledge tells us that we live in a Reality that's saturated with radioactive decay, subatomic particles, and relativistic time dilation. And that's all true enough. But in the

vast majority of situations that we encounter throughout the course of daily life, these aspects of Reality are not usually connected to our interests and capacities, and may as well not even exist as far as our lived experience is concerned.

This begins to make a good deal of sense when we realize that experiential worlds which are disclosed to us in terms of Being serve an important survival function. The role that Being plays within world disclosure is that it allows us to quickly and easily make basic discernments about what we come across within the world. And it's only because world disclosure creates homes for us within Reality that come pre-arranged around our particular survival adaptations that Being can function in this way.

If our ancestors didn't have access to an understanding of Being that let them quickly and easily understand what aspects of their local Reality were relevant to their survival, we wouldn't be here today. As wonderful as our rational faculties are, the truth is that rational deliberation is far too slow and cognitively expensive to be of much help when a predator is jumping out at you from the bushes.
With this adaptive purpose in mind, we can perhaps better understand how Being is referring to something altogether different than what 'things are made out of'. In particular, the mistake that metaphysical approaches which treat Being as a substance are making is a type of **category error**. Category errors occur when something is mistaken for a fundamentally different type of thing than what it truly is. Perhaps my favorite example of a category error comes from possibly apocryphal stories of audiences reacting with panic at film depictions of oncoming trains, back when the technology for motion pictures was brand new.

As our phenomenological account has hopefully made more clear, Being is really just an aspect of our lived experience that arises out of our interactions with Reality. Similar in some ways to how sense perception is an aspect of our lived experience that arises from the interaction between a body-mind and its environment. Nothing more, nothing less.

The Care That Binds

During our time on the ground level of our 'guided tour', we've been getting oriented with how minds turn Reality into a home for us through world disclosure. Having familiarized ourselves with the vital role that Being plays in this process, we now turn our attention to the core foundation upon which Being rests, which is a capacity for **Care.** What Care refers to is our concernful absorption within a world whose outcomes *matter to us.* In this final stretch of our ground floor, we'll be taking an in depth survey of how Care is the canvas upon which all forms of meaning are painted. Consequently, what we seek to demonstrate is that the richly meaningful worlds that we inhabit, revealed to us through world disclosure, are grounded in Care. So to say that Care is 'important' for us is putting it mildly.

To understand how Care facilitates all this, we'll want to situate this capacity within the larger organizational framework that minds are embedded in. To that end, what we'll be looking to map out is a *genealogy of Care*. Our basic aim will be to offer a plausible account of how Care is an outcome of the basic organizational structure that's inherent to all forms of Life. Doing so will help us untangle why it is that Care seems to be a

unique capacity of living beings. And consequently, why this capacity is entirely absent from non-living entities, such as learning algorithms on digital computers.

While the connection between this genealogy of Care and the concerns of daily life may seem a bit opaque at first glance, it will provide some much needed context for one of the central features of our existence: that what we experience *matters to us*. Yet much like the parable of the fish who asks 'what the hell is water?,' the challenge of our venture stems from the fact that aspects of our existence that are closest to us can be among the most difficult to notice and convey.

While phenomenology can do much to help us uncover aspects of our experience that are ordinarily hidden from us, there are of course limits to what we can learn from phenomenology. This is hardly surprising however, since the same holds true for all methodologies. Consequently, this is also the reason why science, or a lifetime of meditative practice for that matter, can't teach us everything there is to know about Reality on their own.

With this in mind, to help us in our task we'll be complimenting our phenomenological foundation by making use of a field of study known as *Systems Thinking*. Systems Thinking is an analytical framework for understanding how systems behave and change over time. Phrased slightly differently, it's a method for comprehending complex phenomena by studying the web of relationships that they're made up of and embedded within. By integrating Systems Thinking into our genealogy, we can gain valuable insights into how Care arises from the intricate tapestry of processes that sustains living beings.

If we take a step back to consider why Life is such a remarkable addition to our universe, much of it has to do with Life's incredible capacity for emergent novelty. **Emergent novelty** refers to new and unexpected behavioral domains which arise from the *structured combination* of less complex entities (*complexity* being a measure of the interconnections and dependencies an entity is sustained by). An important aspect of emergent novelty is that the behaviors and properties that it gives rise to aren't something that could be predicted from studying its constituent components in isolation. For example, there's nothing about organic molecules that would lead us to expect that an entity composed of these elements could produce *Romeo and Juliet*.

Consequently, in any sort of analytical approach, care must be taken that structurally important differences between entities from different domains aren't being flattened. For instance, this is why you can't just selectively apply principles from quantum mechanics to try to provide an explanation for consciousness, even though particles are fundamental components of body-minds (*a fallacy known as quantum mysticism*). This is also why attempting to draw inferences for human social hierarchies from the behavior patterns of wolves or lobsters is bunk, despite the fact that humans do share an evolutionary lineage with other social animals. One fallacy that arises from getting this wrong is **reductionism** (oversimplifying complex things to the properties of their constituent parts). Another is **elevationism** (bringing in properties and behavior that only emerges at higher levels of structural complexity). Physicalist conjectures that consciousness can be explained through the laws of physics is an example of the former. Projecting thoughts and emotions into non-living entities, such as computer learning algorithms, is an example of the latter.

With this qualification in mind, let's return to our discussion of emergent novelty. Possibilities for emergent novelty arise when complex systems become structurally coupled to one another through ongoing reciprocal relationships. Another term for this is *symbiosis*. We can find an example of this even in supposedly 'simple' single celled organisms, whose existence is sustained through coordinated information and energy exchange, in the forms of DNA replication and metabolism respectively. Additionally, the processes that sustain our 'simple' organism are themselves embedded within a web of relationships with other entities in its environment (indeed, ecology is the study of these forms of relational exchange). While this type of organizational structure can, with enough time, lead to a remarkable degree of emergent behavior, it's also something of a double edged sword. One consequence of this layered complexity is the relative fragility of lifeforms, reliant as they are on maintaining a delicate internal equilibrium known as *homeostasis* to sustain their existence.

To further highlight what makes living beings structurally distinct from non-living entities, we can turn our attention to the celestial bodies where the heavy elements that life is composed of were originally formed. Stars are particularly intriguing for this purpose because they share a crucial characteristic with lifeforms, in that both types of entities rely upon the maintenance of an internal equilibrium to sustain their existence. This shared reliance upon internal processes that will eventually cease functioning is why we're able to analogize that stars have a 'life cycle' that ultimately ends in their 'death'. (Of course this is only a helpful metaphor; stars aren't literally 'alive').

With this broad similarity in mind, we can turn our attention to the crucial differences between how these two types of entities maintain their internal equilibriums. Unlike the web of relationships that living beings rely upon to maintain homeostasis, stars are sustained by a balance of two primary forces: the inward pull of gravity, and the outward pressure that's generated by nuclear fusion. The comparative simplicity of this type of internal structure is what gives stars their very high degree of stability; even the most short-lived stars have a lifespan that lasts for several million years. Another consequence of this type of internal structure is that stars are relatively self-sustaining, and thus much less susceptible to disruptions that could alter its fundamental nature. As such, there aren't a lot of things within this universe that can cause a star to stop behaving like a star, while there are innumerable things that can disrupt the delicate information and energy exchange systems that sustain a living being.

