

Excerpts from *Dreams of a Visionary Explained by Dreams of Metaphysics*

By **Immanuel Kant** [1766]

First Part

Fourth Chapter

Theoretical Conclusion From the Whole of the Considerations of the First Part

The accuracy of scales used for commercial measurements, according to civil law, is discovered if we let the merchandise and the weights exchange pans. So the partiality of the scales of reason is revealed by the same trick, without which, in philosophical judgments, no harmonious result can be obtained from the compound weighings. I have purified my soul from prejudices; I have destroyed any blind affection which ever crept in to procure in me an entrance for much fancied knowledge. I now have nothing at heart; nothing is venerable to me but what enters by the path of sincerity into a quiet mind open to all reasons—whether thereby my former judgment is confirmed or abolished, or whether I am convinced or left in doubt. Wherever I meet with something instructive, I appropriate it. The judgment of him who refutes my reasons fashions my judgment, after I first have weighed it against the scale of self-love, and afterwards in that scale against my presumed reasons, and have found it to have a higher intrinsic value.

Formerly, I viewed human common sense only from the standpoint of my own; now I put myself into the position of another's reason outside of myself, and observe my judgments, together with their most secret causes, from the point of view of others. It is true that the comparison of both observations results in pronounced parallaxes, but it is the only means of preventing the optical delusion, and of putting the concept of the power of knowledge in human nature into its true place. You may say that this is very serious talk in connection with so trifling a problem as that under consideration, which deserves to be called a plaything rather than a serious occupation, and you are not exactly wrong in thus judging. But although one ought not to make a great ado about a small matter, yet one may perhaps be allowed to make use of such occasions; and unnecessary circumspection in small matters may furnish a useful example in important matters. I find that no attachment nor any other inclination has crept in before examination, depriving my mind of a readiness to be guided by any kind of reason *pro* or *con*, except one. The scale of reason after all is not quite impartial, and one of its arms, bearing the inscription, "Hope of the Future," has an advantage of construction, cause even those slight reasons which fall into its scale to outweigh the speculation of greater weight on the other side. This is the only inaccuracy which I cannot easily remove, and which, in fact, I never want to remove. I confess that all stories about apparitions of departed souls or about influences from spirits, and all theories about the presumptive nature of spirits and their connection with us, seem to have appreciable weight only in the scale of *hope*, while in the scale of speculation they seem to consist of nothing but air. If the answer to this problem were not in consonance with a poor inclination, what reasonable man would be doubtful as to whether it were more plausible to assume the existence of a kind of beings having no similarity whatever with anything taught him by his senses, or to attribute certain alleged experiences to a kind of self-deception and invention which, under certain circumstances, is by no means uncommon?

In fact this seems generally to be the main reason for crediting the ghost-stories so widely accepted. Even the first delusions about presumed apparitions of deceased people have probably arisen from the fond hope that we still exist in some way after death. And then, at the time of the shadows of night, this illusion has probably deluded the senses, and created, out of doubtful forms, phantoms corresponding to preconceived ideas. From these, finally, the philosophers have taken occasion to devise the rational idea of spirits, and to bring it into a system. You probably will recognize also in my own assumed doctrine of the communion of spirits this trend to which people commonly incline. For its propositions evidently unite the state after death. But how it enters, i.e., of procreation and propagation, I make no mention. Nay, I do not even mention how it is present in this world, i.e., how an immaterial nature can be in an immaterial body and act by means of it. The very good reason for all this is that I do not understand a single thing about the whole matter, and consequently might as well have been content to remain just as ignorant as before in regard to the future state, had not the partiality to a pet notion recommended the reasons which offered themselves, however weak they were.

The same ignorance makes me so bold as to deny absolutely the truth of the various ghost stories, and yet with the common, although queer, reservation that while I doubt any one of them, still I have a certain truth in the whole of them taken together. The reader is free to judge as far as I am concerned. The scales are tipped far enough on the side containing the reasons of the second chapter to make me serious and undecided when listening to the many strange tales of this kind. But, as reasons to justify one's self are never lacking when the mind is prejudiced, I do not want to bother the reader with any further defense of such a way of thinking.

