SUMMARY/OVERVIEW of

Knowing and Unknowing Reality: A Beginner's and Expert's Developmental Guide to Post-Metaphysical Thinking

by Tom Murray

Below is an Abstract, the TOC, and the Conclusion/Summary of "Knowing and Unknowing Reality," a manuscript appearing in Integral Review journal January 2018, and also in submission as a book.

Abstract/blurb:

Can rationality and spirituality be in a healthy dialogue in a "post-truth" culture threatened by meaninglessness, where reasonableness seems unfashionable? Tensions between pre-modern "magical/mythical," modern "rationalist," and post-modern "post-rational" sensibilities seem to be escalating across the globe, with scant signs of being resolved. Our march into modernity, along with its gifts, has left behind too much of what the human soul craves. Themes from religion and spirituality, rather than disappearing into a clarified stage/haze of rational humanism, have become the knife-ended scepter piercing and unraveling some of modern culture's dominant assumptions. The "questions of ultimate concern" behind spirituality will not go away, nor will they be resolved through a techno-scientific approach, and, it could be argued, they may always sit at the very center of human being. Still, one can imagine generative paths toward resolving these tensions.

One of the primary conundrums with this cultural unrest is what to do with "metaphysical" understandings of concepts such as spirit, soul, god, life-force, Eros, destiny, Gaia, consciousness, non-duality, etc. This text explores the emergence of "post-metaphysical thinking," also called "4th person perspective," as a set of capacities capable of integrating the meaning-making and life-giving resources of magical, mythical, and mystical consciousness with the gifts of rationality (and post-rational consciousness). Post-metaphysical thinking includes an exploration of "negative capability" and a deeper understanding of the "sources of belief fallibility" in human thought, which support a deeper humility and resilience in collective belief-formation. It is applicable to the metaphysical domains of spirituality, but more generally palliative and corrective for the ills of the contemporary "post-truth" society. The book does not so much propose a new prescriptive, but elaborates on an already emerging capacity with the goal of supporting this form of cultural evolution.

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Conclusions and Summary

(1) Humanity has reached a crossroads in its cultural (or consciousness) evolution. Since the dawn of the modern age we have relied upon our powers of intellect, looking outward to craft a world bursting with technological miracles built upon accumulating scientific knowledge. But we are waking up to "externalities" that, alongside the undeniable benefits of our powerful intellect, are creating world-shattering phenomena such as species extinction, environmental degradation, and unprecedented rates of depression, obesity, suicide, terrorism...the long list of global "crises" is familiar to all. It may be that humanity's list of major troubles has always been long, but only recently, anthropologically speaking, is it true that our biggest threats are products of the human mind and of human nature, as opposed to being about the human relationship with Nature.
Religion and spirituality have traditionally provided the meaning-making resources to protect us from despair and confusion in the face of life's "questions of ultimate concern." But, tethered to metaphysical modes of meaning-making, traditional spiritual narratives are ill-equipped for the current era. Any spirituality, or any world-view, that offers a bridge to a sustainable future must look further inward – into the interior landscape. It must offer sufficient wisdom about the human condition, including the limitations of human reason, to evolve human culture beyond the so-called "deficient mental" cul-de-sac of modernity.

Any such spirituality must put the modern intellect in perspective by supporting an enlightened re-integration of the magical and mythical layers of the human being, while developing a keen awareness of the dynamic unconscious drives emanating from those levels. It must re-enchant, illuminate, and oversee, not suppress or deny, the layers of consciousness that confer emotional vitality and meaning to the objects we perceive (and conceive). Modern manifestations of secular humanism and interfaith religiosity, by themselves, are too subdued to spark the radical experiences of connection, insight, majesty, luminosity, boundlessness, oneness, wholeness, and emptiness that spring from the archetypal strata of the mind (or "soul"). On the other hand, wide-eyed idealistic "spiritual" frameworks for life often ignore both concrete realities and the darker threats of magical/mythical thinking.

