

CHAPTER 2

A World of Ideas

In Chapter 1, I laid the blame for much avoidable suffering at the door of the conceptual way of knowing. Poets have long intuited that the power it offers to imagine the future and mentally revisit the past creates a kind of unhappiness unknown to other creatures. They look with longing at the peace of simpler animals who seem to live fully in the present moment. The 18th-century Scottish poet Robert Burns (1786) makes the contrast with powerful directness in his poem “To a Mouse”:

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

Our powers of mental time travel—the ability to imagine possible futures or rehearse memories of the past—arise directly from our capacity for conceptual thought. Like other features of conceptual knowing, mental time travel is a two-edged sword: it creates possibilities for unprecedented control over our outer worlds, but, equally, it puts our inner happiness at risk.

Used unskillfully, a sword will hurt us. But that, by itself, is no reason to throw away our swords. With knowledge and training, we can discover how to use a sword safely and effectively. Equally, we can learn the uses of different kinds of swords: when, like the Three Musketeers, to rely on the dueling powers of the slender rapier; when, like the cavalry arriving over the horizon, to rely on the greater versatility of the saber.

In a similar way, we can learn to harness the power of conceptual knowing as a force for good, while avoiding the snares and pitfalls it creates.

And, crucially, we can discover that this is not our only way of knowing: that we also have another, holistic-intuitive way of knowing (which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 3): a way of knowing that will often be more appropriate to use than conceptual knowing.

To master the use of different kinds of swords, knowledge of the purpose for which each was designed, and their particular strengths and weaknesses, is invaluable. In the same way, a clearer understanding of the underlying nature and evolutionary function of conceptual knowing can help us use it with greater skill and discernment.

The Conceptual Way of Knowing

Conceptual knowing is the kind of knowing with which we are most familiar. It deals with meanings that are explicit, specific, and easy to communicate. These meanings are the stuff of most of our conscious thinking. Conceptual knowing is factual knowing—knowing *about* something. It focuses on the kind of meaning conveyed by a single sentence such as, “The cat sat on the mat.” We can acquire this kind of knowledge directly from our own experience—but, crucially, we can also acquire it indirectly from what someone else tells us or what we read.

Both the power and problems of conceptual knowing arise from its underlying form and structure. That form and structure, in turn, reflects the original evolutionary function of conceptual knowing—for detailed treatments of this topic, see Barnard, Duke, Byrne, and Davidson (2007) and McGilchrist (2009). Conceptual knowing evolved as part of a more general development that empowered early humans to communicate the kind of explicit, detailed information that social groups have to share in working together toward agreed goals. That development enabled human groups to achieve goals quite beyond the capacities of any one individual working alone.

Conceptual information, as we now know it, evolved, at most, only 200,000 years ago. This makes it a very recent development in the overall evolution of mind. In the short time (from an evolutionary perspective) that conceptual knowing has been around, its influence has expanded vastly from its initial limited use in helping people work together to achieve goals. In contemporary human culture, it is hard to find any area of life about which we do not think conceptually—to the point where, crucially, we may assume that the way we see the world through the lens of conceptual thought is the only “reality” there is.

Nonetheless, the task-based origins of conceptual thinking still have direct and far-reaching consequences for the problems we discussed in Chapter 1:

- Conceptual information has an *atomistic* structure—it divides the world up into ideas (concepts) of *separate*, self-existing, enduring entities (“things,” “selves,” “subjects,” “objects”).
- The qualities of these separate “things” are seen as aspects of their inherent properties—they are intrinsic to the things themselves, rather than the result of certain conditions coming together in particular ways.
- Concepts are abstractions, freed from the constraints of concrete sensory reality—through them we can imagine alternative states of the world, different and more desirable than the one we are actually in; this capacity underpins an extraordinarily powerful strategy to achieve chosen goals.
- Most crucially, although concepts (ideas) are abstractions, they are often treated as “real”—equivalent to the things they represent.
- Conceptual knowing, its strategies to achieve goals, and a narrow task-focused attention tend to be automatically brought “online” when the mind prepares to take action to get what we want; crucially, this can happen even when those strategies are totally counterproductive.

