

ROBERT BOLTON

# KEYS OF GNOSIS

SOPHIA PERENNIS

HILLSDALE NY

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by Sophia Perennis  
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This book reconstructs  
and further develops ideas which  
were first introduced in the author's  
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For information, address:  
Sophia Perennis, P.O. Box 611  
Hillsdale NY 12529  
sophiaperennis.com

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# INTRODUCTION

MANY FAMILIAR VALUES, which might be thought to be just inherited social conditioning, can be shown to have hidden depths when examined in the light of metaphysical thought. Once it is realized that the everyday world depends on an unseen world with a reality of its own, values can be understood as the points at which this unseen world enters our awareness of the visible one, rather as the mountain tops of a submerged continent appear to us as islands.

The existence of such subtle realities cannot be ignored with impunity, and their hidden action is decisive in relation to the freedom and powers of activity which are possible for human beings. Consequently, this study will not evade or minimize the thorny subject of the relation between power and spirituality, under various aspects. Idealists nearly always deny that they could ever be power-gatherers on the grounds that power is never intentionally sought by them and that, on the contrary, they are making actual sacrifices. However, these answers are either naive or self-deceiving. The repression of awareness of certain aspects of one's motivation is so far from repressing its natural effects that it may well enable it to operate more freely. That the religions and power are closely connected is sufficiently proved by their ability to acquire huge material resources, and in their ability to influence politics.

To make this better understood, moral and religious values will be examined in an analytical manner, but in a way which will cut across the normal boundaries of academic study such as those of philosophy, theology, and psychology, so that our perception of their operation will not be artificially limited. Personal development is inevitably a process of empowerment among other things, but because this development is also a part of natural life, it is regarded as just a worldly concern by most traditional guides and teachers, who pass over its spiritual dimension. This is unfortunate because its place in the divine order of things can be shown to be



indispensable. The question of its due recognition is even more relevant today when inhibitions against the natural have been generally removed.

To have power over the direction of one's life is in any case a universal desideratum, since it is relevant to all purposes from the most exalted to the most mundane. Without some measure of it, the fulfilment of all other desires appears to be only a form of escapism. It is at very least implicit in the ideals of religious teachings, despite their lack of direct reference to it. Another reason for this silence is that control over one's life is almost always popularly misunderstood in selfish and materialistic terms. Innumerable examples of worldly success show that one can be in control of one's life for certain purposes in one kind of society, though this only distracts attention from the central question of how to live authentically under any conditions.

This misunderstanding of personal power forms part of a near-universal modern inability to understand the meaning of the spiritual life whenever it takes forms which are not conducive to the usual practicalities. It is often seen as a form of anti-social selfishness, and an evasion of the only real obligations we can have, as though spiritual reality was but a faint shadow of the material world. Thus for modern minds, the highest ideal has become confined to that of sainthood, while that in turn has become confined to the moral qualities society is willing to recognize as sainthood. But besides this ideal, there is another, more inclusive one, that of the Adept, in whom sainthood is combined with knowledge and power. While this ideal is more demanding intellectually, in that it requires more than morality, it is also closer to things which we instinctively know to be meaningful. When the perspective of adepthood is ignored, the deepest self-knowledge is blocked and deformed, because we cannot understand what we really are unless we understand what we are capable of becoming. Here, the spiritual ideal must transcend the usual popular simplifications.

Many of those who hold religious beliefs understand this issue no more than do unbelievers, with the result that humanism continues to infiltrate modern religion. The problem is to explain how lives which are not notable by utilitarian criteria can still have a

usefulness to the world beyond the views of materialism. For this purpose, a series of subjects will be brought together and related to the central theme of self-understanding. The reason why this is related to an apparently egotistical subject like that of power lies in the higher forms it can take.

There is an adage that knowledge is power, which is usually repeated as though it needed no explanation. But in real life it may not appear to be so, especially if the possession of it means membership of a minority with no special rights. However, even if it effected nothing directly, it can still free one from the power of collective ignorance. There is nothing worse than alliances of ignorance with power, and there are all too many such alliances in today's world. They rule most of all those who do not know enough to see ignorance as ignorance. At very least, then, knowledge is the antidote to the wrong kinds of power, such as have a way of draining legitimate power from their victims. The whole range of evils which afflict the human race reduces to the problem of increasing numbers of persons who lack power over their lives spiritually as much as materially, the two problems being closely related. There is something deeply unnatural about such helplessness because it does not come from our true nature, but rather from a blindness to that nature. Unless each successive generation can continue to overcome this blindness, it may not be possible to save civilization from barbarism.