The mystical sages and shamanistic healers of the future only need to understand and skillfully activate the magical (including "archetypal" and some of the "mythical") strata of consciousness, as they always have – ideally from a place of great care and skillful means. They do not need to "believe in" literal or metaphysical manifestations of magical beings and phenomena to do their important work. Concepts such as Spirit and Soul continue to be rich ideas for the metaphorical and metaphysical (and post-metaphysical) dimensions of human Being. We do not want to reject them, but rather find modes of belief-holding and dialogue that move flexibly between levels of interpretation, knowing the ideas are tools for mutual understanding and liberation, rather than realities we are subject to.

(2) Our treatment of the landscape of the contemporary "spiritual but not religious" has been, I think appropriately, slanted towards concepts borrowed from Eastern religions. Starting with the quotes in Exhibit A, and throughout, we have highlighted the related concepts of Absolute (or Ultimate) Reality (or Truth), Ground of Being, and Emptiness. This territory that mystics experience and point us toward, is, I would agree, an essential, perhaps the essential, focus of the spiritual journey. The knowing of this territory (which is also, paradoxically, an unknowing) is accompanied by profound compassion, selflessness, bliss, expansiveness, one-pointedness, lucidity, peace, freedom, and/or sacredness. Not as ends in themselves, but as resources of human potential that can make a difference to others and for our world.

Mystics, and the codified mysticism found in esoteric religious texts, has always known that this territory is ineffable, easily misunderstood, and easily taken as an object of egotistic fixation; and have tried in various ways to describe the wrong turns and dead-ends along "the path." These provisos, plus trying to limit certain teachings to those with specific attainments, were the best they could do to negotiate the dance between making knowledge available and avoiding its misuse in their era.
What we are suggesting in this text is that, in the modern and post-modern context, the quasi-literal language of absolutes and ultimates is no longer an appropriate metaphysics. First, this is because, at least as they are often framed, they grate against the expected norms of rational discourse. Second, it is because the emerging capacities of 4thPP (and 5thPP) action logics allow for a post-metaphysical language and comprehension that better meets the underlying goals of the spiritual (and esoteric religious) teachings.

(3) In this text I have offered a post-metaphysical perspective on ideas and ideals woven into contemporary "spiritual but not religious" discourse. The topics covered, sometimes briefly and sometimes in depth, include (in brackets is the section containing that theme):

− Quotes from contemporary teachers/mystics making claims about Soul, Spirit, Godhead, Consciousness, Reality, Source, Non-duality, etc. – that include metaphysical descriptors such as absolute, ultimate, infinite, supreme, essential, primordial, eternal, formless, perfect, and universal. [The metaphysics to Come]
− An analysis of the "Two Truths Doctrine" that posits Absolute Reality (or Truth) in contrast to Relative Reality (or Truth); including a discussion of emptiness and dependent origination. [Two truths: One Problem]
− Gaia – the Earth as a being. [Constructing the Real]
− Recursively structured classification frameworks such as Yin/Yang, Masculine/Feminine, astrology, and personality typing systems. [Constructing the Real]
− Soul, Spirit, Higher Self, Unique Self, True Self, Absolute Self. [Reification and Misplaced Concreteness]
− Eros and Archetypes (Lover, King, Trickster, etc.) (with a short treatment of absolute reality and emptiness) [Reification and Misplaced Concreteness]
− Spiritually potent dualisms including: good/evil, saint/sinner, dark/light, spirit/matter, mind/body, interior/exterior, individual/collective, state/stage, empty/full, absolute/relative, self/selfless, and being/non-being. [Embodied Realism and Metaphorical Pluralism]
− Emptiness and Dependent Origination (co-dependent arising), revisited. [Embodied Realism and Metaphorical Pluralism]
− Time and Causality; plus a brief tap at the questions: Do slugs have emotions? Are dolphins intelligent? Are computers intelligent? Do apes use language? Are rocks or trees or atoms conscious? Do we have a soul? [Embodied Realism and Metaphorical Pluralism]
− Metaphysical descriptors such as absolute, ultimate, infinite, supreme, essential, primordial, eternal, formless, perfect, and universal--revisited on phenomenological grounds [Epistemic Drives]
− Consciousness and the Unconscious. [Epistemic Drives]
− Love and free will [Phenomenology and Infinity]
− Infinity, emptiness, one-pointedness [Phenomenology and Infinity]
− Timelessness, spacelessness, unity, and selflessness. [Phenomenology and INFINITY]
− Auras, light-bodies, channeled messages, and the cosmic hum of existence. [Phenomenology and Infinity]
− Collective consciousness and We-beings. [Phenomenology and Infinity]
– Subtle energies and subtle bodies (distance healing, chakras, prana, Élan Vital, Qi; synchronicities, affirmations). [Phenomenology and Infinity]