Each of these features relates directly to the power conceptual knowing offers—and to the problems it can create. By becoming more familiar with its fundamental characteristics we can take advantage of what this way of knowing has to offer, at the same time avoiding the kinds of problems we discussed in Chapter 1.

Key Features of the Conceptual Way of Knowing

A World of Separate, Independent, Self-Existing Things

Conceptual knowing involves “isolating things artificially from their context . . . enabling us to focus intently on a particular aspect of reality and how it can be modelled, so that it can be grasped and controlled” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 115). Isolating things in this way creates a world of separate, independent, self-existing entities—*things*, each with its own inherent intrinsic identity. This kind of atomistic structure allows conceptual meanings to be constructed, understood, and worked with piecemeal, concept by concept, in a linear sequence as words are spoken and heard. This part-by-part, step-by-step kind of knowing is ideal for talking about, or thinking about, how to achieve particular objectives through skilled action. It provides a way to communicate specific meanings with reliability and accuracy in ways that all will understand. It gains precision and economy

by focusing only on aspects of situations that are immediately relevant to the task in hand. (This *atomistic* structure stands in marked contrast to the *holistic* character of holistic-intuitive knowing discussed in Chapter 3: holistic knowing draws simultaneously on the patterns of *relationships* between all the information available in any moment.)

The atomistic structure of conceptual knowing means that concepts create perceptual lenses through which we see the world in a very particular way. Things are extracted from the contexts in which they occur and are seen in isolation. The agents that act on those things are also seen as wholly distinct from the things they act on and from other agents. This creates a *dualistic* view of the world that divides the world into separate subjects and objects, and separates “me” from “you.” It reflects the agent-action-object (*who* does *what* to *whom*, or *what*) structure of language. This structure is invaluable for getting tasks done in a social group. But when we unconsciously extend this dualistic view to the world as a whole, we create a world of “thingness” in which we experience a gnawing sense of disconnection and alienation. This painful sense of separation underlies much human unhappiness, as we discussed in Chapter 1.

Inner awakening transforms our habitual *dualistic* worldview of separation and disconnection to a nondualistic worldview of wholeness, relationship, and connection (Chapter 10).

Things with Inherent, Enduring, Essential Qualities

Having divided the world up into separate things, conceptual knowing then treats the quality of each thing or experience as an aspect of its inherent nature. That is, as something that belongs to the thing itself, which it carries around wherever it goes—rather than as an emerging property of complex interactions between many different conditions. We talk, for example, of a *delicious* cake, an *awesome* sight, or an *attractive* person, implying that these features are somehow inherent in the objects themselves.

Adding extra meaning in this way can work fine at a practical level. If you want to make a stone ax, it is really helpful to know: (1) that you need a type of stone that can take a sharp edge; and (2) that flint has this property, but sandstone does not. Here, with the qualities of flint, you are dealing with physical properties that remain relatively constant from one context to another. But when it comes to aspects of *experience*—such as whether a piece of cake tastes wonderful, or whether someone is attractive—then a whole host of interacting contextual factors will determine the quality of the experience. The cake that tasted so delicious on the first bite of the first slice may not be quite so wonderful when you get round to the tenth slice. And the person whose company you enjoyed so much at the party on Saturday night may not look so good or be so much fun when you see them

first thing on a wet Monday morning, disheveled, late for work, having slept through their alarm.

Our (usually unconscious) tendency to see our experience of things and our feelings toward them as reflections of their inherent qualities lies at the root of much avoidable suffering. It leads directly to our pursuit of “objects of desire”—objects with (we believe) the intrinsic power to make us feel good. We can end up believing that if only we can find the right object of desire—or enough of them—then we will enjoy lasting happiness. Even more perniciously, as we saw in Chapter 1, our lives can be ruled by the quest to become a particular kind of “thing” ourselves—a “good self”—that we believe will make us “live happily ever after.” Both these strategies are not only doomed to failure and frustration: they are also a major source of human suffering.

Concepts Are Abstractions

Dictionaries suggest two aspects to the meaning of *abstract*: (1) “existing in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence”; (2) “general and not based on particular examples.” Concepts are abstract in both these senses—and both are directly relevant to the crucial question of the relationship between concepts and “reality.” I will consider each in turn.