All of which goes to demonstrate that as a system becomes more complex, the conditions under which it can continue to exist as a unified entity tends to become more constrained. This brings with it added *fragility*. For instance, while the cells that your body is composed of do have rudimentary survival requirements, human beings have a whole host of highly specialized needs which are absent at lower levels of structural complexity. Tissues and organs don't require meaning and companionship; living people do. Of course, this drawback is compensated for by the added behavioral *flexibility* that increased complexity can facilitate. While more complex entities have a greater variety of more specialized needs, added complexity also brings with it a wider variety of mechanisms to acquire what that entity needs to sustain itself. One way of referring to entities that are capable of adjusting their behavior

in response to environmental feedback is as an **adaptive system.**

Crucially, it's within this interplay of *fragility* and *flexibility* that a capacity for Care can emerge. Care doesn't serve a functional purpose for an adaptive system unless two key conditions are met: (1) It must be *fragile* enough that interactions with its environment have a significant potential to alter it in irreversible ways. (2) It must have *flexible* mechanisms for responding to many different kinds of environmental feedback. In other words, Care is only useful if there's something vital that's at *stake* for an entity, and if it's in a position to *do something about it.* As far as we know (keeping in mind that we should be open to new discoveries that could alter this understanding), only living beings are capable of fulfilling both of these conditions.

The relevance of this interplay to our daily lives stems from how it shapes our lived experience. Consider the innumerable ways in which things can go badly for us if our varied and complex needs go unfulfilled (which points to our *fragility*). Along with the almost incomprehensible number of means we have at our disposal for meeting those needs (which is evidence of our *flexibility*). Consequently, this is what allows our everyday interactions with Reality to be impactful for us. For an interaction to be *impactful* means that it can play out in ways that lead to appreciably different outcomes for us.

When we reflect upon the vast number of ways, both large and small, that everyday interactions are able to be *impactful* for us, we can begin to appreciate just how embedded we are within Care's embrace. This embeddedness entails a particular relationship to Reality, which is that of *engaged participants*. Which is to say, that we have 'skin in the game' for how we

interact with the world around us, and this precludes us from having a 'neutral' relationship to Reality. Accordingly, the only reason that a world that's disclosed to us in terms of our needs and capacities is functional in any capacity is because we're anchored to the situations we find ourselves in through Care.

Our condition as living beings means that we're thrust into a world that we didn't choose or create, which is nonetheless highly impactful for us. As such, we find ourselves bound through Care to a **Horizon of Significance,** which is a reflection of what we need from Reality to sustain ourselves, and to cope with the demands of our current situation.

To really drive home what it is that Care does for us, reflect for a moment that we ordinarily have little trouble ascertaining what's relevant for our needs in any given situation. We intuitively know to seek out food when we're hungry, clothing or shelter when we're cold, a source of light when it's too dark to see our surroundings. In each of these instances what's relevant for the situation we're absorbed in is obvious in an immediate and visceral way. Precisely because Reality can have quite severe consequences for us if we get this wrong, billions of years of evolution have geared the whole of our being towards getting this, if not optimally correct, at least approximately right most of the time.

All of which leads back to the core theme of our survey: *that Care is foundational for minds because Reality has consequences for us*. With this understanding, we'll conclude this first leg of our journey with a brief look into a domain that's becoming increasingly prevalent in our modern world : that of artificial intelligence. Precisely because these programs manage to emulate aspects of what minds do without the underlying

organizational structure that living beings rely upon, an analysis of their limitations can be a compelling way to highlight why Care is so significant for us.

Conclusion : What Artificial Intelligence Can Teach Us About Minds

As of the time of this book's writing in 2023, machine learning algorithms such as ChatGPT have advanced to the point where their responses to questions can correspond to an impressive degree with how human beings use written language. ChatGPT's ability to incorporate context in conversationally appropriate ways makes interacting with these models feel uncannily natural at times. Of course, training an AI language model to interact with humans in ways that feel natural is far from an easy problem to solve, so all due credit to AI researchers for their accomplishments.

Yet in spite of all this, it's also accurate to point out that artificial intelligence programs don't actually *understand* anything. This is because understanding involves far more than just responding to input in situationally appropriate ways. Rather, understanding is grounded in fundamental capacities that machine learning algorithms lack. Foremost among these is a form of concernful absorption within a world of lasting consequences; i.e., capacity for Care. To establish why

understanding is coupled to Care, it will be helpful to explore what it means to understand something.

To understand something means to engage in a process of *acquiring*, *integrating*, and *embodying* information. Breaking down each of these steps in a bit more detail : (1) *Acquisition* is the act of taking in or generating new information. (2) *Integration* involves synthesizing, or differentiating and linking, this new information with what one already knows. (3) *Embodiment* refers to how this information gets embedded into our existing organizational structure, informing the ways in which we think and behave. What's important to note about this process is that it ends up *changing us* in some way. Moreover, the steps in this sequence are fundamentally *relational*, stemming from our interactions with the world.

While machine intelligence can be quite adept at the first stage of this sequence, owing to the fact that digital computers can accumulate, store, and access information far more efficiently than a human being, it's in the latter steps that they fall flat in comparison to living minds. This is because *integration* and *embodiment* are forms of growth that stem from how minds are interconnected to living bodies. In contrast, existing forms of machine intelligence are fundamentally *disembodied*, owing to the fact that digital computers are organized around wholly different operating principles than that of living organisms.

For minds that grow out of living systems, interconnections between a body and a mind, and between a body-mind and an environment, is what allows interactions with Reality to be *consequential* for us. This is an outcome of the fact that our mind's existence is sustained by the ongoing maintenance of our living bodies, and vice versa. If our living bodies fail, our

minds fail. Likewise, if our minds fail, our bodies will soon follow, unless artificially kept alive through external mechanisms.

Another hallmark of living systems is that they're capable of producing and maintaining their own parts; in fact, your body replaces about one percent of its cellular components on a daily basis. This is evident in the way that a cut on your finger will heal, and within a few days effectively erase any evidence of its existence. One term for this ability of biological systems to produce and maintain their own parts is **autopoiesis** (*a combination of the ancient Greek words for 'self' and 'creation'*).

The basic principles behind autopoiesis don't just hold true for your skin, but for your brain as well. While the neurons that make up your brain aren't renewed in the same way that skin or bone cells are, the brain itself has a remarkable degree of *plasticity*. What plasticity refers to is our brain's ability to adaptively alter its structure and functioning. And the way that our brains manage to do this is through changes in how bundles of neurons (known as 'synapses') are connected to one another. How we end up using our mind has a direct (though not straightforward) influence on the strength of synaptic connections between different regions of our brain; which in turn influences how our mind develops. Accordingly, this is also the reason why the science fiction idea of 'uploading' a person's mind to a computer is pure fantasy, because how a mind functions is inextricably bound with the network of interconnections in which that mind is embodied.

This fundamental circularity between our autopoietic living body and our mind is the foundation of embodied intelligence, which is what allows us to engage with the world through Care. Precisely because autopoietic circularity is so tightly bound with

feedback mechanisms that are inherent to Life, it's proven extraordinarily challenging to create analogues for this process in non-living entities. As such, it's yet to be demonstrated whether or not autopoietic circularity can be replicated, even in principle, through the system of deterministic rules that governs digital computers. Furthermore, giving machine learning models access to a robotic 'body' isn't enough, on its own, to make these entities truly embodied. This is because embodiment involves far more than having access to and control of a body. Rather, embodiment is a way of encapsulating the rich tapestry of interconnections between an intelligence and the physical processes that grant it access to a world (keeping in mind that everything that your body does, from metabolism to sensory perception, is a type of process).

For the sake of argument, however, let's assume that the challenges involved in the creation of embodied artificial intelligence are ultimately surmountable. Because embodiment is coupled to a capacity for Care, the creation of embodied artificial intelligence has the potential to open a Pandora's box of difficult ethical questions that we may not be prepared for (and this is in addition to the disruptive effects that AI is already having on our society). Precisely because Care is grounded in interactions having very real consequences for a being, by extension this also brings with it a possibility for suffering.

For human beings, having adequate access to food, safety, companionship, and opportunities to self actualize aren't abstractions, nor are they something that we relate to in a disengaged way. Rather, as beings with a capacity for Care, when we're deprived of what we need from Reality, we end up suffering in real ways. Assuming that the creation of non-living entities with a capacity for Care is even possible, it would

behoove us to tread extraordinarily carefully since this could result in beings with a capacity to suffer in ways that we might not be able to fully understand or imagine (since it's likely that their needs may end up being considerably different than that of a living being).