As I am not at the conclusion of the theory of spirits, I am bold enough to say that this study, if properly used by the reader, exhausts all philosophical knowledge about such beings, and that perhaps in the future many things may be thought about it, but never more known. This assumption sounds rather vainglorious. The problems offered by nature are of such multifariousness, in its smallest parts, to a reason so limited as the human, that there is certainly no object of nature known to the senses, be it only a drop of water or a grain of sand, which ever could be said to be exhausted by observation or reason. But the case is entirely different with the philosophical concept of spiritual beings. It may be complete, but in the negative sense, by fixing with assurance the limits of our knowledge, and convincing us that: all that is granted to us to know the diverse manifestations of life in nature and its laws; but that the principle of this life, i.e., the unknown and only assumed spiritual nature, can never be thought of in a positive way, because for this purpose no data can be found in all our sensations; that therefore of something so entirely different from everything sensuous; and that the possibility of such negations rests likewise neither upon experience nor upon conclusions, but upon invention, to which a reason deprived of all other expedients finally resorts. With this understanding pneumatology may be called a doctrinal conception of man's necessary ignorance in regard to a supposed kind of beings, and as such it can easily be adequate to its task.

And now I lay aside this whole matter of spirits, a remote part of metaphysics, since I have finished and am done with it. In future it does not concern me any more. But thus making the plan of my investigation more concentrated and sparing myself some entirely useless inquiries, I hope to be able to apply to better advantage my small reasoning power upon other subjects. It is generally vain to try to extend the little strength one has over a wide range of undertakings. It is therefore a matter of policy, in this as other cases, to fit the pattern of one's plans to one's powers, and if one cannot obtain the great, to restrict oneself to the mediocre.

Practical Conclusion from the Whole Treatise

It is the zeal of a sophist to inquire into any idle proposition and set to the craving after knowledge no other limits than impossibility. But to select from among the innumerable tasks before us the one which humanity must solve is the merit of the wise. After science has completed its course, it naturally arrives at a modest mistrust and, indignant with itself, it says: How many things there are which I do not understand! But reason, matured by experience so as to become wisdom, speaks through the mouth of Socrates when, of all merchandise of a fair, he says serenely: "How many things there are which I do not need!" In this manner two endeavors of a dissimilar nature flow together into one, though in the beginning they set out in very different directions, the one being vain and discontented, the other staid and content.

To be able to choose rationally, one must know first even the unnecessary, yea the impossible; then at last science arrives at the definition of the limits set to human reason by nature. All hollow schemes, perhaps not unworthy in themselves but lying outside of the sphere of men, will then recede to the limbo of vanity. Then even metaphysics will become that which at present it is rather distant from, and which would seem the last thing to be expected of her - the companion of wisdom. As long as people think it is possible to attain knowledge about things so far off, wise simplicity may call out in vain that such great endeavors are unnecessary. The pleasure accompanying the extension of knowledge will easily make the latter appear a duty, and will consider deliberate and intentional contentedness to be foolish simplicity, opposed to the improvement of our nature.

The questions about the spiritual nature, about freedom and predestination, the future state, etc., at first animate all the powers of reason, and through their excellency draw man into the rivalry of a speculation which reasons and decides, teaches and refutes without discrimination, just according to the nature of the apparent knowledge in each case. But if this investigation develops into philosophy which judges its own proceedings, and which knows not only objects, but their relation to man's reason, then the lines of demarcation are drawn closer, and the boundary stones are laid which will never allow investigation to wander beyond its proper province. We had to make use of a good deal of philosophy to know the difficulties surrounding a concept generally treated as being very convenient and common. Still more philosophy moves this phantom of knowledge yet further away, and convinces us that it is entirely beyond the horizon of man. For in the relations of cause and effect, of substance and action, philosophy at first serves to dissolve the complicated phenomena, and to reduce them to simpler concepts. But when one has finally arrived at fundamental relations, philosophy has no more employment.

Questions like "How something can be a cause, or possess power," can never be decided by reason; but these relations must be taken from experience alone. For the rules of our reason are applicable only to comparison in respect to identity or contrast. But in the case of a cause something is assumed to have come from something else; one can find therefore no connection in regard to identity. In the same way, if this effect is not already implied in what preceded, a contrast can never be made out; because it is not contradictory merely to assume one thing and to abolish another. Thence the fundamental concepts of causes, of forces, and of actions, if they are not taken from experience, are entirely arbitrary, and can be neither proved nor disproved. I know that will and understanding more

my body, but I can never reduce this experience by analysis, and can therefore recognize it, but can not understand it. That my will moves my arm is not more intelligible to me than if somebody said to me that he could stop the moon in its orbit. The difference is only that the one I experience, but the other has never occurred to me. I recognize in myself changes as of a living subject, namely, thoughts, power to choose, etc., and as these terms indicate together make up my body, I have good reason to conceive of an incorporeal and constant being. Whether such a being is able to think without connection with a body can never be concluded from this empirical concept of its nature. I am conjoined with beings kindred to myself by means of corporeal laws, but whether I am, or ever shall be, conjoined according to other laws which I will call spiritual, without the instrumentality of matter, I can in no way conclude from what is given to me.

