

KNOWLEDGE SPACE NO. 12

THE REALITY OF NONDUALITY

A Research Journey Through Medicine, Science, Philosophy, and Wisdom

“The reality of nonduality does not begin beyond the human being. It begins where the human being recognises that they were never separate from it.”

AKADEMIE DER WEISHEIT — KNOWLEDGE SPACES

♦ 1. The Lost Connection

The more precisely a human being comes to understand the particular, the more urgent the question of the whole becomes.

The history of human knowledge is also a history of distinction. The body was divided into organs, organs into tissues, tissues into cells, cells into ever smaller structures. Scientific disciplines emerged, specialised, and developed a precision without which large parts of modern medicine and research would scarcely be conceivable.

This movement was no mistake. It was precisely the ability to lift a phenomenon out of its context and examine it with precision that made possible discoveries capable of treating illness, easing suffering, and preserving life.

And yet every act of differentiation gives rise to a second task.

For the human being whose heart is being examined does not consist of that heart alone. The brain does not live detached from the body. An immune system does not exist independently of environment, lifestyle, and the body's other systems. Perception arises within a life story. Identity forms in encounter. Health unfolds under social conditions.

The particular becomes ever more clearly visible. At the same time, the question of what binds these particular parts together grows more pressing.

This is no turning away from science. It is, rather, the continuation of science's own movement. Whoever comes to recognise the parts ever more precisely eventually encounters the relationships between them.

And perhaps it is precisely there that the question of nonduality begins. Not as a counter-model to analysis. Not as the abolition of all distinctions. Not as the claim of a hidden reality behind the visible world. But as the question of whether the boundaries with which we describe reality are also the boundaries of that reality itself.

With every new discovery, the individual parts became more clearly visible. Now the gaze turns once again to what connects them.

♦ 2. How Knowledge Arises

Every act of knowing begins with a boundary. The human being comes to know by distinguishing.

Light and dark. Inside and outside. Body and environment. Health and illness. I and you.

Without such distinctions, language, orientation, and scientific knowledge would hardly be possible. Only by distinguishing one thing from another does it receive a name and become describable.

The boundary is, at first, a tool of knowing. But a tool can eventually be mistaken for the thing it describes.

A heart can be mentally set apart from the rest of the organism for the purpose of examination. In the living body, however, it never beats alone. A nervous system can be scientifically regarded as a system in its own right. In the human being, it stands in constant relation to hormonal, immunological, and other bodily processes. An individual possesses a biography of their own and yet remains shaped by language, culture, relationships, and environment.

The boundary remains methodologically useful. It merely loses its claim to explain the whole of reality.

With this, the movement of knowledge itself changes. At first it differentiates. Then it discovers relationships. Finally it begins to ask whether what was separated was ever as separate as its own concepts made it appear.

Systems biology, network medicine, psychology, ecology, and other fields of research each use their own models and concepts for this. None of these disciplines thereby proves a metaphysical unity of reality. But they do make visible that many phenomena can only be adequately understood within their interactions.

The boundary makes knowledge possible. That does not mean it must also be the final boundary of reality.

♦ 3. Medicine Remembers the Whole Human Being

The human organism shows itself ever more clearly as a living fabric of continual interaction.

Modern medicine owes its precision to specialisation.

Cardiology attends to the heart. Neurology to the nervous system. Endocrinology to hormonal processes. Immunology to the body's systems of defence and regulation.

This specialisation remains indispensable.

At the same time, medical and health research is increasingly turning toward connections: psychoneuroimmunology studies the relationships between psyche, nervous system, and immune system. Systems and network medicine view disease within complex biological processes. Epigenetic research examines the interplay between biological regulation and environmental conditions. Microbiome research widens the view of the human being to include those communities of life with which the organism remains continually bound.

The human being thereby appears less as a collection of independently functioning parts. He appears as an event. Heart, brain, immune system, hormonal system, metabolism, movement, sleep, nutrition, experience, and environment unfold within a context in which changes on several levels can gain meaning at once.

And precisely here a remarkable question arises.

The human body is in constant change. Cells arise and pass away. Substances are built up and broken down. The organism adapts to strain and experience.

And yet a person experiences themselves, across decades, as the same person.

What, then, is unity, when its constituent parts are ceaselessly in flux?

Medicine need not answer this question metaphysically. Yet its own findings repeatedly arrive at a point where health can hardly still be meaningfully described as the isolated property of a single organ.