As the reader knows, these topics were not explored in terms the specific beliefs surrounding their use, but in general terms of how they relate to metaphysical and post-metaphysical thinking.

Throughout the text I tried to "practice what I was preaching" by laying bare the indeterminacies, fallibilities, and metaphorical pluralisms of the central concepts of my framework. Models such as the five person-perspectives; concepts such as truth, reality, reason, consciousness, and reification; and dualities such as ontology/epistemology, reality/ideas, interiors/exteriors, metaphysics/post-metaphysics, reason/emotion, and concrete/abstract – were all revealed to have fuzzy boundaries and inconvenient interdependencies.

(4) Questions of ultimate concern tap into our deepest needs, fears, and dreams. They are "ultimate" in at least two senses. First, they seem larger than we are – like obscure metaphysical mysteries or un-graspable "hyper-objects." But they are also ultimate because they are omnipresently immanent, touching the most minute, mundane, and intimate aspects of life. Renouncing the "ultimates" of eternalist truths, primordial foundations, and grand narratives does not mean we have to turn our backs to these questions.

Is there a God? – A Soul or Spirit? – A Purpose to life? – A life after death? – An Ultimate Reality? What is Consciousness? Is there a cosmic force of Eros? Do we have free will? What is the Good? ...

Viable answers will not be found in this text, nor within the frozen commandments of any future religion or spiritual framework. We can no longer look to eternally-true authorities for answers to these questions – we must develop ways of thinking that allow the answers to evolve with us and through us. Similarly, we can no longer afford to project the causes and sources of human love and resilience onto an imaginary metaphysical realm (God, Spirit, Cosmos, Eros, etc.) that then turns back to capture us with the force of its demi-real narrative. To be truly resilient we must ground our metaphysics and ethics in an ontology that embodies the realities of the human condition. Post-metaphysical thinking is not non-metaphysical thinking, but rather a stage of wisdom that supports us in collectively and reflectively constructing the metaphysical foundations of a thriving society.

The post-metaphysical injunction to reflect upon our metaphysics and metaphysical thinking, rejecting some of it but not all of it, is a nuanced affair. One needs to develop the skills of giving oneself fully (or almost fully) to the unknown territory of the unconscious, as it bubbles up through the magical strata of mind, at just the right times, yet while keeping lit the pilot light of rational (and post-rational) thought. Culturally, we must perform the developmentally sophisticated operations of de-reifying our Gods, i.e. bringing them down from the heavens and back into the workshop, where we can make adjustments, refinements, and do complete re-designs; to then be able to launch them back into the heavens, believing in them with all of our souls, but only while that serves our deepest needs.
Within this delicate dance I have tried to strike the right note between critique and appreciative inquiry. While exposing the many sources of indeterminacy in the contemporary spiritual meme-scape, I want to emphasize the importance of skillfully "suspending disbelief" (or playing "the believing game") to access the magical, mystical, and metaphysical gifts of life, for example:

- To sense the large oak in the forest as a Being that I am intimately connected with – that whispers forgotten truths into my inner ear;
- To imagine that a Universal Love or Eros saturates the cosmos, animates life forms, breaths consciousness into my own being, and motivates cosmic evolution; and
- To experience the co-presence within a group as connected through a meta-being that contains us all in a higher wisdom, and into which I can release myself.

Such things are critical, not as literal indicators of metaphysical truths, but as experiences that can be penetrated for deeper, if fallible, truths. Importantly, post-metaphysical thinking must include a phenomenological inquiry into the truths found in raw experience – it cannot be limited to abstract reasoning about "things" and "the other," or narratives comforting to Reason. In arriving at any shared world-view, i.e. in proclaiming what is "real" and how it is real, the metaphysics of the future must be influenced by both scientific methods and the deepest of human intuitions, metabolized through generative participation and caring dialogue.