All such opinions, as those concerning the manner in which the soul moves my body, or is related to other beings now or in the future can never be anything more than fictions. And they are far from having even that value which fictions of science, called hypotheses, have. For with these no fundamental powers are invented; only those already known by experience are connected according to the phenomena; their possibility, therefore, must be provable at any moment. It is different in the former case, when even new fundamental relations of cause and effect are assumed, the possibility of which can never, nor in any way, be ascertained, and which thus are only invented by creative genius or by chimera, whichever you like to call it. That several true or pretended phenomena can be comprehended by means of such assumed fundamental ideas cannot at all be quoted in their favour. For a reason may be given for everything, if one is entitled to invent at will actions and laws of operation. We must wait, therefore, perhaps until in the future world, by new experiences, we are informed about new concepts concerning powers in our thinking selves which, as yet, are hidden to us.

Thus the observations of more recent days, analyzed by mathematics, have revealed to us the power of attraction in matter, concerning the possibility of which we shall never be able to learn anything further, because it seems to be a fundamental power. Those who would have invented such a quality without first having obtained the proof from experience would rightly have deserved to be laughed at as fools. Because, in such cases, reasons are of no account whatever, neither for the sake of inventing, nor for confirming the possibility or impossibility of certain results: the right of decision must be left to experience alone. Similarly I leave to time, which brings experience, the ascertainment of something about the famous healing-powers of the magnet in cases of toothache, when experience shall have produced as many observations to the effect that magnetic rods act upon flesh and bones, as we already have proving their effect on steel and iron. But, if certain pretended experiences cannot be classified under any law of sensation that is unanimously accepted by men: if, therefore, they would only go to prove irregularity in the testimony of the senses—which, indeed, is the case with rumored ghost-stories—then it is advisable simply to ignore them. For the lack of unanimity and uniformity makes the historic knowledge about them valueless for proving anything, and renders them unfit to serve as a basis for any law of experience within the domain of reason.

Similarly, while on the one hand, by somewhat deeper investigation, one will learn that convincing and philosophic knowledge is impossible in the case under consideration, one will have to confess, on the other hand, in a quiet and unprejudiced state of mind, that such knowledge is dispensable and unnecessary. The vanity of science likes to excuse its occupations by the pretext of importance; thus it is pretended in this case that a rational understanding of the spiritual nature of the soul is very necessary for the conviction of an existence after death; again, that this conviction is very necessary as a motive for a virtuous life. Idle curiosity adds that the fact of apparitions of departed souls even

furnishes us with a proof from experience of the existence of such things. But true wisdom is the companion of simplicity, and as, with the latter, the heart rules the understanding, it generally renders unnecessary the great preparations of scholars, and its aims do not need such means as can never be at the command of all men. What? Is it good to be virtuous only because there is another world, or will not actions be rewarded rather because they were good and virtuous in themselves? Does not man's heart contain immediate moral precepts, and is it absolutely necessary to link our thought to the other world for the sake of moving man here according to his destiny? Can he be called honest, can he be called virtuous, who would like to yield to his favorite vices if only he were not frightened by future punishment? Must we not rather say that indeed he shuns the doing of wicked things, but nurtures the vicious disposition in his soul; that he loves the advantages of actions similar to virtue, but hates virtue itself? In fact, experience teaches that very many who are instructed concerning the future world, and are convinced of it, nevertheless yield to vice and corruption, and only think upon means cunningly to escape the threatening consequences of the future. But there probably never was a righteous soul who could endure the thought that with death everything would end, and whose noble mind had not elevated itself to the hope of the future. Therefore it seems to be more in accordance with human nature and the purity of morals to base the expectation of a future world upon the sentiment of a good soul, than, conversely, to base the soul's good conduct upon the hope of another world. Of a similar nature is that moral faith, the simplicity of which can do without many a subtlety of reasoning, and which alone is appropriate to man in any state, because, without deviations, it guides him to his true aims. Let us therefore leave to speculation and to the care of idle men all the noisy systems of doctrine concerning such remote subjects. They are really immaterial to us, and the reasons pro and con which, for the moment, prevail, may, perhaps, decide the applause of schools, but hardly anything about the future destiny of the righteous. Human reason was not given strong enough wings to part clouds so high above us, clouds which withhold from our eyes the secrets of the other world. The curious who inquire about it so anxiously may receive the simple but very natural reply that it would be best for them to please to have patience until they get there. But as our fate in the other world probably depends very much on the manner in which we have conducted our office in the present world, I conclude with the words with which Voltaire, after so many sophistries, lets his honest Candide conclude: "Let us look after our happiness, go into the garden and work."