To explain this more fully, it will be necessary to challenge a number of uncritically-accepted ideas about the nature of personal identity. This can be done by means of a number of key concepts which should make it impossible to return to certain common sense assumptions which are infected with materialism. The subjects treated will include such issues as: Do we know that there is a soul? What defines a human being? What is the most universal activity? What is the most universal law which applies to our lives? If there is such a thing as fate, can we get free of it?

The thought employed in the following chapters is of an inclusive kind, which effects a combination of reason with intuition. This is to prevent thought from falling into the extremes of either an analytical philosophy with no transcendental dimension, or a mystical thought which aims at transcendence without the theoretical



principles which would allow an objective grasp of it. Metaphysical thought has essential things in common with both mystical and rationalistic thought without having any need to identify with either.

Popular or New Age mysticism and ultra-rationalism are a pair of opposites which, like most opposites, still have certain things in common. They both enshrine a negative attitude to the intellect, the one in the more passive manner of by-passing it as something unnecessary, and the other in the more active manner of denying it any access to non-physical reality. There is also a certain compatibility between them, owing to the fact that the materialist outlook is no more than minimally challenged by non-rational vindications of the transcendental. Those who see things in this way are not usually open to the idea that the intelligence belongs to both the natural and to the supernatural equally, and so are liable to take as limited a view of it as do materialists.

For a long time now, religion in the West has been polarized between a democratic kind of faith meant for simple believers, and divine mysteries so high that hardly anyone can claim to know much about them. The vital connecting region between them, that of metaphysical religion, is all but lost for orthodox purposes. Some of it has leaked away into the New Age movement, where it exists out of contact with the historical roots of civilization. Besides providing continuity, this metaphysical dimension of religion is the remedy for ignorance where it is most dangerous. In the world of common sense materialism, the self is always felt to be the ego and nothing else. Because of this, nearly all religions have to treat the self as simply the ego in the same way, in order to make contact with the cultures to which they are addressed. Nevertheless, the real self is much more than the ego, and this is where one must venture outside the usual boundaries, even though the grace of revealed religion remains necessary.

The true role and meaning of reason and the intellectual faculty will not be understood by those who keep to a materialistic idea like that of the self as ego alone, and for this reason, the following chapters will contain an attempt to shed some light on the meaning and purpose of the intellectual faculty. Even with common sense it can

be seen that the rational mind is so made that it can govern its internal states. It is free, moreover, to increase the effectiveness of this governance without any apparent limit, so that it may become equal to even the strongest forces capable of deranging its thought and intention, even though the individual may not have control over anything else in the world. Far from being an individualistic dream of self-sufficiency, it is clear that this kind of power is essential to the very nature according to which we are formed, however little it may be realized in practice.

This is what connects the function of ideas with the realm of action and the capacity for action. Where this is blocked, all outward forms of action either atrophy or harden into routines or even pseudo-absolutes. The repression of this role of the intellect in modern thought shows an ignorance of the fact that it applies to workaday realities as well as to metaphysical ones. Despite this repression, mind is still efficacious enough to ensure that a civilization based on technology continues to function and that its industry and commerce are able to produce a living; in other words, we know that mind can connect with objective reality, and there is no reason why the range of this connection should be restricted of itself. The modern scepticism about reason is therefore a negation in the practical realm as much as in the theoretical. This can only smother the vitalizing force referred to above, and typifies a spiritually barren phase of civilization which future generations will be glad to forget when it has run its course.

The senses, the emotions, and the fantasy can be directly induced to operate in certain ways by the action of the relevant culture, but the activity of intelligence on the other hand is so dependent on self-activation that there is no point in trying to act upon it except by very indirect means. The rational soul, qua rational, is thus autonomous, not least because the all-important thing, the perception of the rational as such, cannot be supplied from without. This is not sufficiently realized where the intelligence is seen only as a tool for practical activities.