Planned, goal-focused action hinges on the ability to deliberately create a mental representation of a goal: a different, more desirable state of the world than the one you are in right now. To create such an idea of a future state of affairs, some part of the mind has to free itself from “the world”—the information arriving each moment from our sense organs. The mind can then think about things that are not physically present right now.

ICS (interacting cognitive subsystems; Barnard, 1985, 2012; Barnard & Teasdale, 1991; Teasdale & Barnard, 1993) offers a general-purpose psychological framework that will underpin much of our exploration of mindfulness and inner awakening. (In previous presentations of ICS, conceptual knowing and holistic-intuitive knowing were called, respectively, propositional knowing and implicational knowing.) In the present case, a simplified sketch of the ICS view of the human mind (Figure 2.1) makes clear why conceptual knowing is in an ideal position for thinking about things—like goals—that are not actually physically present here and now. (There is no need to worry about understanding the details of this sketch: I will highlight relevant points, as and when needed.)

Two aspects of this sketch are key. The first is that the conceptual subsystem (which processes conceptual information) is the only one to have no *direct* connections with any of the sensory subsystems receiving

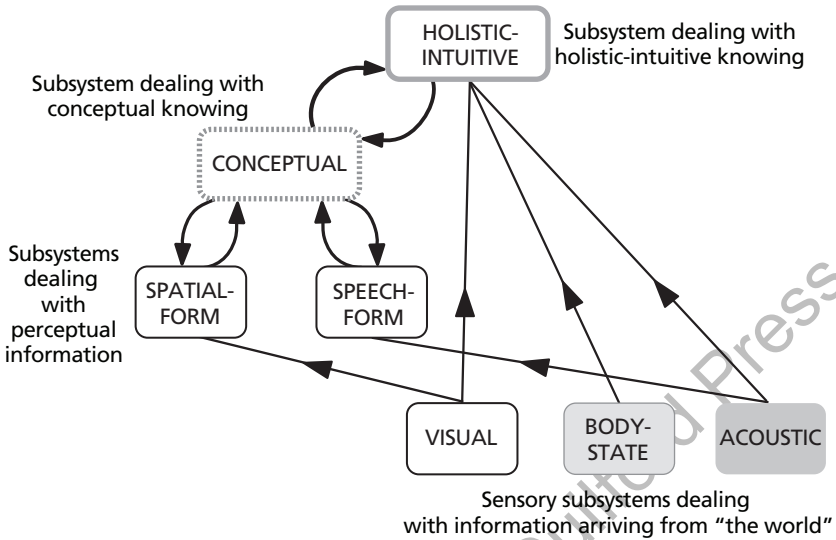


FIGURE 2.1. The human mind as seen by ICS. Note: Boxes represent subsystems, each specialized for processing a different kind of information; lines represent the flow of information through the system.

information from “the world.” Only the conceptual subsystem is so well “insulated” from the sensory world in this way.

This lack of direct connection means that, although the conceptual subsystem *can* keep some indirect connection with current sensory reality, *it does not need to*; it is quite possible for it to end up processing conceptual information—*ideas*—totally disconnected from the “reality” of the information arriving from the sense organs each moment. Unanchored in this way, conceptual processing can float free to create inner mental worlds quite unconstrained by current sensory “reality.”

The second key aspect of Figure 2.1 concerns the three processing loops centered on the conceptual subsystem. These loops (shown separately in Figure 2.2) play crucial roles in creating our inner mental worlds.

These three loops all involve two-way interactions—conversations, if you like—between the subsystem processing conceptual information and subsystems processing other kinds of information. Conversations within these loops provide a way for the mind to go completely “internal”: to free itself entirely from the happenings in the world “out there” in this moment.

An analogy may be helpful here. Imagine two people engaged in conversation in a windowless soundproof booth with no cell phones or other ways to contact the wider world outside the booth. They are totally

disconnected from the sights and sounds of the outer world. Once they begin to exchange words with each other—each one responding to what the other just said—their conversation can develop very easily without the need for any further input from the world outside the booth. The course of their conversation can then take them very quickly to talk of places and times very far away from the place and time where they “really” are. The shared mental worlds created in this way provide ample stimulus for further conversation. This conversation could go on for a long time without any need for further input from the world outside the booth.