And of course, there's the undeniable fact that humanity, as a whole, has had a rather poor track record when it comes to how we respond to those that we don't understand. For some perspective, it's only relatively recently that the idea of universal human rights achieved some modicum of acceptance in our emerging global society, and our world still has a long way to go towards the actualization of these professed ideals. By extension, our world's circle of concern hasn't expanded to include the suffering of animals in factory farms, let alone to non-living entities that have the potential to be far more alien to us than cows or chickens. Of course, that's not to imply that 'humanity' is a monolith that will respond to AI in just one way. Rather, the ways that beings of this type will be treated will almost certainly be as diverse as the multitude of ways that people treat one another.

Of course, all of this is assuming that the obstacles on the road to embodied artificial intelligence are surmountable, which is far from a given. It could very well be that the creation of non-living entities with a capacity for understanding is beyond what the axioms of what the rules of digital computation allow for. And that apparent progress towards machine understanding is analogous to thinking that one has made tangible progress towards reaching the moon because one has managed to climb halfway up a very tall tree. Yet given the enormity of the stakes involved, it's a possibility that's worth taking seriously. For what it's worth, we'll be in a much better position to chart a wise

course for the challenges that lie ahead if we approach it with a higher degree of self understanding. Which brings us back to the guiding purpose behind the journey that we're undertaking. Namely, that more epistemic awareness around how our minds work can help us navigate our world in more compassionate and productive ways.

And with that, we've reached the elevator that will take us from the ground floor to the next section of our 'guided tour', which will be an in depth exploration of *knowledge*; what it is, how we acquire it, and how it's connected to *truth*.

Chapter Summary

- **World disclosure** is the process by which our minds turn Reality into a home that we can reside in. Minds do so by constructing meaningful worlds that come pre-arranged in terms of our needs and capacities. World disclosure is an outgrowth of how our minds are inherently *embodied;* which is to say, of how our mind and body form an integrated living system.

- **Affordances** are an aspect of world disclosure that helps us navigate our surroundings by 'inviting' us to interact with things in concrete ways. Because affordances are highly flexible, the experiential worlds we inhabit are ripe for *improvisation*.

- World disclosure extends to how we perceive objects, in that objects are mentally constructed, but not imaginary. A **construct** is a category or boundary that our minds create and sustain, which is coupled to some

observation about ourselves or the world.

- **Phenomenology** is a branch of philosophy that deals with how things show up for us in our lived experience.

- **Metaphysics** refers to what the overall structure and purpose of Reality is thought to be. The metaphysical assumptions behind a particular idea or activity can be either explicit or implicit.

- **Being** is foundational to how we navigate Reality, since it's what allows us to understand things as distinct entities in an immediate and pre-reflective way. Being is our most basic way of understanding a tree *as* a tree, or a person *as* a person. When we say that something *is* a type of thing, we're referring to its Being.

- **Care** refers to our concernful absorption within a world whose outcomes matter to us in some way. Care is an outcome of the autopoietic organizational structure of living beings, which grants living beings a high degree of both *fragility* and *flexibility*.

- **Autopoiesis** is a property of the organizational structure of living beings, which allows them to create and maintain their own parts. The ability of your body to replace aging and damaged cells is an example of autopoiesis. Autopoiesis is a large part of what makes living beings distinct from non-living entities such as AI.

KNOWLEDGE IS MOSTLY SITUATED COPING

Orienting Metaphor :

Situated coping is our 'vehicle' for engaging with everyday Reality, while concepts resemble a GPS that's used for navigation

---

How To Cope With A World

Back on the ground floor of our 'guided tour' we were introduced to some foundational concepts that will accompany us on the exploratory journey that lies ahead. Key among these are: (1) How minds turn Reality into a home for us through *world disclosure*. (2) The importance of the *living body* to what minds are and how thought works. (3) *Being's* centrality as a foundational form of understanding. (4) The unifying role that *Care* plays in how living minds navigate Reality.

Having made our acquaintance with these key concepts, we'll be using them to develop a more in-depth understanding of *knowledge* itself. As such, this chapter will be a deep dive into *epistemology*. What **epistemology** concerns itself with are theories of knowledge; and in particular, what constitutes valid knowledge. Our eventual goal in this chapter is to construct a *theory of knowledge* that's rooted in a recognition that minds disclose worlds, and that thought is fundamentally embodied.

But before we get there, we'll be spending some time examining the link between *concepts* and *knowledge*. This is in reaction to the widespread implicit assumption in the West that knowing things is mostly about holding *justified, true beliefs*. Our motivation is to flip this assumption on its head, by shedding light on the centrality of *nonconceptual knowledge* to daily life.

Which brings us to our second 'Provisional Truth', which is about how we use *knowledge* to engage with the world. Its premise is that we do so primarily through *Situated Coping*, and only secondarily through *concepts*. What **Situated Coping** refers to is a flexible, nonconceptually guided form of *awareness* that's essential for navigating everyday life. The orienting metaphor that we'll be using to illustrate its role and applications involves *driving*. In essence, Situated Coping is our 'vehicle' for engaging with our immediate circumstances, while concepts resemble a GPS that's used for navigation.

So that's our roadmap for this second leg of our 'guided tour'. But before setting off, it would behoove us to specify exactly what we mean by *conceptual* and *nonconceptual* forms of knowledge. To that end, we can think of the next few pages as a type of 'supply hub' where we'll be gathering ideas and concepts for the next leg of our journey.

The Dimensions Of Knowledge

The first thing that we'll be packing into our bags is a solid understanding of *conceptual knowledge*. What **conceptual knowledge** refers to are the categories and distinctions that we use to form generalizations about things and situations that we

encounter in the world. For instance, we know that a 'pen' refers to a category of ink filled cylindrical objects that are used for writing. And that a 'cat' refers not only to the small, domesticated animals that we keep as pets, but also to a subset of wild animals that share some specific traits in common.

The function of conceptual knowledge is to make our observations and insights *explicit* for the purposes of communication and problem solving. Because of this, conceptual knowledge is *representational;* we use concepts to 'stand in for', or *represent,* both things and experiences. Accordingly, this is how conceptual knowledge is able to serve as the basis for language. Beyond its necessity for linguistic communication, conceptual knowledge is a precondition for being able to form *beliefs* about Reality, and for deliberative modes of thinking such as reason, logic, and scientific inquiry.

So that's conceptual knowledge. The next item on our list is **nonconceptual knowledge,** which refers to forms of understanding that are not structured or processed within this framework of categories and distinctions. Being able to recognize a face, eat with a fork, tie one's shoes, catch a ball, or ride a bicycle are some examples of this from daily life. What's important to note is that the basis of knowledge that allows us to perform these actions is *implicit.* While we can, with a bit of effort, come up with an explicit set of rules and procedures for riding a bicycle or tying shoelaces, in practice these are after-the-fact reconstructions that aren't actually present while we're performing these actions.

The basic importance of nonconceptual knowledge lies in how it allows us to navigate many types of diverse situations, without needing to rely on *rules* to guide our behavior. For instance,

when talking with someone, we need not be *explicitly aware* that standing on the opposite side of the room is too far for a typical conversation, or that being a few inches from someone's face is far too close. In practice, we tend to automatically place ourselves at a distance from someone that's appropriate for a given social situation, without having to *think* about it at all.

In fact, allowing these nonconceptual coping mechanisms to seep into our explicit awareness can actually disrupt their ability to function properly. Approaching conversations with a heightened degree of explicit awareness about how we 'should' be behaving on a moment to moment basis can make social interactions exhausting, as anyone who's struggled with social anxiety can attest to. When our nonconceptual coping is functioning as it should, the situation seems to *draw the appropriate behavior* out of us, in such a seamless way that it's ordinarily invisible to us.

Which brings us to the item on our list: Situated Coping**.** As we intimated, what it refers to is a nonconceptually grounded *form of awareness* that's indispensable for daily life. Its basic purpose is to allow us to engage with our immediate circumstances in an involved and intuitive way.