The human being does not possess a connection. He lives as one.

◆ 4. The Brain — Between Prediction and Reality

The self appears less as a fixed object than as an ongoing process.

The picture of the brain, too, has changed.

Earlier models could give the impression that particular faculties could be assigned to particular centres, and that perception consisted chiefly in taking in information from an outer world and processing it.

Newer models describe a more intricate event.

Perception, on this view, arises from the interplay of sensory impressions, bodily states, experience, expectation, and ongoing neural processing. The brain does not merely passively depict the world. It participates in how what is perceived comes to carry meaning.

These approaches include models of predictive processing, in which perception is described as an ongoing interplay between sensory information and expectation-guided processing.

Thinking, remembering, feeling, and deciding likewise arise from the interaction of widely distributed networks.

This also touches the image of the self.

From a neuroscientific perspective, the “I” does not simply appear as an unchanging inner observer. Bodily awareness, memory, language, emotion, and social experience together contribute to the experience of continuity and selfhood.

None of this means that neuroscience has answered the philosophical question of the self. But it does shift its starting point. When brain, memories, perceptions, and relationships are in constant change, and yet the sense of a continuous life remains, the seemingly simple question “Who am I?” suddenly deepens.

Perhaps the self names less an object a person possesses. Perhaps it describes an ongoing movement of life. The I might be less a place than a relationship perpetually arising anew between body, experience, memory, and world.

✦ 5. The Human Being Becomes Human Through the Other

No human being becomes human outside relationship with another.

A child develops language in the sound of other voices.

Feelings receive names because someone responds to them.

Trust arises through experienced reliability.

The image of one's own self grows within countless encounters.

Developmental psychology and attachment research have worked out the significance of these early relationships. Trauma research, resilience research, systemic approaches, and embodiment widen the view further to the question of how experience continues to act within the body, within perception, and within relationship.

This undermines the self-evidence of the idea of a wholly self-contained individual.

A person remains unmistakably themselves. And yet their identity never arises entirely out of themselves alone.

They speak a language that existed before them. They carry the experiences of other people within them. They are changed through encounter and in turn change those they encounter.

Here the concept of resonance gains its meaning.

Resonance does not mean fusion. Two people do not become one person in encounter. It is precisely their difference that makes response possible. Resonance connects while difference remains. It describes a relationship in which something is touched and answers, without having to lose its own form.

This movement already carries within it an essential thought of nonduality:

*Connectedness requires no uniformity. Unity does not mean that difference disappears.
Perhaps difference only becomes fully visible within relationship.*

✦ 6. The Human Being in the Mirror of the Times

The human being never lives solely within their own boundaries.

Health does not arise in the body alone.

People live, work, learn, and age within social, cultural, and economic conditions. Housing, education, social security, relationships, working conditions, environment, and social participation all shape the possibilities of life and of health.

This widens the view once more. What at first appears to be an individual event carries traces of its surroundings.

The burdens of an era, too, shape the people living within it. Permanent availability, high density of information, acceleration, and the ongoing possibility of comparison change the way attention, time, and social relationships are experienced.

Burnout, depression, anxiety, or loneliness must therefore, from this perspective, be neither wholly individualised nor reduced to social conditions alone. Either would again be a foreshortening.

The human being shapes society, while social reality in turn acts back upon them. Individual and life-world are distinguishable from one another and yet remain continually related.

Health thereby appears less as a purely private achievement. It touches relationships, working life, education, social structures, and those cultural notions of what a person is supposed to accomplish, represent, and withstand.

The human being does not stand opposite their world. They shape it — and are shaped by it.

♦ 7. The Question of Being

How does unity remain experienceable, when everything is in motion?

Here philosophy begins to ask further, at the point where empirical description reaches its methodological limit.

The body changes. Thoughts come and go. Memories shift. Relationships arise and pass. Societies alter their forms. And yet people speak of a life.

Philosophy has known this tension since its beginnings.

Parmenides asked after the abiding. Heraclitus saw change itself as the basic movement of life. Plotinus thought unity. Spinoza developed the notion of a single substance. Whitehead understood reality as becoming and process.

These thinkers by no means share a single philosophy. It is precisely their differences that matter.

Yet between them a common question remains: what does identity mean within a reality that is forever changing?

Science can describe processes. Philosophy asks after the very conditions under which we can speak of process, being, identity, change, and reality at all.

Neither perspective need replace the other. The boundary between them preserves each one's precision.

Perhaps this is already a first nondual thought: different approaches need not cancel one another out in order to meet the same reality.

Change and permanence need not be opposites. Perhaps they are two ways of regarding the same movement.

♦ 8. The Remembering of Wisdom

Wisdom begins where knowledge becomes experience.

Alongside scientific observation and philosophical reflection, a further form of human approach to reality has existed for millennia. It begins with direct experience.

Advaita Vedānta, Buddhism, Taoism, Christian mysticism, Sufism, and other traditions of wisdom have each developed very different conceptions of the human being, of the self, and of the origin of reality.

These traditions must not be fused into a single teaching.

Advaita Vedānta speaks of the relation between Ātman and Brahman. Buddhist traditions, by contrast, question the very notion of an unchanging self, developing concepts such as anattā (Pali; Sanskrit: anātman) and Śūnyatā. Taoist texts use other images again. Christian mysticism speaks in yet another religious and theological language.

Their differences remain essential.

This closeness does not amount to metaphysical equivalence. Advaita Vedānta describes nonduality through the identity of Ātman and Brahman. Buddhist teachings of anattā, or anātman, and Śūnyatā instead reject the very notion of an unchanging self or an independently existing substance. Their point of contact therefore lies less in a shared ontology than in their shared questioning of the separateness that ordinary experience takes for granted.

And yet, within many of these traditions, there appears an experience in which the ordinary separation between the observing human being and the observed reality loses its self-evidence.

Contemporary contemplative research can investigate which psychological or neural changes accompany meditative and contemplative experience. It thereby proves no metaphysical claim about the unity of reality. This distinction is precisely the crucial one.

Science can study processes of experience. Philosophy can question their presuppositions and meanings. Traditions of wisdom can open paths of experience. None of these levels need be made into the other.

Where thought recognises its own limit, knowing need not end. Only its form may change.

♦ 9. The Shared Horizon — What Nonduality Means

Diversity remains. What changes is the way in which it is experienced.

In this Knowledge Space, nonduality denotes neither a religion nor a creed nor a second reality behind the visible world.

It points to a way of knowing in which the customary separation between human being and world, self and other, or subject and object, loses its exclusive validity.

This does not make the world of differences disappear. The human being remains human. The tree remains a tree. Body and mind remain distinguishable. Science remains science. Philosophy remains philosophy.

Nearness is not distance. Joy is not pain. Birth is not death.

Nonduality therefore does not mean: everything is the same. It asks, rather, whether difference must necessarily mean separateness.

A single note remains a note and yet belongs to the music. A wave possesses a recognisable form and yet never stands outside the water. A human being possesses an unmistakable biography and yet never exists outside language, nature, body, relationship, and world.

Differences then appear less as proof of mutually independent realities. They become different expressions within one shared event.

This research journey formulates this shared horizon explicitly in such a way that science, philosophy, and wisdom each keep their own language. The connection between them therefore arises not through blending, but through the standing of their perspectives side by side.

Nonduality does not abolish diversity. It makes questionable the notion that diversity must mean separation.

◆ 10. Health as an Expression of Nonduality

Health is not a property of life. It is a way in which life comes to realise itself.

From here, the question of health itself changes.

Within this philosophical perspective, health appears less as a wholly stable state that might at some point be reached and thereafter preserved.

Life is in constant change. The body ages. Relationships shift. Burdens arise and pass. People fall ill, recover, adapt, lose capacities, and develop others.

Health can therefore be regarded as mobility within this change.

This view does not replace any medical definition of health, nor any pathophysiological explanation of illness. It adds an existential dimension.

Illness is not romanticised here. Pain remains pain. Impairment remains real. Medical treatment remains necessary wherever it is necessary.

And yet healing need not always mean a return to an earlier state.

After serious illness, trauma, loss, or profound life change, that earlier life frequently no longer exists in its old form.

Healing can then mean developing, anew, mobility, relationship, resonance, and participation within a changed reality.

The human being does not always return. Sometimes they go on.

Health thus shows itself as a dynamic event, and healing as the regaining of inner mobility — without wishing to remove vulnerability or change from life.

Health does not consist in escaping change. It shows itself in remaining alive within change.

♦ 11. Conclusion — The Human Being Remembers

The reality of nonduality does not begin beyond life.

This research journey began with a separation. With body and mind. Individual and environment. Science and wisdom. Health and illness. Self and world.