In the same way, conversations in the loops centered on conceptual knowing can float free, totally unconstrained by current sensory “reality.” The mind can then engage in mental time travel and mental space travel—revisiting the past, dwelling in imaginary futures, and visiting distant lands. These conversations create self-contained inner mental worlds with a life of their own. Depending on the partners involved in the conversation, those are worlds of inner imagery and daydreaming, of inner speech and internal narrative (the stories we tell ourselves), or “pure thought.”

This uniquely human capacity to deliberately think about things not physically present in the moment, and that may have never actually existed, gives the human mind its extraordinary ability to control the outer world. This capacity allows us to dream of pyramids, of flying machines, or of landing on the moon. And, crucially, it also allows us to imagine the steps of practical action that will translate those dreams into realities.

On the other hand, the power of conceptual thought to disconnect us from the anchors of immediate sensory experience means we can create imaginary goals totally at odds with the way things actually are. Such goals can never be attained. The relentless pursuit of such impossible goals is the cause of much human unhappiness (Chapter 1). Equally, our capacity

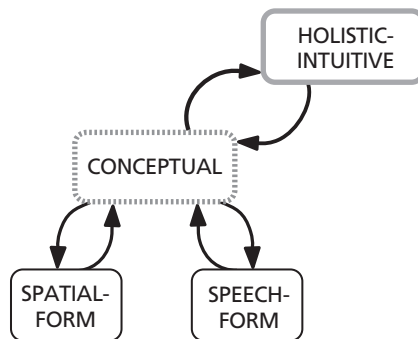


FIGURE 2.2. Three processing loops centered on the conceptual subsystem.

to create and dwell in purely inner mental worlds can totally disconnect us from the living, breathing, interacting world around us. We then end up like Mr. Duffy, one of the characters in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, who "lived at a little distance from his body" (we will meet Mr. Duffy again in Chapter 9).

This kind of disconnection has profound consequences for our well-being—and not only when the inner worlds in which we come to dwell are dominated by negative, fearful, or self-critical themes (Chapter 8). It turns out that most of us spend an extraordinary proportion of our waking lives dwelling in the inner mental worlds we create and the stories we tell ourselves (Chapter 9). Inner awakening liberates us from these dream worlds (Chapter 10)—and mindfulness enhances the quality of our lived experience through that same route (Chapter 9).

Concepts are also abstract in the sense that they are "general and not based on particular examples." The concept "knife," for example, applies to all "instruments composed of a blade fixed into a handle, used for cutting or as a weapon," irrespective of whether the blade is made of flint, bronze, or steel, or whether the handle is wood, bone, or plastic, or whether it is small or large, old or new, and so on. So if I want to tell you how to sharpen your "instrument composed of a blade fixed into a handle, used for cutting or as a weapon" I can use the general word *knife* and you will know what I mean. Neither of us has to know the hundreds of words we would need if we had individual names for all the different particular knives we might encounter. General conceptual categories lead to huge gains in the efficiency and economy of communication and the generalization of knowledge. But, crucially, they also change the nature of my relationship to the "object" in which I am interested.

For the practical purposes of goal-focused action, I only need to take in just enough information to allocate a "thing" to an appropriate conceptual category. I can then retreat to my off-line internal mental world to work out how to achieve my goal. There is no need for me to stay intimately connected with the concrete, individual, unrepeatable, and constantly changing aspects of the world in which I actually live, move, and have my being. Partially disconnecting from experience in this way means that even if I focus on current experience I will again end up with some sense of disengagement and alienation: I will not feel part of a larger whole, I will feel incomplete, and I will suffer.

A Strategy to Achieve Goals

Conceptual knowing gives us the ability to disconnect from the demands of immediate experience and imagine future states of the world. That capacity

provides the foundation for an extraordinarily powerful strategy to achieve goals. First, the mind creates a conceptual description (an idea) of a goal state. Then, it compares that idea with an idea of the current state and monitors the gap between these two ideas as the mind generates plans to reduce the gap. When the two descriptions are identical (the gap is closed), the goal is achieved, and the system exits these cycles of processing. And, of course, the path to achieving the final goal can be broken down into a number of subgoals, and the same strategy applied to each one of them in turn.

I can use a simple domestic example to illustrate how this strategy works in practice.