The type of engagement that it facilitates is **situated** in the sense that it's always tied to the particulars of a *situation*, such as riding a bicycle or having a conversation. And it's a form of **coping** in the sense that it's a dynamic, flexible *response* to the demands of these situations. Hence, *Situated Coping.*

Importantly, Situated Coping is *not* mindless, zombie-like behavior. Instead, it describes a type of inherent *flexibility* that we bring to activities we engage in, which is highly responsive

to the ebb and flow of our immediate circumstances. This flexibility becomes particularly evident when we encounter difficulties that disrupt our Situated Coping. For instance, we may find that a familiar tool isn't functioning as expected. Or an object that we're attempting to pick up is much heavier than anticipated. In these instances, the adaptability of Situated Coping is showcased by how we remain fully capable of transitioning into conceptually guided problem solving if our coping mechanisms are disrupted. It's precisely this high degree of applicability to the varied circumstances of everyday life that makes Situated Coping indispensable. Through everyday Situated Coping, we're able to form a basis of *familiarity with the world* that serves as our foundation for conceptual knowledge.

With that, we wrap up our preparations for the upcoming leg of our 'guided tour'. Up next, we'll be fleshing out the *driving* metaphor that will help us traverse the nuances of the *epistemology* that we're constructing.

Driving As A Metaphor For Situated Coping

If we reflect upon how we interact with our surroundings while *driving,* we observe that the bulk of our decision making is focused on controlling our vehicle, monitoring the road, and responding to the flow of traffic. While a GPS can assist us in this activity, what's important for our present purposes is that its role is *supplementary.* Without access to a vehicle (or a good pair of legs), a GPS on its own won't get us to our destination, regardless of how sophisticated our particular GPS is.

Which is *not* to say that the navigational assistance provided by a GPS is *unimportant,* as there are plenty of scenarios where the planning and problem solving capabilities of a GPS can be indispensable. For instance, a GPS can help us find our way if we're driving through an unfamiliar city, or if we're taking a road trip to another part of the country. Moreover, it can provide an alternative route if we happen to encounter an unexpected obstacle on our trip, such as road closure or a traffic accident.

Accordingly, the extent to which we rely on a GPS isn't fixed, but will vary according to where we're heading and what we encounter along the way. If our drive is going smoothly and it's a commute that we're familiar with, our GPS will tend to recede into the background of our awareness; there if we need it, and easily ignored if we don't. Additionally, many types of commutes are so routine and familiar to us that our GPS isn't used at all.

So that's the substance of our metaphor. Extrapolating it to the themes that we're exploring in this chapter, we can draw a parallel between *driving* and our everyday uses of *knowledge*. Just as driving mostly relies on situational awareness of our vehicle and its surroundings, everyday practices and activities mostly rely on Situated Coping. And much like a GPS can help us find our way when our destination is unfamiliar or we encounter an unexpected obstacle on our commute, *conceptual knowledge* similarly assists us when we encounter novel situations or unanticipated difficulties that disrupt our Situated Coping. Moreover, while a GPS will recede into the background of our awareness when our commute is familiar and our drive is going smoothly, detached, theoretical understanding similarly recedes when our everyday practices and activities are going smoothly.

Crucially, it was also emphasized that a GPS can't get us to our destination without access to a means of transportation. Likewise, conceptual knowledge can't serve its intended purpose without access to the *background of familiarity* with our everyday world that we acquire through Situated Coping. To elaborate, recall that the purpose of conceptual knowledge is problem solving and communication. As such, its categories and distinctions can only take on meaning for us against a backdrop of *pre-conceptual familiarity* with the world. We attain this familiarity through everyday practices and activities. For instance, our interactions with streets and roads is what enables us to intuitively connect the display of our GPS with streets and roads in our physical environment. So when it's mentioned that we engage with something *pre-conceptually,* it's to this *pragmatic involvement* in our everyday world that we're referring.

Precisely because this background of *pragmatic involvement* in our everyday world is so crucial for understanding knowledge, it's worth taking some time to explore it more fully. The term that we'll be using for this background of involvement is *Being-In-The-World,* and it will be the focus of our next section.

Being-In-The-World

Back in the introduction to this book, it was mentioned that dissecting the works of academic philosophers isn't the 'point' of the guided tour we're undertaking. While that still holds true, for this topic in particular, we'll be loosening this precept just a bit, for reasons that will soon become apparent. This is because

any in-depth exploration of *Being-In-The-World* can't help but be pulled towards the individual who not only coined the term, but used it as the cornerstone of a new approach to philosophy, upending 2000 years of established thinking on the subject.

That individual is the German philosopher Martin Heideggar (1889-1976), and he's among the most important thinkers in all of Western philosophy. If you're not familiar with him, it's likely because his work has a reputation for being notoriously difficult, written with close to zero consideration for non-specialists. His most significant contribution to philosophy, 'Being And Time' (1927), is full of dense, technical language that can be indecipherable for someone who's not already deeply versed in philosophical concepts. Indeed, anyone who's put the time and effort into comprehending Heideggar's writing might describe the experience as almost akin to learning a second language! Needless to say, delving into the intricacies of obtuse academic texts isn't our focus, so we'll confine ourselves to his notion of *Being-In-The-World*, since it's directly relevant for our present purposes.

Recall that in our previous chapter, we defined 'Being' as *a form of understanding*. More specifically, it's our most basic and primordial way of understanding people, places, and things *as* people, places, and things. It's how we understand a cup *as* a cup, or a chair *as* a chair, in an immediate and intuitive way. When we say that something *is* a particular type of thing, we're referring to its *being*.

What **Being-In-The-World** refers to, then, is the type of 'being' that people have, which is characterized by our *embeddedness within the world*. At its core, the expression is a recognition that our *concernful involvement* with the world through everyday

practices and activities is central to *who* and *what* we are. It's a way of thinking about ourselves which emphasizes that our *interconnectedness* to people, places, things, and culture is fundamental to how we experience and comprehend Reality. In conjunction with this, the expression also points to the basic conditions from which we attain the *background of familiarity with the world* that all other forms of knowledge depend upon. For our present purposes, it's this latter dimension of *Being-In-The-World* that we're primarily interested in, because it's directly related to the role and function of Situated Coping.

The hyphenation of *Being-In-The-World*, which may feel a bit awkward for someone unused to philosophical neologisms, is there for a very good reason. A **neologism** refers to a newly coined term or expression that was created to fulfill a specific need, and has yet to be widely adopted into mainstream language. For the neologism *Being-In-The-World*, the hyphens are meant to express that 'being' (more specifically the type of 'being' that *people* have) and 'the world' are to be understood as a single, unified concept.

So, to sum up: the gist of *Being-In-The-World* is that we can't understand the human condition in isolation from our concernful dealings with the everyday world, as the two are fundamentally inseparable. The basic reason for this is that our absorption into a world of people, places, things, and culture forms the *context* for the rest of our existence. It's the foundation upon which we construct an identity, and come to ask questions about ourselves and the nature of Reality. Another way of stating this point is that *Being-In-The-World* is the basis for our *personhood;* it's what makes 'a person' different from other types of entities, such as a rock or a computer or a tree. An alternate term that could be used for this

'concernful involvement' with the everyday world is *Care*. With this in mind, what *Being-In-The-World* is attempting to illuminate for us is how Care is fundamental to *what Reality is for us*.

As to the practical implications of all this for *knowledge,* one's cultural understanding of *what a person is* heavily informs where the 'starting point' for knowledge is conceived to be. To that end, a pair of obvious contrasts might help illustrate this. Case in point, someone who thinks that we're fundamentally a material arrangement of matter and energy is likely to have very different intuitions about the *origins of knowledge* than someone who believes that our true essence is housed in an immortal soul that's part of a divine order.