None of these distinctions had to disappear. On the contrary. The more precisely each perspective was considered, the more clearly its own standing became visible.

Yet, at the same time, something else emerged.

The heart exists only within an organism. The brain develops within a body and a life story. Identity arises in relationship. Health unfolds within life-worlds. Society is created by human beings and at the same time creates the conditions of human life.

Philosophy thinks reality. Traditions of wisdom seek its direct experience.

None of these levels possesses the whole. And none stands outside it.

Perhaps this is precisely where the reality of nonduality lies.

It asks for no withdrawal from the world. No special identity. No final knowledge.

It begins where the notion fades that a human being must stand outside life in order to know it.

They are already part of what they are asking after.

Diversity remains. The individual person remains. Their story remains. Their body, their relationships, their vulnerability, and their uniqueness remain. Only the asserted separation loses its final self-evidence.

The reality of nonduality does not begin beyond the human being. It begins where the human being recognises that they were never separate from it.

∞ Further Reading & Related Knowledge Spaces

Readers wishing to continue exploring the questions raised here will find related depth in the KNOWLEDGE SPACES series:

- Knowledge Space No. 3 — The Stillness of Calm: A Space for Consciousness, Education, and Change
- Knowledge Space No. 7 — Beyond Listening: The Essence of True Presence (Sparsha)
- Knowledge Space No. 8 — The Echo of Life: Between Creation, Impermanence, and Presence

◇ Sources & Threads of Thought

This Knowledge Space is not a scholarly publication. The sources below mark the scholarly and scientific threads of thought that its central statements connect to — above all those of Chapters 3 through 8.

- Barabási, Albert-László / Gulbahce, Natali / Loscalzo, Joseph: Network medicine: a network-based approach to human disease. *Nature Reviews Genetics* 12 (2011), 56–68. A foundational text of network medicine, drawn on in Chapter 3.
- Clark, Andy: Whatever next? Predictive brains, situated agents, and the future of cognitive science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 36 (2013), 181–204. An influential formulation of the predictive-processing approach, drawn on in Chapter 4.
- Bowlby, John: Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1: Attachment. London: Hogarth Press, 1969. The foundational work of attachment research, drawn on in Chapter 5.
- World Health Organization: Social determinants of health. Geneva: WHO, continuously updated (as of 2025). Evidence for the influence of living and working conditions on health, drawn on in Chapter 6.
- Diels, Hermann / Kranz, Walther: Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker. 6th, revised edition. Berlin: Weidmann, 1951–1952. The standard edition of the fragments of Parmenides and Heraclitus, drawn on in Chapter 7.
- Spinoza, Baruch de: Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order. Amsterdam, 1677. The foundation for the idea of a single substance, taken up in Chapter 7.
- Whitehead, Alfred North: Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology. New York: Macmillan, 1929. A source for understanding reality as becoming, taken up in Chapter 7.
- Deutsch, Eliot: Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction. Honolulu, 1969. An introductory overview of the Advaita tradition and the relation of Ātman to Brahman, drawn on in Chapter 8.
- Nāgārjuna: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way). c. 2nd century CE. A central text on the concept of emptiness (Śūnyatā), drawn on in Chapter 8.
- Brewer, Judson A. et al.: Meditation experience is associated with differences in default mode network activity and connectivity. *PNAS* 108 (2011), 20254–20259. An example of neuroscientific contemplative research, drawn on in Chapter 8.

○ KNOWLEDGE SPACES — Appreciation

The KNOWLEDGE SPACES series is a labour of the heart — offered free of charge, though not something to be taken for granted. If these reflections have given you something, and you would like to give something back, a voluntary contribution is always welcome:

[PayPal.me/VossKati](https://paypal.me/VossKati)

Thank you for your appreciation. It helps such content continue to come into being — quietly, with care, and in service of wholeness.

△ KNOWLEDGE SPACES — Notes

The KNOWLEDGE SPACES serve professional orientation, deepening, and personal engagement with topics from health, care, palliative care, spiritual care, psychology, and philosophy.

This Knowledge Space brings together scientific, philosophical, and wisdom-based perspectives. These different forms of knowing are not thereby equated. In particular, philosophical or spiritual interpretations of nonduality do not constitute claims scientifically proven about the nature of reality.

The content does not replace individual medical, therapeutic, nursing, or legal advice. For acute or serious health concerns, please consult appropriately qualified professionals.