(5) If, when looking within we see that the basis of our being shines with Love, we can then choose to adopt a metaphysics that activates the magical and mythical levels of being by feeling into the divinity and omnipresence of that Love. We can claim it as real. Similarly, we can plumb the depths of our experience to mine the resources of compassion, curiosity, forgiveness, gratitude, creativity, endurance, and integrity that can produce inspired actions and uplifting artifacts. For such a "deliberate metaphysics" we can craft a science-compatible Universe Story that includes metaphysical assumptions about the miraculous divinity of nature and the essential goodness of human nature (ex. see Swimme & Berry; 1992; Dowd, 2008). We can allow for flexible, participatory, generative, local, and humble "grand narratives" addressing questions of ultimate concern.

If, on the other hand, an individual or group looks deeply within itself and, in that moment or continuously, does not find that the foundation is built from components such as love, curiosity, forgiveness, respect, and integrity, but rather finds pain, hatred, or fear at what seems to be the foundational layer, then this is a signal to call in resources for healing to mend the broken heart or traumatized mind; to transform the disfigured pathways of life-energy in the body/mind. It is not the time to re-imagine a new metaphysics, nor to reproduce a given one.

For those ensconced in "status quo" reality in between these two extremes, escaping from the metaphysical assumptions of the "consensus trap" will no doubt involve initial phases of dissonance and discomfort. I hope that the arguments made in this text will motivate such an inquiry and help one negotiate the transitions. And for anyone on such a journey – one that allows for hope while facing "reality" – grief and longing are bound to be constant companions that should be welcomed and listened to. Any future spirituality must include resources up to the task of navigating significant and unpredictable change. The metaphysics to come must account
We have emphasized an embodied orientation to reason and belief-formation. Embodiment has many implications. Human reason is a wet-ware product of evolutionary caprice; and reason is influenced by unconscious drives and distortions born in the ancestral past and from the misfortunes of a lived life. Reason is intimately imbedded in the concrete processes of action and dialogue. Abstract concepts are grounded in sensory-motor primitives; and are "enacted" as much as conceived. Ideas are "tools" more than "truths," and lose relevance if they don't attend to the "seriousness" of pragmatic life. They also lose validity in the face of "performative contradictions." All of this speaks to the embodiment of Reason.

We have made heavy use of a developmental model describing 1stPP through 5thPP action logics. This framework is an orienting generalization and categorical simplification of the complexity of the human condition; however its contours are backed up by dozens of psychological theories and thousands of scientific studies. With each succeeding action logic consciousness builds capacities to see increasingly complex patterns in the world; and builds the skills of ever-deeper self-understanding. The meaning-making drive operates at every developmental level of consciousness, answering life's ultimate questions by producing emotionally charged objects (1stPP), compelling narratives (2ndPP), reasonable truths (3rdPP), multi-perspectival wisdoms (4thPP), and empty-while-full pearls of holistic/cosmic insight (5thPP and above). Rather than fully characterize each action logic in one central place, I have chosen to spread an accumulation of descriptors of these levels throughout the text.

We have used the term "4th person perspective" (4thPP) to indicate the embodied "wisdom skills" that meet the requirements of a future-ready and present-grounded spirituality that can sense into how personal, cultural, and anthropological pasts live within the subterranean strata of the mind/body. At 4thPP many of the sources of fallibility within human ideas and ideals become known, and a deeper humility and self-understanding is possible. There are sources of fallibility at many cognitive levels including: perceptions, conceptions, beliefs, models/theories, and entire world-views. In this text we have focused on the level of conception, that is, at the level of concepts and objects, which touch the ontological and metaphysical questions about "What is real?" that underpin the "What is true/good?" questions behind beliefs, models, theories, and worldviews. We have also hinted at the wisdom skills associated with 5thPP that begin to emerge at 4thPP, including construct aware consciousness.