For Heideggar's part, when he coined the expression *Being-In-The-World*, part of what he was attempting to do was to illuminate this exact point. His method for doing so involved drawing attention to a core aspect of the human condition that had been neglected by Western philosophy up until that point. What was being pointed to is the lack of any *absolute boundary* between ourselves and the world. This is because our interconnectedness with the world is constitutive of *what we are*. So any exploration into the human condition must also include our embeddedness in the world as well, because the two are fundamentally inseparable. As an aside, this way of understanding the human condition has much more in common with Eastern wisdom traditions such as Buddhism, than with mainstream Western philosophy up until that point.

So that's *Being-In-The-World.* To recap, our reason for taking this detour is to demonstrate that *knowledge* involves far more than 'justified, true beliefs'. It emphasizes that there are essential pre-conditions for knowledge, rooted in our organizational

structure and our connection to Reality. Crucially,, all forms of knowledge are entangled with our ability to derive *meaning* from what we encounter within the world. This meaning stems from our capacity for *concernful engagement* with this world, also referred to as *Care*.

In the previous chapter we explored how our capacity for Care is dependent upon Reality having *consequences* for us, due to our nature as living beings with complex survival needs. What Being-In-The-World adds is a focus on how our *embeddedness within the world* is central to how we engage with Reality. In conjunction with this, it draws attention to how deliberative modes of understanding, such as science and beliefs, are themselves derived from our Being-In-The-World. Consequently, every abstraction we create to understand some facet of Reality is only intelligible to us due to our pre-conceptual *familiarity with the world*, acquired through our concernful engagement with everyday practices and activities.

To return to our orienting metaphor of *driving,* we can think of Being-In-The-World as akin in some ways to the civilizational infrastructure that makes driving *possible*. While the components of this infrastructure encompass material necessities such as roads, gas stations, and automotive repair shops, it also includes a number of *cultural practices* as well. We can look to our shared social understanding about which side of the road to drive on, who has the right of way at an intersection, and how someone is expected to behave during a traffic stop, to list some examples.

For just as driving a car depends in innumerable ways upon this pre-existing civilizational infrastructure, knowledge is similarly dependent upon our *concernful involvement with the everyday*

world, which we have taken to calling Being-In-The-World. And just as culture is an indispensable part of the infrastructure which supports driving, Being-In-The-World also necessarily takes place amidst a background of *shared social practices*. Social practices that embody a whole cultural interpretation of what it means to be human, what a material object is, and more generally what counts as 'real'. Crucially, this 'interpretation' isn't an explicit belief system so much as it's an intuitive and largely pre-reflective foundation for relating to people, places, things, and culture.

And with that, we wrap up our overview of Being-In-The-World. Up next is an exploration of our emotional attachment to *certainty*, which we'll use as a launching off point for an overview of mainstream epistemological perspectives in the West. What concerns us is how the embodied approach that we've been constructing diverges from two prominent theories of knowledge: Absolutism and Relativism. As we unpack the ongoing tug-of-war between these two camps, our aim is to subsume the partial truths of both into a 'middle way' that we'll be calling 'Enactivism'.

We'll then conclude this chapter with an overview of how Enactivism is at its heart a *reconstructive* epistemology. Where the aim is to reconcile the recognition that knowledge is always tied to a *perspective*, with an acknowledgment that we can and must be able to arrive at *shared forms of understanding*.

Chasing The Certainty Dragon

The expression ‘chasing the dragon' is a way of referring to the pursuit of a desired goal or state that's always just out of reach. Originating from drug culture, it alludes to the experience of chasing an elusive high that one can never quite re-attain; due in part to how our bodies naturally build up a tolerance to psychoactive substances through repeated use. Though coined to describe a specific aspect of drug use, the phrase is malleable enough to have applicability in other domains, since it captures a broader truth about the human condition.

What it points to is a more basic tendency to chase after an elusive goal that promises to fulfill some kind of emotional need, such as safety, belonging, or contentment. The rub being that it ultimately fails to deliver on this promise, resulting in negative consequences for ourselves and others. To wit, ‘chasing the dragon' can be a very apt metaphor for the psychology behind consumerism. In that no matter how much stuff one manages to acquire, it's never enough for lasting fulfillment. Or for an altogether different example we can look to the context of spiritual practice. Where ‘chasing the dragon' can serve as a cautionary expression about emotionally clinging to mystical experiences, as trying to force such states makes them less likely to occur.

So what does this aside about ‘chasing the dragon' have to do with *knowledge*? Well, our basic contention is that clinging to *absolute certainty* has key commonalities with ‘chasing the dragon', insofar as it relieves us of the emotional burden of having to question our deeply held beliefs about Reality. Precisely because these are often a core aspect of our identity, we ordinarily have a great deal of emotional resistance to scrutinizing them in a serious way (a topic we'll return to in our final chapter - *Beliefs Serve Us Best When Held Lightly).*

For our present purposes, what's important is that this emotional payoff isn't truly sustainable, since it's paid for by having to live in denial about aspects of Reality that clash with our intuitions. An important result of this denial is that it serves to *bar the path of inquiry*. Meaning that it prevents us from investigating possibilities that might turn out to be true. Not only leaving us more ignorant than we might otherwise be, but in many cases leaving us ignorant of our ignorance.

For a well known historical example, we can look to the 17th century Catholic Church, whose doctrine dictated a geocentric model of the solar system that placed the Earth at the center of the cosmos. Moreover, the Church had been using its considerable political influence to *bar the path of inquiry* on the subject. Dismissing out of hand observational evidence from astronomers such as Galileo Galilei that the Earth orbits the sun, and going so far as to confine the intrepid scientist with house arrest and threaten him with torture if he didn't drop the matter.

For a more contemporary example of *barring the path of inquiry,* we can look to the way in which many atheists will dismiss out of hand anything having to do with spirituality. In effect, throwing the baby out with the bathwater by conflating spiritual practices that are meant to cultivate insight with religious superstition, while casting suspicion that there are any valid insights to be gained from these experiences. The origin of which comes from a purported *certainty* that everything there is to know about ourselves and our connection to Reality can be learned through science. And that anything which can't be observationally verified using the tools of science doesn't actually exist.

As to the connective tissue between 'Chasing the Dragon' and the broader themes of this chapter, it becomes apparent that *certainty* has been a central point of fascination for as long as people have been crafting theories of knowledge. (Recall that another term for theories of knowledge is **epistemology**). Hence, a broader context for the role of *certainty* will be important going forward, because it will help us define the 'shape' of the Enactive *epistemology* we're constructing.

The Enactive Approach

The epistemology that we'll be constructing on our 'guided tour' aims to be a flexible 'middle way' for thinking about certainty, grounded in the active role that our minds play in 'bringing forth', or *enacting,* an experiential world. In essence, Enactivism threads a course between *Absolute* and *Relative* accounts of knowledge. The former contending that knowledge is strictly *impersonal*; perhaps best personified by the statement that 'facts don't care about your feelings'. While the latter attests that knowledge is inherently *perspectival,* meaning that it's unavoidably interpreted through a set of individual and societal circumstances.

In contrast to these two epistemological camps, the approach that we're proposing goes by the name of *Enactivism*. The basis of our term arises from the word 'enact'. What it alludes to is a process of 'carrying out' or 'bringing to fruition', which is the lens that we'll be using to think about how knowledge is *constructed* through the interactions of living minds and their environment. Which is to say, knowledge isn't something that exists 'out there', as a fixed feature of a 'neutral' Reality. But

neither is it purely an invention of the mind, independent of inputs from the shared Reality that we all co-inhabit. Rather, the contention is that *knowledge* sits at the cross section of a mind and its environments; the result of a dynamic feedback loop that links the two entities called *world disclosure*.

Recall, the gist of *world disclosure* is that our minds give us an experiential Reality to live in that comes *pre-arranged* in terms of our needs and capacities. Accordingly, Enactivism contends that knowledge is the culmination of this *relational process* between a living mind and its environment. Meaning that the mind's role is far more involved than a passive receiving and processing of information. Rather, minds are active and engaged participants in this process. (Note that most of this takes place beneath the level of *conscious awareness*, as our minds do a lot of work to present us with an intelligible world long before our awareness enters into the picture).