Such is the general outline of some leading features of the metaphysical standpoint which will be enlarged upon in the following chapters by the application of this form of thought to a series of



subjects which are important both personally and spiritually. Chapters 1-7 are concerned with the nature of the self under various aspects, and chapters 8-13 with the self in relation to the providential order, and chapters 14 and 15 with the self in relation to God. Where both human nature and religious beliefs are involved equally, the abstract and the concrete can be brought into a specially close relation so as to show how speculative thought need not be solely a matter of abstraction. The problems of the world religions today, with their immersion in politics, arise in the wake of a neglect of metaphysical reality, and popular religion drifts into becoming a part of the cosmic process it should serve to overcome. Everything therefore depends on the liberation of the most universal beliefs and values from a popular and common sense idea of reality which is profoundly false.

## 1

## THE NATURE OF THE REAL SELF

### WHOLE PERSON AND DUALITY

THE REAL SELF was always taken to be the immortal soul of the person, which was conceived to be the owner and controller of the body. This idea of the soul brings with it the traditional body-soul duality, which has been denied almost as a matter of principle over the past eighty years, as a result of a modern craving for simplification at any price, often with a sense of self-righteousness. In this way, the wisdom and experience of past ages was rejected, not because it was known to be wrong, but for ideological reasons. There is, of course, no simple or popular way of understanding how a union of soul and body could result in a single being with psychological unity. Nevertheless, the dualistic conception of the person remains necessary if self-knowledge is to get off ground level.

A great deal can be known about either soul or body in the abstract, because each of them manifests a general class of being. On the other hand, a whole person, regarded solely as a unity, is not knowable in this conceptual way, but only by acquaintance. This kind of self-unity is, besides, a spiritual dead-end, because all inner dynamism and growth come from an awareness of the actions and reactions between the soul and the person as a whole. Without this, there can only be a static sense of the self, vainly compensated by a mania for change and activity in everything else.

However, such has been the strength of the reaction against Dualism that the very existence of the soul now seems doubtful to the modern mind. If, in fact, the soul really is essential to the real self, the



consequences of this for self-understanding must be crucial, and because of their potential importance, we need to find out which things in natural experience can reveal the soul's presence and activity to us. To do so, we shall have to examine a number of things which used to be routinely a part of philosophy, but which today are ignored because they are both clearly factual and incompatible with anti-dualist ideology. The facts involved may appear to have little to do with souls or self-knowledge, but if the reader will bear with what seems to be a digression, we shall arrive at a set of data which will point clearly to the function of the soul as the creative agent in our relations with the physical world. The importance of the phenomena reviewed below lies in their implications for the way in which the world and the soul subsist together to give rise to the self.

#### HOW NATURE IS DUAL

In 1673, Roemer did an experiment with light on the assumption that it moved with a finite velocity. It involved observations of Jupiter's four largest moons and the times of their disappearances and reappearances from behind that planet. By this means, he was able to calculate the velocity of light. Roemer showed that as light had a finite velocity, the eclipses of the moons were seen to happen at times which were later by a measurable amount, as the earth moved further away from Jupiter. This established the principle that a perception and the object perceived cannot simply be taken to be the same thing. Similarly with the stars we see, any one of which can be seen to be in a position it moved out of ages ago. If any given visual object is an object-at-time-*t*, that particular object no longer exists in the following moment. Relativity theory has taken the distinction between perceptions and their objects much further. Einstein's achievement 'consists essentially in this: he has succeeded in separating far more completely than hitherto the share of the observer and the share of external nature in the things we see happen.'<sup>1</sup>

This major development of modern science underlines the pervasiveness of modern philosophy in its determination to ignore the representational nature of our knowledge of the outside world. While Descartes is dethroned in the official forms of philosophy, he is nonetheless vindicated in the philosophy of science. His dualism has been called the cornerstone of the new physics, and quite reasonably, in view of the way in which modern scientific discoveries diverge ever more profoundly from anything open to sense-perception; and in view of the fact that a fundamental difference between perceptions and percepts is the very basis of relativity theory. Without the principle that the world of sense experience is a world of individual representation, natural science could not exist. Scientific thinkers may talk of closing the gap between representation and reality, but they cannot do anything effectual about it because the progress of science always means pushing knowledge further and further into realms beyond all normal experience.