A key aspect of 4thPP consciousness is a "post-metaphysical thinking" that, among other things, illuminates the nature of ideas and objects derived from metaphysical thinking. Along our journey we have illustrated the fallibilities and dangers that accompany the benefits of unreflective magical, mystical, and metaphysical thinking. To summarize, the sources of these fallibilities and dangers include:

- **Magical** modes of thought that confuse interior and exterior phenomena, and imbue non-living objects and abstractions with human properties such as intention and feeling.
- **Mythical** modes of thought that project story lines, including totalizing narratives, upon reality to satisfy the epistemic drive for the world to makes sense.
- **Hyper-rational** modes of thought that disenfranchise emotions and intuitions, and ignore that which can't be measured and that which can't be neatly categorized.
- **Metaphysical** modes of thought that invent realities beyond time, space, and matter as convenient "locations" to uncritically store beliefs and simplistic answers to complex life questions.
- **Epistemic drives** that compel us toward abstractions, ideals, universals, essentials, totalities, eternals, and infinities;
- The **symbolic drive** that cleaves reality into neat categories and dualities, producing demi-real byproducts such as faux-paradoxes.
- **Misplaced concreteness** (reification) that paints abstract ideas and ideals with demi-real properties of concrete objects.
- The impossibly objective "view from nowhere" that supports the individual analytical mind in drawing universal conclusions without reference to multiple perspectives and actual conversations.
- The disembodied character of modern and Western thought, which disjoins mind and matter, spirit and body, reason and intuition, thinking and acting/being – reductively favoring the first and marginalizing the second of each of these; distancing us from the blood, sweat, tears, and sod of life.

This list is long but its items are so deeply related that the basic shifts in attitude and complexity found at 4thPP can work holistically towards reconciling all of them. This shift is neither easy nor guaranteed, but it is possible. Development happens when sufficient challenge meets sufficient support, and when the psyche is clear of shadow elements that are attached to the known. Perhaps paradoxically, because our world is rife with challenges adequate to this task, the best strategy for building 4thPP thinking is to release or deconstruct unnecessary complexity built up within lower strata, rather than effort to achieve a new level of complexity.

(7) As we come to see that many of the answers handed down to us – wrapped in universal truths, fundamental essences, and grand narratives – are, in some sense, metaphysical counterfeits, post-metaphysical thinking allows us to pan the gold hidden within the sludge. It allows us to pierce the veil of certainty surrounding knowledge bequeathed by the crowd, admired teachers, or "pure" rationality. Post-metaphysical thinking can acknowledge and begin to adapt to the above sources of belief fallibility through tools, skills, and attitudes that we have mentioned, and summarize below:

- The *negative capability* of tolerance of, and playfulness with, uncertainty, ambiguity, and unknowing.
- Having an *embodied* philosophical orientation to reality (summarized just above) that views cognition as constrained by the contingencies of evolution, the physicality of the brain, and the drives of the socially-embedded being.
- **Minding the gap of demi-reality**, i.e. refining the skill of sensing the differential qualities of ideas/ideals vs. concrete reality.
- Developing a *construct aware* appreciation for the cognitive nature of concepts in language including: misplaced concreteness (reification), metaphorical pluralism, the symbolic impulse (categorical splitting that creates dualisms, faux-paradoxes, faux-fractals, and other demi-real illusions); and the graded, exemplar-based, and metaphorical nature of abstract concepts.
- The *interpretive pluralism* of assuming that claims are binary and questions have single answers; asking "in what sense" something is true or real (or not); and "under what definitions, and assuming what exemplars, can one acknowledge another's claim.
- The delicate developmental psychic choreography of balancing the (1stPP) "pleasure principle", (2ndPP) meaning-making drive, (3rdPP) "reality principle," and (4thPP) holistic drive; i.e. suspending rational judgment and *opening to magical and mythical thinking*, while maintaining enough post-rational wisdom-skill to avoid being swindled by the simplicity, naïveté, and narcissism of the primitive mind.
- Engage in the therapeutic or contemplative *shadow work* of reducing reality-distorting complexities, lacunas, and blockages to uncover, recover, or reconstruct the lower strata of the psyche.
- The *phenomenological approach* of: grounding spiritual truths in experiences – as opposed to allowing ideals or theories to limit experiences and dictate interpretations; developing a proprioceptive felt-sense for when the magical mind is keenly engaged; and feeling into the bundle of epistemic drives as they pull at one's attempts at meaning-making.
- Nurture a *procedural rationality* that emphasizes how people think over what people think – replacing foundationalism with "fallibilism."
- Taking a *participatory and dialogical* approach to building and applying knowledge about world, self, and society; seeking diverse perspectives and applying humility, openness, vulnerability, and curiosity to collective truth-seeing activities.
- Holding searches for the "truth" and "reality" as fundamentally *ethical, emancipatory*, and self-emancipatory – as grounded in sincerity, authenticity, respect, gratitude, forgiveness, and care.
- Using the *idea portability principle* while communicating one's beliefs – i.e., that the greater the distance between the worldviews or beliefs of interlocutors the more important it is to understand and compensate for indeterminacy.