And while this generative process can and does lead to reliable knowledge about Reality, what it cannot provide is *absolute certainty*. The basic reason for this is that knowledge can never be fully divorced from a *perspective*. At the same time, this also comes with a recognition that, as *living* minds, perspectives are necessarily bounded by *biology*. Precisely because all human beings are the heirs of a shared evolutionary lineage, from this it is possible to excavate forms of knowledge that are both stable and applicable across a host of diverse perspectives.

An additional aspect of *Enactivist* epistemology lies in its insistence that Absolutist and Relativist accounts are *true, but partial*. What this means is that both viewpoints contain elements of truth, but are partial in the sense that they leave out important aspects of Reality. While our Enactive approach will

aim to *synthesize* aspects of these two accounts, it also rejects some key assumptions that are common to both.

The first of these shared assumptions that Enactivism rejects is that knowledge is primarily *conceptual,* and mostly a matter of holding *beliefs*. As we've seen, this is flawed because it fails to account for how *nonconceptual* ways of knowing and being are central to everyday life. Our extended survey on the centrality of Situated Coping for everyday forms of knowing and being was an articulation of this precise point.

A second shared assumption which Enactivism repudiates is that thought, and by extension knowledge, is largely *disembodied*. As we'll see, this has direct relevance for the role that *perspectives* contribute to knowledge. Precisely because neither Absolutism or Relativism places a great deal of emphasis on how minds are inherently *embodied*, both tend to miss the mark on this topic; but for different reasons. With the former largely failing to account for the unavoidable role that perspectives play in what is or is not considered to be valid knowledge. And the latter overemphasizing the social and cultural dimensions of knowledge, while neglecting how our commonalities open the door to stable forms of knowledge that transcend one's individual and societal context.

Lastly, Enactivism flips on its head the implicit assumption, common to both Absolutism and Relativism, that there's an *absolute* or *fixed boundary* between ourselves and the world. Enactivism calls into question the taken-for-granted view that Reality can be cleanly divided into an 'external' physical Reality and an 'internal' world of experience; *where never the twain shall meet.*

In practice, this boundary is often coupled with a presupposition that one of these two domains is more 'real' than the other. We can see this in materialist perspectives that try to 'explain away' consciousness, arguing that minds can be approached from the same fundamental framework that's been used to understand matter and energy. On the flip side of the coin, certain spiritual perspectives contend that our physical Reality is a type of illusion created by our minds. Both instances offer an illustration of something known as *reductionism*. We can think of this as trying to 'explain away' a particular phenomena by conjecturing that it's in fact a *property* of something else.

As we'll see, one of our aims with Enactivism is to sidestep this tug-of-war over what's ultimately 'real', and instead offer a more pragmatic perspective that's grounded in our day to day experience. In questioning the notion of a fixed or absolute boundary between ourselves and the world, our aim is to suggest a more nuanced framing that doesn't fall into a form of *reductionism*. To that end, Enactivism cuts across these two camps in its recognition that living minds are also inherently *embedded* within the world. Put another way, one of the fundamental presuppositions of this view is that the *world itself* is an indispensable part of what minds are. Consequently, when we speak of what knowledge is, we're also necessarily speaking of how a mind is *embedded within the world*.

So how does the Enactive approach to epistemology constitute a 'middle way' for understanding certainty? Well, as noted earlier, the lack of a 'neutral' perspective from which to begin our investigation of Reality is a core recognition of Enactivism. At the same time, this also comes with an acknowledgement that perspectives inherently exist within a biological and evolutionary context. One pragmatic consequence of this is that

there are certain fundamental things that human beings can and must be able to agree upon to have functional societies. In every human society, people fall in love, have children, get sick, grow old, and die. While the meanings that people attach to these things will vary widely across cultures, they're so ubiquitous that it's safe to acknowledge them as 'universals'.

So that's the gist of the *Enactive* approach. What's to follow is a brief followup on the *Absolutist* and *Relativist* viewpoints which *Enactivism* offers itself as an alternative to. Our aim is to unearth the basic assumptions behind both viewpoints, while excavating the *partial truths* contained within. Afterwards, we'll wrap up this chapter with some practical applications of the *Enactive* epistemology that we'll be fleshing out over the course of this book.

Pining For Absolute Foundations

In contrast to Enactivism's emphasis on perspectives, *Absolutist* epistemology aims to adopt a 'view from nowhere' as a lens to investigate Reality. To that end, philosophers, scientists, and theologians have striven to identify a set of *absolute foundations* upon which our knowledge about Reality can safely rest. In essence, people from many different eras and disciplines have looked for something that we can be *absolutely certain of*, which can serve as a stable bedrock to investigate Reality from.

Speculation on the basis for this certainty has included an all-knowing and all-powerful God, the surety of our own conscious experience, and a self-contained material reality

governed by physical laws, to list just a few of the more prominent candidates which have been proposed.

In all of these examples, what's being presupposed is the self-contained or independent existence of whatever happens to *ground* that particular epistemology. What a 'ground' refers to is a foundational assumption that's not contingent upon anything else. For instance, scientific worldviews are generally grounded in the presupposition of a self-contained physical Reality that's not dependent upon any outside forces (such as a creator deity). A broadly similar line of reasoning goes for how monotheists typically conceive of God, who is believed to be absolute and eternal. Additionally, some philosophical and spiritual traditions contend that consciousness is the basis for all of Reality.

What binds all of these diverse perspectives together is a shared presupposition that there's a monolithic *something* (such as God, matter and energy, or consciousness) that serves as the Source, or *ultimate ground,* for everything that exists. The importance of what grounds a particular epistemology can't be understated. Since this directly influences attitudes about what counts as valid knowledge, stemming from our underlying intuitions about what's ultimately 'real'. This is why we'll generally dismiss out-of-hand claims that violate these intuitions, without devoting much time or energy on the minutiae of ideas that seem especially unlikely to us. This is why, for instance, we don't get alarmed when a small child tells us that there's a monster under their bed; yet we would react with an appropriate level of concern if the child reports a man lurking in our yard at night.

And to be clear, this 'sniff test' does serve a very important purpose, as it would be impossible for us to thoroughly investigate every single piece of information that comes our way.
This is even more true in our digital era, where we're bombarded with a steady stream of conflicting information and viewpoints, which far exceeds the bounds of what our minds are evolutionarily adapted for. At the same time however, it's important to recognize that this 'sniff test' that we use to filter out irrelevant and unreliable information can and does misfire; and often quite badly. To get a sense of how and why this is the case, we now turn to the other end of the ongoing tug-of-war between these two approaches to certainty: i.e, *epistemological Relativism*.

The Prudence And Pitfalls Of Relativism

In contrast to Absolutist viewpoints, which pine for unassailable foundations to investigate Reality from, Relativist epistemology is underpinned by an enduring skepticism that knowledge can be grounded in absolute (i.e., fixed and eternal) truths. The guiding intuition here is that knowledge is inherently *fluid* and *perspectival*. Because of this, the dynamics of how knowledge is *constructed* tends to be the primary focus of these viewpoints.

Developing alongside advances within other academic disciplines, such as linguistics and sociology, the guiding observation behind Relativist epistemology is that knowledge is always situated within a *context.* From this, we can gather that knowledge necessarily involves *interpretation.* When presented with the assertion that 'facts don't care about your feelings',

Relativism counters that ‘there's no such thing as an *uninterpreted fact*'. In other words, facts always *mean* something to someone. By extension, there's no such thing as a ‘neutral' perspective from which to evaluate and interpret facts; since we always do so from within an existing worldview and set of circumstances.