Ordinary experience is filled with examples of the difference between what we experience and what we believe actually exists, so much so that it is wholly dominated by this. We constantly perceive square or rectangular objects as rhombuses or parallelograms, or parallels as converging, and circular forms like those of coins and cups are nearly always seen as elliptical. These things change their perceptible shapes as we move around them and grow bigger or smaller as we move nearer to or further from them. But so convinced are we that the real world consists mostly of things which have fixed shapes and sizes, and that man-made things are typically made rectangular or circular, that we become almost unconscious of our sensory evidence which keeps on contradicting these beliefs.

Similarly, we believe that the real world consists mostly of things which exist as continuously as we do ourselves, despite the fact that there is no direct sensory evidence for this. What our perceptions tell us would be just the opposite if we relied on them alone as the things around us appear, disappear, and reappear, more or less in sequence with the way we move ourselves and our center of attention. From an empirical point of view, the continuous existence of everything about us would be simply a piece of theory and not a basic assumption, let alone an experience. Consequently, no matter

1. See A.O. Lovejoy, *The Revolt Against Dualism*.



how closely our perceptions of the world may resemble the contents of that world, there is no way in which they can be literally the same things.

At this point I would add an argument which philosophers do not as a rule make use of, possibly because it is almost embarrassingly evident. This is the fact that every experience of our world necessarily takes the form of objects arranged in concentric circles or spheres, centered on our own body. Perception is thus Ptolemaic, so to speak, by its very nature. Since there is no way in which the objective world could really revolve about one's body, it follows that all perceptions of the world are private and personal representations of it.

From a more sophisticated point of view, our perceptions differ from their objects in an even more remarkable way, one which arises from our knowledge of the ways in which natural laws and causes operate. We constantly perceive things which can be shown to obey the laws of mechanics, optics and electricity, but we hardly ever reflect that our perceptions of these regular phenomena do not themselves obey any laws at all, and that neither are they the causes of anything else, even though we perceive them as caused by their objects. For example, Newton's laws of motion cannot govern the order of our perception of what moves, and still less motion in fantasy. Similarly, there are no naturally perceptible laws in the outside world unless we change our behavior to find them. Thus the Moon's phases appear only as a lawless jumble of shapes if the Moon is observed irregularly and without any special intention. Only if the observations are made with a regularity corresponding to the Moon's phases will we see the law of its phases. Such cases result from the fact that our sense data cannot be subject to natural laws while being also subject to our wills. All this would be impossible were there not a fundamental difference between the world in itself and our representations of it. Should there be any doubt about the absence of causal capacity in our mental impressions, one need only consider whether one's brain is ever heated by mental impressions of fire, or whether a mental fire needs to be extinguished with mental water.

Though mental impressions have no causal power, they can still be the occasions of our having emotional states about them, but

that depends on the disposition of our will, and so these events must differ according to the person involved. This is wholly different from the uniformity of natural causes. Our impressions are in fact largely ruled by our will, which selects them, along with their frequency and duration. Our mental impressions of natural processes are typically lacking in the continuity, order, and self-continuation of those phenomena.

From this it is no very long deduction to the conclusion that scientific thought could never have begun before man had learned to distinguish between representations of actual things and the empty representations of dreams, fantasies and hallucinations. Anti-dualistic thought would abolish this division by putting back all these 'wild data' into nature, regardless of whether science could survive it. This is in defiance of the fact that conscious beings live, almost by definition, outside their bodies, and the only way in which they can do so is by external things being made present inwardly through representations. Though the latter are spatial in form, that is only because they correspond to physical space while they themselves do not occupy any public space at all, in keeping with their lack of physical causality. For example, a hundred persons viewing the interior of a meeting-hall have a hundred representations of it which all together take up no space in the hall itself.

This points to a 'one-way' relation between our impressions and their objects inasmuch as the latter cause them, whereas the impressions do not exert any reciprocal action. They are endlessly multiplied in more or less the same form in the experience of different observers of the same objects, and in each case they form part of a separate inner world. The only alternative to this endless multiplication of the outside world would be that objects be in many different places at the same time. Real objects would have to travel with magical speeds, so as to form the different combinations of them we have in our minds, if experience had to be explained in terms of originals and not representations.