Any sustainable spirituality (or world-view) of the future must have elements of the 4thPP post-metaphysical skills listed above, to allow humanity to address perennial "questions of ultimate concern" in ways that holistically meet the needs posed by multiple layers of the psyche. Obviously, this is not a how-to book containing practices and success stories related to these skills and attitudes. The focus has been on generative and clarifying ideas rather than practices, and I hope that the many invitations to connect the rather philosophical ideas to life experience have compensated for the degree of abstraction. The motivated reader can find many sources of practical advice on contemplative practice, psychotherapy, deep dialogue, and critical self-reflection elsewhere. And again, though this list may seem daunting, the elements are massively interconnected and co-creational, with each supporting the others in the developmental move into a 4thPP action logic.

**Epilogue.** This text is intentionally hopeful. The author realizes that humanity's myriad problems and "crises" look quite dire, and understands that a nearly miraculous degree of cultural consciousness transformation toward something like 4thPP, *and/or* an impractical proliferation of psychic healing, would be needed to reach a species-wide "tipping point" that would usher in a sustainable global human system. Perhaps I am pointing a flashlight down one of the more hopeful-looking roads leading out of a dimly lit crossroad along the Anthropocene; but I have little comprehension of who may go there, how long the road is, or what other resources are
required for the journey. Actually, that metaphor is not very apt – I am offering a few conceptual tools for the suitcase and some compass points for the map for such a journey, rather than lighting up an entire road. But I am confident that the basic tools are necessary, sturdy in the right hands, and generally wieldable for those willing to practice.

I have suggested a clearing and cleaning out of unnecessary (classical) metaphysics and a collective re-building of a more nourishing and radiant deliberative and embodied metaphysics. The many perspectives I have given on this post-metaphysical approach may make this seem complicated and daunting. But, in a sense, it is as simple as looking into the eyes of others with openness and care, responding to the vulnerable human needs arising in that context, and translating one's response into a deliberate metaphysics by articulating the core values and beliefs that arise there. It is complex and daunting because the layers of demi-reality and egoic attachments that accumulate in the psyche in modern culture are indeed complex and daunting. Social structures reify and reinforce these patterns. Releasing this "baggage" can be disorienting and painful; and seem completely impractical in those back-alleys of culture that are maliciously committed to perpetuating the demi-real. But, I submit, all of this reality may be more malleable than we imagine. The science of chaotic systems allows for miracles in concrete reality.

Your author has ample direct (often humbling) experience in his own life that, in a sense, reality is constructed by one's projections onto it. At least at the local level of human interaction, a shift in attitude, a released fear or craving, a pause to wonder – can create a recognizable "ontological" change in others, as well as oneself. If the global indeed emerges from the local, these are powerful spiritual acts. I may not be able to bend a spoon with my mind, magically manifest the new car of my dreams, or heal a distant stranger with my prayers, but with every small step of taking responsibility for my actions, thoughts, beliefs, energetic presence, and even my emotions and the contents of my unconscious, I learn that the metaphysics that I embody co-creates a reality. If a sufficient number of people seemed to agree, not with my ideas but with a similar metaphysics, then maybe a new sun would peek through the clouds of our species-wide predicament. Perhaps it already has. Perhaps you are among those responsible for it.