By extension, there isn't a formula that we can turn to that can tell us *which facts* are relevant for a given *situation*. Essentially, individuals and groups will choose to emphasize certain facts over others based on their motivations, life experiences, and cultural background. Importantly, this isn't a ‘flaw' of human reasoning that can be excised through a strict adherence to ‘objectivity'. Rather, it's a basic epistemological constraint that's imposed upon us by the fact that Reality is always experienced from within a perspective.

In accordance with this focus on context and interpretation, Relativism also brought to the fore new forms of social critique, which illuminated the impact of coercive *power structures* on what's accepted as valid knowledge. Historically, Relativism was often driven by a desire to decouple considerations of knowledge from *Grand Narratives*. What a Grand Narrative refers to is a story that offers a broad and encompassing explanation for an observed state of affairs, often serving to justify an existing social order (or one of its proposed alternatives).

For an illustration of this justificatory function of Grand Narratives, we can look to the widely studied ‘white man's burden' narrative from late 19th and early 20th century Europe. Its assertion is that white Europeans had both a right and duty to ‘civilize' (i.e., colonize) other regions of the world, due to a purportedly self-evident racial and civilizational superiority.

Moreover, this notion found support in scientific discourse of the time, bolstering its credibility in the eyes of the well educated and esteemed individuals who were some of its strongest proponents. What Relativist epistemology shines a light on is the *constructed* nature of such Grand Narratives, exposing their role in legitimizing colonialist exploitation and perpetuating existing power structures.
And while it's easy for us moderns to ridicule these antiquated cultural narratives, their cautionary implications are still relevant to this day. The takeaway being that our epistemic intuitions will inevitably reflect our own social, cultural, and personal circumstances. Moreover, this can happen in ways that are invisible to us, due to how enmeshed we normally are in the conditions that inform our attitudes and beliefs.

So when we pass judgment on outdated knowledge claims, it's worth keeping in mind that we're doing so with the benefit of hindsight. Crucially, the point isn't to downplay the harms of problematic narratives, so much as it is a call to approach the self-evident truths of our own era with *informed* skepticism. (We'll dive into the difference between *informed* and *uninformed* forms of skepticism in our final chapter, Beliefs Serve Us Best When Held Lightly).

So those are the *partial truths* contained within the Relativist epistemology. Having explored the 'prudence' of this view, where do its 'pitfalls' lie?

To set the stage for our survey for these pitfalls, it's worth reiterating that our goal is to *differentiate and link* the Enactivist epistemology that we're constructing with Relativism. This involves identifying Relativism's *partial truths,* while being mindful of its inherent limitations. Phrased differently, we could

say that we're attempting to 'transcend and include' the partial truths of Relativism, just as we did for Absolutism (all due to credit to the philosopher Ken Wilber for popularizing this helpful notion).

An attentive reader may have already picked up that there are indeed some shared areas of emphasis between Relativism and Enactivism: namely, a focus on how knowledge is *constructed,* and a repudiation of *absolute knowledge*. That said, the overlap between these two epistemological viewpoints shouldn't be overstated, as there are some major pitfalls to Relativism that limit its usefulness as a comprehensive framework for understanding knowledge.

The most notable of these pitfalls arises from how Relativism is ultimately a self-undermining position. To illustrate why this is necessarily the case, we can take note of what happens when Relativism is turned inwards upon itself. For if we take its suppositions to their endpoints, we arrive at the conclusion that Relativism is merely one valid perspective among others; neither superior or inferior to the Absolutist viewpoints that it critiques. Which leads to the paradoxical observation that if Relativism is correct, then one must also accept the validity of Absolutist viewpoints, undermining its own claims.

While this might seem like a form of epistemic humility, in actuality no one adheres to Relativism without an implicit belief that it's a more valid perspective than the ideas it's critiquing (otherwise, why even embrace Relativism over some other viewpoint)? Another term for this is a **Performative Contradiction**. What it refers to is an inconsistency within a viewpoint that goes unaddressed (or is at the very least heavily

downplayed), because it's fundamentally unanswerable; and thus inconvenient to those who advocate for that viewpoint.

In conjunction with this, the second major pitfall of Relativist epistemology is pragmatic in nature. In essence, Relativism doesn't provide any real guidance on *which types of perspectives* should guide our decisions and behavior. Providing actionable guidance on how to discern what's likely to be *true* is obviously extremely important for any epistemology. Precisely because any attempt to assess the comparative value of different societal and cultural viewpoints is anathema to Relativism, this severely limits its usefulness for guiding our decisions in the real world. An important aspect of living in the real world means being confronted by decisions that are informed by incommensurable viewpoints. As such, we can't always reach a compromise that 'splits the difference', nor should we work from the assumption that every perspective has something useful to contribute (as anyone who's dealt with online trolls can likely attest to).

This brings us to the final pitfall of Relativist epistemology, which are its potential negative consequences for social discourse. This stems from the fact that Relativist epistemology is inherently *deconstructive*. What this means is that its modus operandi is to 'debunk' existing attitudes and beliefs. To be clear, it's incredibly important to be able to challenge harmful ideas. But deconstruction on its own doesn't facilitate shared understanding, nor does it give us a path forward for reconciling our differences.

At its worst, bad applications of Relativism can devolve into narcissistic echo chambers, where individuals and groups insist upon their own 'truths' that are completely detached from

Reality. Needless to say, this is an issue that's been especially prevalent over the past decade, due in large part to the proliferation of social media; with disastrous consequences for the civil society that sustains democratic institutions.

And with that, we wrap up our overview of the Relativist viewpoint. In the conclusion for this chapter, we'll propose how Enactivism is a *reconstructive* epistemology, which fulfills a real social need that we have in the West.

Conclusion : The Need For Reconstructive Epistemology

To understand the necessity of *reconstructive epistemology*, it's essential to consider the outcomes for a culture when its stories and myths become untenable, without any suitable replacements to fill the void. What's important to realize about these constructed narratives is that they serve an underlying purpose which transcends their specific content. Which is to supply individuals living alongside one another within a society with a framework for shared forms of meaning and identity.

These frameworks came to be especially important once human societies grew to the point that the close-knit social relationships of nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes began to break down. In essence, there's a cognitive limit to the number of human beings that we can relate to on a first name, face-to-face basis. This figure is known as *Dunbar's number,* which is around 150 or so individuals. While most of us don't find it unusual to be living in societies whose other members are mostly strangers to us, it's essential to recognize that this is a

far cry from the type of social environment that our psychology is evolutionarily adapted to.

In order to have functional societies that contain thousands and even millions of people, humans developed a number of *social-technologies* that would allow interactions with individuals that we don't know to become routine to daily life. One of these social-technologies was the development of *constructed social identities* that can sustain social interactions in lieu of a network of extended familial relations to draw upon.

Precisely because we wouldn't have the types of large societies that we live in today without these constructed forms of identity, we ignore their underlying role and purpose at our own peril. As such, the narratives that they sustain aren't some holdover from the distant past. Human rights, democracy, money, and even science are just a few of the constructs that support our modern interconnected world. Accordingly, if people stopped believing in them they would cease to exist; yet it would be a mistake to think of them as 'imaginary', as their effects on us are very real.

For our present purposes, what's worth noting is that constructed narratives will eventually begin to break down. This could be as a result of their own internal contradictions, mounting external pressure, or some combination thereof. We'll refer to this process as **Construct Collapse**. When this happens (assuming that the society in question is still around), *something* will eventually move in to fill that vacuum.

Importantly, Construct Collapse isn't a positive or negative development in and of itself. The degree to which it's beneficial or harmful depends upon the context in which it happens, and what ultimately ends up replacing it. For instance, with the

benefit of hindsight, very few people today would openly argue that the collapse of the cultural narratives that supported *slavery* was a bad thing. On the flip side, totalitarian ideologies which exploit Construct Collapse during states of crisis are an example of its inherent dangers.