Another consequence of unmediated, or non-representational experience, if there were such a thing, is that it would make error impossible. Direct grasp of the original objects of perception would mean sensory infallibility. It should be noted that there is in fact no



difference between veridical perceptions and illusory ones *qua representations*, but only in the way in which they relate to what is known already. Veridical perceptions correspond to their objects, whereas fantasies, illusions, or 'wild data' do not correspond to them, and therefore not to any retinal images either.

The nature of our knowledge of the physical world in the light of the above is summed up by A. O. Lovejoy as follows:

Essentially, knowing is a phenomenon by which the simple location of things is circumvented without being annulled. Upon any metaphysical theory deserving of serious consideration, reality is an aggregate of *partes extra partes*. Every particular is in its own time, or in its own place . . . they do not escape from their reciprocal exclusiveness . . . and the being-known of a thing is its getting reported where it does not exist—and its getting reported there as existing at the locus or region in which it does not exist.<sup>2</sup>

Lovejoy points out a specially decisive field in which Dualism is unavoidable, this being memory. Although its implications are strangely neglected by most philosophers, the distinction between the object and our representation of it stands out more clearly here than anywhere else: 'to remember is to be aware of the difference between the present image and the event recalled.' One could not deny this without denying the existence of memory itself. Doubts about the relevance of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* could be settled, as Lovejoy shows, by the fact that the mere passage of time continually transforms it into *memini ergo fui*, something much less open to sceptical attack. In any case, our ability to recollect the recent past plays a crucial part in our experience of the present. So much of what one sees going on at any given time would mean nothing to anyone without a recollection of what had been going on one or two minutes before then.

The upshot of this is that if there were such a thing as unmediated experience at a given time, its status as present experience would depend so largely on memory content, which is dualistic by definition, that no true alternative to representation would result. The

interweaving of past with present also extends into the future, since our ability to think constructively in practical ways depends wholly on whether we can think effectively about future events. But our future or intended activities have never been objects of present experience, whence here again there is no room for doubt as to the duality between them and our present thoughts about them. In all such cases, the object must be present vicariously or not at all; what has never been experienced is, if possible, even less accessible than things now past. The knowledge of things past and future merges continuously with present experience, showing how practical needs do not depend on unmediated experience, any more than do theoretical ones.

#### REAL SELF AND FALSE SELF.

At this stage it need not take long to indicate the outcome of the facts instanced so far. The world about us is neither more nor less than our private and personal representation of the objective world. In view of the difference between these two realities, we infer the existence of a third reality in which they can be related so as to form a common system, one which both adapts and contains the world as the individual knows it. Such is precisely what the soul is understood to mean. On this basis, the existence of the soul is as sure as the facts of representation, this being both the generator and the medium of the represented form of the world one knows. Because of their intimate connection with the soul, the publicly-accessible facts of representation have a cause which is our own individual being. The real self, or soul, is thus a sphere of consciousness which contains the physical universe in its own mode, and many more subtle realities besides. While man is not unique among living creatures in having a soul with this property, he is unique inasmuch as the human soul is rational and self-aware, as well as object-aware.

The psychological and cultural context of this subject is worthy of consideration, not least because of a prevalent inclination to deny the validity of this kind of analysis. The present-day conception of the person as a physical reality forming part of a physical world which is supposedly known in an immediate manner, has the effect

2. *The Revolt Against Dualism*, chap. 9.



of maximizing the power of the environment over the individual for those who believe in it. At the same time, this view of the person, with its denial of the inward being, serves to suppress the differences between individuals, since what we are as observable egos at any given time is very limited in comparison with the real self. This goes with a hostility to both privacy and superiority, and these things are connected by the reality of the individual, which such thinking would deny. At the same time, the natural sciences, with their aim of reducing everything to the level of physical facts, and a philosophy which equates persons with their observable egos, form the ideological background to modern attitudes.

But although the methods used are ultra-rationalistic, the motivation behind them is unmistakably passional, not to mention the fact that its wilful ignoring of the distinction between objective reality and representation is almost a guarantee of delusion. The quasi-mystical tendency which Lovejoy calls 'dyophobia', if seriously believed in, implies a degree of resistance to manifest realities which by rights should be a subject for psychoanalysis rather than for philosophy. It could be said that modern attempts to escape representation seem to be moved by a belief that if the contents of experience were arranged with enough ingenuity, it could cease to be representation. The real mistake here is to think that duality can be overcome on its own level, which is done by materialists who think there is no level but the material one. But if that should be impossible, it may yet be overcome elsewhere; that, in fact, is what Platonism is largely concerned with. But this answer depends on the idea of different levels of being.

The difference between perception and reality brings us to the idea of the real self as the soul, which would be the container of our world-representation, and this would form a complete counterpart to the common sense idea of a bodily self living and moving in space and time with other physical entities. This does not mean that the latter idea is false in itself, however, because it only becomes an illusion when it is taken to be exclusively true. The real self is rather the combination of the physical self of common sense and the soul with its world representation. This is a far more complete reality, one which can be thought, but not grasped by the imagination, however,

since it goes far beyond the limits of the common sense self or ego.

The price of this disregard of the real self is the typical misconception of the whole self as being just one more item among all the other objects in its own field of representation. But once the truth about the real self is understood, it can be seen that the 'choir of heaven and all the furniture of earth' are not as alien to the self as they appear to be for naive or ego-centered perception. Instead, the objective world is known to have a form which results as much from its adaptation to our own powers of cognition, as from its objective nature. For this reason, the vastness of the manifest world is also a reflection of our own larger self, in which the ego and its environment are enclosed like a seed in a fruit.

Visionary and fictional accounts of the world occupy as much and as little of the real self as does the physical universe, while the self which could be said to be relatively nothing could therefore only be the ego, not the soul. In traditional mystical writings, therefore, the 'self' which is often said to be 'nothing' is invariably the ego, because in earlier times there was still no technical terminology for the real self. We thus have a vastly extended range of meaning for the individual once he or she no longer has to be equated with the ego alone.

This conclusion is completely in line with what has been said about the soul by the founders of Western tradition, as where Plotinus says:

But soul is not in the universe, on the contrary the universe is in the Soul; bodily substance is not a place to the Soul; Soul is contained in Intellectual-Principle and is the container of body.<sup>3</sup>

The intellectual principle is in turn contained by God, so that the soul both contains and is contained in a hierarchy of being and reality. By representing physical reality to itself, the soul transposes physical reality onto the psychic level, upon which it can be an object for the higher-order beings whose nature is purely spiritual. At the same time, the consciousness of the individual person is the fulcrum on which all this turns: every object is the counterpart of a subject.

3. Plotinus, *Enneads*, v, 5, 9.



Finally, there is a criticism of representation which states that if we have to have representations to mediate between our minds and physical realities, there must result an infinite regress. Such criticisms assume that we can never grasp the original of anything, which Dualists do not try to maintain. Our first representation of the outside world is a reality in its own way, it is said, and so then we should need a second representation to know it, and then a third one to know the second, and so on.

This objection is mistaken because Dualism only implies that we do not have direct knowledge of the material world, while it affirms that we do directly apprehend mental realities like representations. If it should be asked why, if we can know mental realities directly, we should not be able to know everything else in the same way, we need only refer to a basic argument for representation: that if one had the true originals of sense-objects, they could not be accessible for anyone else at the same time.

completely wrong

## 2

## A PRIMARY CERTAINTY

## CERTAINTY IN THE SELF

Given the part played by the soul in the real self, we can now consider it from a different angle so as to see what manner of certainty the self can provide from within, that is, in a way not dependent on sensation. The presence of the soul as such was deduced from an analysis of our relation to the outside world, though this itself does not show whether the soul by its own nature can achieve certainty about itself through itself alone. Such a certainty would be a foundation for many others like it, in accordance with the principle that when something is established as a possibility, other things in the same category will be possible as well.

This need for self-certainty was for a long time answered by Descartes' *cogito* argument, which is now generally found unacceptable because it formed part of an extreme Dualist position which would divide body and soul from one another by an inexplicable gulf. Such a radical separation would make it impossible to explain the interaction between body and soul. This is, to some degree, responsible for the modern resistance to the very idea of the soul, since it became identified with the Cartesian conception. The idea that two substances which have nothing in common should be able to form a single person is a barrier to the understanding which detracts from what may be made known about the soul, therefore, so Descartes gives with one hand and takes with the other, so to speak.

Consequently, this subject needs to be detached from the reaction against Descartes by tracing it back to the way it was understood in earlier times. There are two questions here, those of interaction and of the basic certainty that the essence of our understanding is logically prior to any knowledge of the sense world.