Imagine that my wife and I decide it would be good to have an extra shelf in our kitchen. My mind creates a mental image of the completed new shelf, and this image, in turn, brings to mind similar experiences from the past and the pleasant feelings associated with them—the satisfaction of completing a practical task, my wife’s pleasure, and so on. These associations give the current image positive incentive value—something that I want to get—and the mind switches in the conceptual goal-achieving strategy.

The first step in the strategy is to create an idea of a goal state—a “thing” (a completed shelf) with certain properties. These properties will—obviously—include the capacity to support objects placed on it. Less obviously, they will also include the capacity to give me the satisfaction of a job well done and the pleasure of pleasing my wife. My mind registers the gap between the idea of the goal state (a shelf on the wall) and the current state (no shelf). My mind then identifies the subgoals to be achieved to close this gap—check I have the tools I need, measure the space available, get the materials, drill holes in the wall, and so on. Gradually I work my way through the list of subgoals—my to-do list. Eventually, the information arriving from my eyes, transformed into conceptual information, matches the pattern representing the goal state—a new shelf strong enough to support the weight of the pots and pans placed on it—and the task is completed. Mission accomplished!

Or is it? As far as the practical outcome in the outer world is concerned, that is certainly true. But what of the other less obvious goals of my shelf-building project: the satisfaction of a job well done, and pleasure for my wife? Here, we move into the world of *inner* experience, where outcomes are not simply a question of creating a “thing with the right properties” but, rather, reflect a wider set of conditions. For example, my satisfaction will depend on the standards I set myself: if I am a perfectionist and the shelf ends up very slightly out of level, or with a small scratch, I will be disappointed, rather than pleased. Equally, my wife might arrive home tired or preoccupied with some other issue and not even notice the new shelf toward which I keep directing hopeful glances.

Using the conceptual strategy to achieve “objective” goals in the

external world, we can subject conceptual processing to “reality checks.” These ground concepts in current sensory reality at certain key points. Constrained in this way, this strategy works brilliantly and has made possible some of the most important developments in human history. But, as we saw in Chapter 1, use of this same strategy to achieve “subjective” goals in our inner worlds of feeling can backfire disastrously. A crucial difference here is that we cannot “reality check” progress toward our goals in the same way. Although I can monitor progress toward a finished shelf each step of the way, I cannot do the same for how I or my wife will feel when the shelf is finished: I may feel tired and frustrated by my slow progress as the shelf is made but still believe my wife and I will feel delighted with the finished product (yet another instance of the difficulties of affective forecasting that we discussed in Chapter 1).

In due course, we will see that we can avoid these kinds of difficulties by shifting the focus of our search for greater happiness. Rather than focusing on the final *outcome* that we hope to achieve (the goal that is meant to bring great happiness), we can more skillfully focus on the quality of the moment-by-moment *process* by which we travel. We can only really know the effects of the final outcome on our feelings when we get there, but, crucially, we can check out how the process feels all along the way.

Concepts and “Reality”

Unquestioned assumptions about the relationship between concepts and reality underlie much human unhappiness. Insight into the emptiness of concepts—the realization that, actually, there are no self-existing independent entities with inherent qualities underlying concepts—is widely regarded as a key factor in inner awakening. Concepts are abstract ideas—general categories, several steps removed from patterns of sensory information related to particular experiences. And yet most of us have a deeply rooted intuition that concepts point directly to certain underlying realities, and that we can treat concepts as equivalent to the realities they represent—that we can treat them as in some way “real.”

In many ways, the conceptual goal-achieving strategy depends on and reinforces this assumption. For this strategy to work, it has to treat my idea of the current state of things as equivalent to how things actually are, and my idea of the desired state of affairs (the goal) as equivalent to a real situation it is trying to achieve. In making my kitchen shelf, I treated the idea of the shelf and the reality of the shelf as interchangeable in certain respects. I acted *as if* there were some kind of one-to-one mapping between concepts and the aspects of reality they represent—and that was an extremely useful strategy for my very practical purposes. Equally, when I look at the shelf I

have put up in my kitchen, my concept “shelf” and the “reality” I can see, or touch, or put pots and pans on seem to match very well: there really does seem to be a separate “thing” there with certain intrinsic qualities.

So long as we reality test our ideas by anchoring them in sensory experience at certain key points, treating ideas as equivalent to aspects of reality is a very effective pragmatic strategy for achieving goals in the external world. Problems arise when we forget that this is only a useful assumption and we start treating concepts as if they really *are* direct reflections of underlying realities: separate self-existing things with inherent qualities. These problems become acute when conceptual processing goes purely “internal,” losing all connection with current sensory experience and the anchoring and grounding that can provide.

Contemplative traditions, Buddhism in particular, have long recognized that the naive equation of concepts and reality in everyday life is itself a distortion and a fundamental source of suffering. In the well-known teaching of “the finger pointing at the moon,” one person points a finger at the moon as a way to draw it to another person’s attention. Guided by the finger (the concept), the other person should see the moon (the actuality to which the concept points). If the person misunderstands and, instead, looks at the finger, taking that to be the moon, only confusion will result. A contemporary teaching makes the same point even more pithily: “The thought of your mother is not your mother” (Feldman, 2017, p. 98).

Concepts and Context

As part of our unquestioned assumptions about the equivalence of concepts and reality we often regard concepts simply as labels for certain realities—realities that retain their identity whatever the situation or context in which we find them. In fact, conceptual meanings are very dependent on wider context. A simple perceptual exercise is often used to make this point.

What do you see when you look at the middle character in the image below?

AIBC

Most people see the letter *B* and bring the concept of that letter to mind.

Now, what do you see when you look at the middle character in this image?



Most people see the number 13 and bring the concept of that number to mind. But the printed character is identical in both figures, as this diagram shows clearly:



The exercise points to the fact that something as apparently intrinsic as “identity” depends on context. The “B-ness” of the central character in “ABC” is as much a function of the characters surrounding it as it is of the character itself. If you change the context (as in the second image), that identity disappears completely and the character now has an identity of “13-ness.”

In the same way, a closer look at the nature of concepts themselves challenges the notion of intrinsic identities that remain constant over different contexts. The concept “table” is far more than a simple label for a shape with “a flat top and one or more legs”: if you look in a dictionary, you will find it is further defined by its relationship to other concepts related to what it is used for and where it can be found. When you encounter a circular horizontal surface supported by a single vertical leg surrounded by chairs in a dining room, you see it as a table. When you encounter the same surface and leg sticking out of the ocean in solitary splendor miles away from anywhere, you do not see it as a table—but, rather, perhaps, as a marker warning of hidden dangers below, such as submerged rocks. As the wider context changed, so did the perceived identity of the same physical structure—what happened to its “inherent tableness”?

Concepts do not stand alone, providing a faithful representation of some discrete real identity. Rather, the meaning of any given concept depends on a network of relationships with other concepts. Through these relationships, a single concept binds into itself many further facets of meaning; it becomes a sort of shorthand for a point of convergence in a much wider web of interconnected concepts.

Concepts Reflect the Structure of Abstract Knowledge Rather Than the Structure of “Reality”

Once we accept that the meaning of a concept depends on its relationship to other concepts, we will be led to the counterintuitive conclusion that concepts actually reflect the structure of *abstract knowledge*—the general conceptual knowledge shared by members of a given culture—rather than the structure of sensory reality. Consistent with this idea, much of our conceptual knowledge is actually gleaned indirectly from the words spoken or written about things rather than direct experience of them—I know that Canberra is the capital of Australia even though I have never been there.

This way of thinking clearly challenges our habitual assumption that concepts bear a direct one-to-one relationship with “real” self-existing “things.” Some cognitive scientists and philosophers have taken this line of thinking even further. They have come to the profoundly counterintuitive conclusion that concepts primarily reflect the way a given culture uses words—rather than direct readouts of the structure of “reality.” This surprising conclusion is powerfully supported by evidence from studies using computers to simulate the way children and adults learn the meanings of words (Landauer & Dumais, 1997). It also tallies with the thinking of some of our greatest modern philosophers. For example, in his later work *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein concluded, “In most cases, the meaning of a word is its use.”

The problem with our habitual assumptions about the relationship between concepts and reality is not just that they can be profoundly unhelpful (as we saw in Chapter 1), but that they are plain wrong. How then, for our purposes, might we best regard and relate to conceptual knowing?

Our Relationship with Conceptual Knowing

There are situations in which we can all see that conceptual thinking and “reality” have parted company somewhere along the line—as when a severely depressed person says they think they are totally worthless and everything they do is a failure, or when a very anxious person refuses to use an elevator because they are convinced it will break down, trapping them inside. We generally regard this kind of negative thinking in a depressed or anxious person as “distorted”—twisted by their mood state. And an enormous body of research supports this view (Williams, Watts, MacLeod, & Mathews, 1997). We assume, and again research confirms, that with a return to normal mood these distortions will be reduced and these individuals will see things more like the rest of us.

And we implicitly assume that “the rest of us” see things as they really are. But contemplative traditions, Buddhism in particular, challenge this assumption. They suggest that, on the contrary, the naive equation of concepts and reality in everyday life is itself a distortion and a fundamental source of suffering—and we have looked at reasons why we should take this view seriously. How, then, should we best regard this “normal” distortion?

Our view of experience is shaped by the way we pay attention—and, as we will see in Chapter 3, the way we pay attention is powerfully influenced by our affective state. There is overwhelming evidence that affects such as anxiety or depression are linked to “distortions” of attention, perception, or memory. I suggest something similar is true for SEEKING core affect (the affect that spurs us into action to get what we want—see Box 3.3 in the next chapter). Specifically, I suggest that in human beings SEEKING core affect prompts a radical shift in the shape of the mind: it brings online the conceptual way of knowing and its goal-achieving strategies; it leads to a narrow, blinkered focus of attention; and it “wheels in” a particular conceptually based view of the world: a world where we see objects, people, and our selves as separate, independently existing “things” with characteristic inherent qualities, a world where we see our ideas as “real” and equivalent to the things they represent.

A classic study by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons (Simons & Chabris, 1999) provides a dramatic illustration of one aspect of the shift triggered by SEEKING core affect: the extreme narrowing of attention so that our minds only “see” information directly related to the task at hand and actively suppress irrelevant information. Participants were asked to watch a short video in which six people—three in white shirts and three in black shirts—passed basketballs around. The participants’ task was to keep a silent count of the number of passes made by the people in white shirts. At some point, a gorilla strolled into the middle of the action, faced the camera, thumped its chest, and then left, spending a total 9 seconds on-screen. Remarkably, half the people who watched the video and counted the passes missed the gorilla. In focusing their attention exclusively on the task of counting passes, participants actively suppressed irrelevant information to the point where, for half of them, the gorilla was rendered effectively invisible.

Turning to the world of experience wheeled in by SEEKING affect—the world seen through the lens of conceptual knowing—Iain McGilchrist’s (2009) description of the “world of the left hemisphere” helpfully captures its essence:

Language enables the left hemisphere to represent the world “off-line,” a conceptual version distinct from the world of experience, and shielded from the immediate environment, with its insistent impressions, feelings and demands,

abstracted from the body, no longer dealing with what is concrete, specific, individual, unrepeatable, and constantly changing, but with a disembodied representation of the world, abstracted, central not particularised in time and place, generally applicable, clear and fixed. Isolating things artificially from their context brings the advantage of enabling us to focus intently on a particular aspect of reality and how it can be modelled, so that it can be grasped and controlled.

But its losses are in the picture as a whole. Whatever lies in the realm of the implicit, or depends on flexibility, whatever can't be brought into focus and fixed, ceases to exist as far as the speaking hemisphere is concerned. * (p. 115)

This way of looking at the world provides invaluable support for the conceptually based strategy to achieve goals. As we have seen, this strategy is powerfully effective in achieving “objective” goals in the external world, where we can subject conceptual processing to periodic “reality checks.” But it is far less effective—and often tragically counterproductive—when applied to the subjective world of feeling.

To find the greater joy and contentment we seek, we must turn to a different kind of happiness and a different way of knowing. McGilchrist's final paragraph (above) gives a clue where we must look. We take up that lead in Chapter 3.

*In making a link between different kinds of attention and knowing, on the one hand, and the two different cerebral hemispheres, on the other, McGilchrist is not suggesting any form of naive lateralization of function: he fully recognizes that both the “world of the left hemisphere” and the “world of the right hemisphere” depend on the interacting functions of both hemispheres.