More often, Construct Collapse may end up addressing an existing societal problem, while introducing a host of unforeseen consequences. For a vivid illustration of this, we can look to a well-known historical example whose effects are still being felt today. When the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously decried that 'God is dead, and we have killed him', what he was referring to was the displacement of organized religion as the ground of meaning and purpose in people's lives. As a witness to the rapid social changes that were taking place in 19th century Europe, he predicted that the constructed cultural narratives that had sustained Western societies would become increasingly untenable. Swept aside beneath the march of science, industrialization, and secular values (otherwise known as 'modernity').

Correctly perceiving that people would still have existential needs around meaning and purpose which scientific and material progress isn't a suitable substitute for, his concern was that cynicism, despair, and vacuous consumerism would come to occupy that void. Leaving aside that his proposed solution for this crisis was quite maladaptive and toxic, insofar as it recommended that we move 'beyond good and evil' to pursue our own egoic agendas heedless of ethics or morality, Nietzsche still deserves credit for identifying the potential for a very real problem.

Turning the clock forward from the 19th century to our own era, we find ourselves amidst a process of ongoing social fragmentation which has been called the 'Meaning Crisis'. (All due credit to the cognitive scientist and philosopher John Verveake for popularizing this term). We can see evidence for this in the widespread adoption of conspiracy theories, political extremism, and bullshit in public discourse; all of which is having a disastrous effect on the civil societies that sustain democratic institutions. Moreover, social media platforms, whose business models push divisive content as a way of driving user engagement, have been adding fuel to this fire. While there's a tendency to think of these as recent problems, in actuality they're an acceleration of longstanding trends within profit-driven media, which has long understood that crises and fragmentation can be lucratively exploited for private gain.

In conjunction with this sharp increase in polarization, we're undergoing an unprecedented mental health crisis in the West, which has left millions of people feeling alienated and lonely. In the United States, life expectancy has been declining over the last several years, due in no small part to 'deaths of despair' (i.e., suicide and substance abuse). Additionally we're in the midst of an unfolding ecological crisis that's poised to have profound impacts on human civilization over the upcoming decades, further feeding into this mental health crisis. These impacts have been especially pronounced among young people, where anxiety about the state of the world they'll be inheriting is commonplace. With the youngest generation at the time of this book's writing, Gen Alpha, not remembering a time before the dysfunctions of the hyper-polarized world that we're living in today.

Of course, none of this is meant to downplay the leading role that endemic socio-economic dysfunction has played in these crises. For instance, it's going to be hard to feel hopeful about the future if your economy is structured in such a way that buying a home, starting a family, and saving for retirement are all increasingly out of reach for ordinary people. Likewise, a great deal of polarization is driven by perverse incentive structures which enable bad actors to exploit existing societal divisions for economic and political gain.

That said, it's important to keep in mind that economic and political dysfunction is downstream from culture. Focusing exclusively on these (admittedly, very real) political and economic factors is to miss a hugely important part of the story. Which is that in addition to these factors, we're facing an *epistemological crisis* in the West. In essence, there's mounting evidence that different segments of society are not inhabiting the same Reality. Beyond having different interpretations over basic facts that we can more or less agree upon, it's becoming increasingly difficult to reach a foundational consensus for productive disagreements. Moreover, the proliferation of ever more sophisticated versions of artificial intelligence is poised to make this problem even worse over the upcoming decades.

These are dangerous developments, making it extraordinarily difficult to cultivate shared understanding with one another. This is incredibly important because the social dysfunction that we've been experiencing will only get worse as the epistemological crisis deepens. Which is why *epistemological literacy* is arguably more important now than it's ever been.

Of course, it would be the height of folly to propose that Enactivism, or any other narrowly defined epistemology, is going

to be the silver bullet that will deliver us from this crisis. But what perspectives like this one *can* accomplish is to help us cultivate more self awareness around the narratives we use to make sense of Reality. Enactivism is a *reconstructive* epistemology because it acknowledges that constructed narratives play an essential role in addressing our individual and collective needs. At the same time, this comes with a recognition that there are *better* and *worse* ways to construct narratives. And that we would be far better off if the ones we use are, on the whole, more *flexible*, *compassionate, and inclusive*.

Hopefully, it should be evident by now that reconstructive epistemology isn't a call to return to the 'good old days' of a romanticized past that never truly existed. Rather, the reconstructive framework that we're proposing isn't interested in quick-fixes for complex problems, nor is it to be taken as a one-size-fits-all approach that's dogmatically applied to every conceivable situation. Rather, Enactivism is meant to exist alongside other epistemological perspectives, in dialogue with them. Note that this isn't an assertion that every type of epistemology is *equally valid*, so much as it's a recognition that the perspective that we're constructing falls into the camp of being 'true, but partial'.

Chapter Summary

- **Epistemology** is the study of how we come to know things and of what constitutes valid knowledge.

- **Conceptual Knowledge** refers to the categories and distinctions that we use to form generalizations about what we encounter in the world. Its function is to make our insights and observations *explicit* for the purposes of problem solving and communication. Conceptual knowledge is *representational,* meaning that concepts 'stand in for' things and experiences.

- **Nonconceptual Knowledge** refers to forms of understanding that aren't structured within this framework of categories and distinctions. Being able to recognize a face and tie one's shoes are some examples of this from daily life. Its importance is that it allows us to intuitively navigate a diversity of situations, without having to rely on rules to guide our behavior.

- **Situated Coping** is a flexible, nonconceptually guided form of awareness that's essential for daily life, allowing us to engage with our immediate circumstances in an involved and intuitive way. It refers to an inherent *flexibility* that we bring to situations and activities, evidenced by our ability to transition to a more detached, theoretical mindset if we encounter unexpected difficulties that disrupt our coping.

- **Being-In-The-World** refers to our embeddedness within the world, alongside our *concernful involvement* with everyday practices and activities. Its basic assertion is that our *interconnectedness* to people, places, things, and culture is fundamental to *what* Reality is for us. It points to the *background of familiarity with the world* that all other knowledge depends upon.

- We can think of Situated Coping as our 'vehicle' for engaging with our immediate circumstances, while concepts resemble a GPS that's used for navigation. With Being-In-The-World as akin to the civilization infrastructure upon which driving depends.

- Grounding epistemological assertions in *certainty* is analogous to 'chasing the dragon', since this practice tends to be sustained by living in denial of aspects of Reality that clash with one's foundational assumptions.

- **Absolutist** epistemology tries to base its claims off from fixed and enduring truths, which we can be absolutely certain of. It aims to use this purported certainty as a stable bedrock to investigate Reality from.

- **Relativist** epistemology is underpinned by skepticism that knowledge can be grounded in absolute (i.e., fixed and eternal) truths. Its contention is that knowledge is unavoidably *interpretative*. In essence, the meaning of things isn't fixed, but is instead derived from a person's motivations, life experiences, and cultural background.

- **Enactivism** refers to an epistemological approach which contends that minds 'enact', or 'bring forth', an experiential world in accordance with our living bodies and our environment. It aims to be a 'middle way' that's in dialogue with both Absolute and Relative accounts of knowledge, while rejecting some key assumptions of both.

- Our larger aim with Enactivism is to cultivate *Reconstructive* ways of thinking about epistemology.

This approach acknowledges the necessity of narratives, while recognizing that there are better and worse ways to construct them. The basic contention is that we should strive for more self-awareness around the narratives we use to make sense of Reality. Rather than trying to do away with such narratives entirely, we'd be better off with ones that are more flexible, inclusive, and compassionate.

ADDITIONAL READING

If you would like a more in depth exploration the topics we've covered so far, here is a list of recommended works which have influenced the ideas and approach of this book

---

The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience by: Fransisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Elanor Rosch

Metaphors We Live By by: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

The Phenomenology of Perception by: Maurice Meleau-Ponty

Philosophy in the Flesh : the Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought by: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

The Righteous Mind by: Jonathan Heidt

The Scout Mindset by: Julia Galef

Sex, Ecology, Spirituality by: Ken Wilber

Skillful Coping by: Hubert Dreyfus

The Structure of Scientific Revolutions by: Thomas Kuhn

The Tree of Knowledge by: Huberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela