What is a philosopher? Two sub-questions
(by Kieran)

Kilaya is excited about the question “what is a philosopher?,” and about the similar answers that ancient Greeks and Indians gave to it. In particular, also, he likes how the escapee from Plato’s Cave articulates this vision of the philosopher/sage. Kilaya’s not the only one to recognize the affinity: you find Plato’s Cave scattered across contemporary Advaita Vedanta teaching, with more or less fidelity. (Also many updated versions involving projectors and screens or, inevitably, The Matrix).

I’m interested especially in this aspect of the question: what relative weights are given -- in this ancient vision of the philosopher -- to analysis versus holistic or embodied intuition? How is each understood? Indian and Greek ancients seem to share an interest in honoring both modes richly. (Whereas so many philosophic trends are heavily analytic; and whereas spiritual traditions like Zen, Sufism or Taoism can sometimes seem to eschew analysis altogether). Indeed, it could sometimes seem like they don’t see the two modes as radically distinct.

And then, in light (no pun intended) of Plato’s Cave, a second sub-question of “what is a philosopher?” also catches my eye. The Cave -- like similar metaphors in Advaita -- seems to invite two nearly opposite interpretations of where truth and liberation lie. One version requires ascension, abstraction, disembodiment; the other requires a more intimate, but unmistaken contact with just this given lifeworld. (Rather than with a dim conceptual shadow-play thereof).

(So e.g. according to the latter interpretive style, the classic Advaita principle that “I am not the body” might actually invite us to explore the felt body -- as a spacious field of sensation; one which is everywhere dependent on the unitary but wide-open "I" of effortless, reflexive, non-objectifiable awareness; and which has no discoverable boundary between a supposed “inside self” and “outside world”).

So, my second riff on Kilaya’s interests: does the cave-escapee transcend the world or penetrate to its heart? To put it differently, what parts of experience does s/he transcend? What parts are real/whole apprehensions vs. false/partial ones? Doubtless Plato, Plotinus, Parmenides, Shankara and Ramana Maharshi all give slightly different answers, as do you and I in our turn.

Classical vs. contemporary (or neo-) Advaita

So for my contribution I’ll address both questions from a contemporary Advaita perspective. Contemporary Advaita has a somewhat more phenomenological (vs. metaphysical) flavor, compared to the classical Advaita reasoning of Shankara, Gaudapada et al; it also has arguably a more immanent emphasis altogether. (Partly through influences from Kashmir Shaivism &
Buddhist nondual traditions… a story for another day).

If you’re unfamiliar with the basics -- Advaita asserts an identity between Atman (individual self or soul) and Brahman (the absolute or totality). (...Whereas you might say Mahayana Buddhism typically claims an identity or continuity between one’s own not-self and the not-self of everything ;)).

Shankara’s classic formulation of pith Advaita is sometimes translated thus, and could certainly sound ascensionist and world-denying, as could Plato’s Cave:

1. Brahman alone is real
2. The world is unreal
3. The world is Brahman

We will see how a contemporary Advaitan like Rupert Spira expounds these principles in phenomenological detail and with, you might say, a certain immanent transcendence.

Contemporary Advaita was mostly shaped by four 20th-century figures, all of them more in the mold of “sage” than pandit/pundit*: Ramana Maharshi, Nisargadatta Maharaj, Atmananda Krishnamenon, and Harilal Poonja. Ramana Maharshi influentially restated Shankara’s three principles by replacing “Brahman” with “The Self.”

*Though Nisargadatta and Krishnamenon especially blur the lines. (They were also cigarette merchant and chief of police, respectively, in their day jobs! Multi-talented guys).

Following their lead, today’s Advaita usually renders the tradition digestible with one of two popular injunctions:

--Inquire ‘Who am I?’
--Release all effort.

The two are more closely related than first appears, since psychic effort is the main shape and symptom of the mistaken, partial “I” whom we imagine sits behind our eyes and confronts an alien world.

An aside about Greeks and Indians…

Advaita and Neoplatonism, especially, have extremely striking parallels. I gather there’s been much speculation about historical influence in one direction or the other; also about forces that might have led to independent, convergent evolution -- e.g. Neoplatonists defended against Skeptics while Advaitans battled Buddhist Madhyamaka critiques. Maybe Kilaya (or doubtless several others among you!) can illuminate similarities and differences more intricately than I. (Including internal differences within Greek tradition).
Both traditions might be described as monist idealisms, and both (I’m told) include at least suggestions that subject-and-object are not fundamental properties of this *nous* or Brahman/consciousness.

**Introducing our contributors...**

Rupert Spira is one of a cluster of living Advaita teachers descended from Jean Klein. In my estimation Spira is notable for his systematic exposition -- a style simultaneously logical and meditative throughout. Jean Klein was more impressionistic, but (for my taste) in quite an inspired way. Numinous, even. He encourages intuitive leaps that mobilize more than the analytic intellect alone -- if analysis is that faculty which operates on reified "parts" of experience.

When Klein says something like “you welcome the welcoming;” or, “in your total absence is your real presence -- you are the absence of yourself” … a mean-spirited logician might accuse him of talking waffle. I encourage you to consider that he’s speaking the proper language of a global, meditative, feeling-exploration mode. And indeed, Jean Klein follows Krishnamenon in praising a “higher reasoning.”

So then in addition to occupying some interesting middle ground between immanence and transcendence (re “how do we escape the cave?”), Klein’s and Spira’s styles also illuminate from two angles the second question I identified (and which follows from the question “what is a philosopher?”): namely, once more: what is the relation between analytic articulations and gestalt grokkings? And what language games most encourage one or the other mode? (...To whatever extent the two modes can finally be distinguished… personally, I suspect that even the most syllogistic processes involve holistic intuition. And I suspect, conversely, that there’s an implicit, embodied logic in global and even ineffable epiphanies).

Okay so here’s a selection from Rupert Spira. I find it a fascinating animal! Is it an unusually phenomenological style of metaphysics, an unusually metaphysical style of phenomenology…?

Spira called his first book “The Transparency of Things”: he says all things are transparent at every point to the seamless, nonreactive, edgeless awareness which both registers and constitutes them. All troubled and particular things (the Advaitan claims...) are composed through-and-through of an untroubled, unimpeded, and “nondual” knowing: its knowing and its being are one, as a light illuminates itself. By the same token, we know “the world” only by being it -- an intimacy which someone could be tempted to call love.

**The Way of Beauty**
An Introduction to the Nature of Perception

The artist and poet William Blake said, "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern."

What did he mean by this? How can a finite object, such as a tree, table, chair, person, or house be infinite?

Let us understand to begin with that the word 'perception' includes all five senses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling.

Conventional thinking tells us that the experience of perception is divided into two essential ingredients: one, a subject that perceives and two, an object that is perceived. This understanding is enshrined in the structure of language with phrases such as, "I see the tree," "I hear the wind," "I touch the person," "I taste the apple" and "I smell the flower."

In each case, a subject – 'I,' the self – is joined to an object – the tree, wind, person, apple or flower – through an act of perceiving, that is, through an act of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or smelling.

Now, in order to understand the nature of perception, we need to explore both sides of this equation – 'I', the subject, and the object or world. Traditionally, mystics have explored the nature of 'I', the self, and artists and scientists have explored the nature of the object or world. In other words, mystics have tended to face inwards, directing their attention to the heart of their being or essential nature, and scientists and artists have tended to face outwards towards the objects of nature and the world.

At first glance it may seem that these two set out in opposite directions. However, if each party explores deeply enough, they inevitably come to the same conclusion. Indeed, it is only because in most cases, each party doesn’t explore deeply enough, that the conclusions of mystics on the one hand, and artists and scientists on the other, tend to differ so radically.

The painter Paul Cézanne said, “A time is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will trigger a revolution.” The revolution to which he referred is the coming together of these two perspectives – the convergence of the mystic’s, artist’s and scientist’s deepest understanding – and the implications this has for all aspects of our lives.

So let us explore, briefly, both these perspectives.

The Nature of the Self
Conventional thinking tells us that it is ‘I,’ the body/mind, that is aware of objects and the world. However, one simple, clear look at experience indicates that we are aware of the body and mind in just the same way that we are aware of objects and the world.

In other words, the body/mind is not the subject of experience. The body/mind is an object of experience, that appears and disappears like all other objects. Now what is the perceiving subject that we call ‘I,’ that knows or is aware of all these perceived objects, that is, that body, mind and world?

‘I’ refers to whatever it is that is aware of the objects of the body, mind and world. This ‘I’ cannot be found as any kind of object, that is, as a thought, feeling, sensation or perception. And yet ‘I’ am undeniably present and aware.

Hence, to be present and aware is inherent in ‘I,’ which for this reason is sometimes referred to as ‘Awareness,’ which simply means the presence of that which is aware. This Awareness that is our essential nature is like an aware, empty openness in which all experience takes place, but is not itself an experience.

Awareness is not located in time and is thus eternal or ever-present; it cannot be found in space and is thus infinite, that is, it has no finite or observable qualities.

The Nature of the Object, Other or World – from Matter to Mind

Conventional thinking tells us that an object is made out of inert stuff called ‘matter’. But what does experience say?

Take the apparent world that we now see. Our only experience of such a world is the current perception. In fact, we cannot legitimately say that we know or perceive an independently existing world, that is, a world that exists in its own right, independent of our perception. All we can legitimately say, based on actual experience, is that we know our perception of the world. In fact, we cannot legitimately say that we know our perception ‘of the world’, because, as we have seen, we never come in contact with any such world. We only know its perception. So, rather than saying we know our perception ‘of the world’, we can only legitimately say that we know perception.

So, having discovered that we never actually know, perceive or come in contact with an object or world, as such, we can now explore our experience more deeply.

Do we actually find an object called ‘a perception’, or do we rather find the experience of perceiving? See clearly that we never actually find the seen object; we just find the experience of seeing. We never find the heard sound; we just find the experience of hearing. We never experienced an object called ‘a taste’; we just know the experience of tasting.
In this way, see clearly that experience does not consist of a collection of objects or nouns, known by a separate, independent subject. Rather, it is more like a flow of experiencing in which the apparent subject and object are contained as one. In fact, in the new language of non-duality we could say that there are only verbs, no nouns! Not, “I see the tree,” but rather, “There is seeing;” not, “I hear the wind,” but rather, “There is hearing.”

As such, the apparently perceived object is beginning to lose its solidity, separateness, otherness, objectness. In other words, the seen or heard object seems to exist at a distance from oneself, but the experience of seeing or hearing always takes place close, intimately one with oneself.

Thus, we have discovered that we never really know, perceive or come in contact with inert stuff called ‘matter’, but that all we know is ‘mind’. That is, all we know or experience of the apparent object or world is ‘perceiving’ – that is, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling. Now what is the nature of perceiving?

**The Nature of the Perceiving – from Mind to Pure Knowing**

Who or what is it that knows or is aware of the experience of perceiving?

Ask yourself, “What is the relationship between the *experience of perceiving* and the *knowing of it*?”

See if you can find these two elements in your experience: one, *perceiving* and two, the *knowing of it*. Or, are ‘perceiving’ and ‘the knowing of it’ one and the same experience? In this way, discover that experience is not actually divided into two essential ingredients. Experience does not comprise one part that *knows* and another that *is known*. It is not inherently divided into a subject and an object.

We do not find a *perception* and the *knower* of that perception. We find that a perception is made out of the experience of *perceiving*, and that *perceiving* and the *knowing of it* are one and the same.

In other words, perceiving is made out of pure Knowing. Reach out an imaginary hand in your experience and try to touch the stuff that perceiving is made of. Try to touch the stuff that seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling is made of.

All we find, know or experience there is the knowing of it. In fact, we don’t find the knowing *of it*, just as previously we never found our perception *of the world*. We just find pure Knowing.

**The Light of Pure Knowing**
And what is it that finds, knows or is aware of this pure Knowing? Is Knowing known by something other than itself? No! This Knowing knows itself. This pure Knowing, or Awareness, never knows, is aware of or comes in contact with anything other than itself.

For this reason I call it pure Knowing. It is a Knowing that is not tainted with the slightest trace of subjectivity or objectivity. It never knows anything other than itself. And the name that is commonly given to the absence of an object or other, to the absence of separation or duality, is beauty or love.

Not to know an apparent object as ‘an object’ is the experience of beauty: not to know an apparent other as ‘an other’ is the experience of love.

Beauty and love are not special kinds of experience that are limited to one or two objects or people; they are the nature of all experience. From the point of view of Awareness or pure Knowing – which is the only real point of view – all experience is made only of beauty and love. That is, from the point of view of Awareness or pure Knowing, there is only itself, being, knowing and loving itself alone.

Thus, from the point of view of Awareness or pure Knowing, there are no finite objects or selves. It is only from the illusory point of view of an imaginary finite self that finite objects or selves are experienced. From the point of view of Awareness or pure Knowing, there is only its own eternal, infinite self, and all apparently finite objects or selves are that alone.

“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.” When experience is no longer imagined or felt to be divided into two essential ingredients – a subject called ‘I,’ inside the body/mind, and an object, other or world, at a distance from and made out of something other than our self – it will be known and felt as it truly is, infinite and eternal.

Everything, all seeming things, shine with the light of pure Knowing. As the Sufis say, “Wherever the eye falls, there is the face of God.”

Rupert Spira     January 2013

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And now two short pieces from Klein -- which I include both because I like them, because it seems worth having a sample size of at least two different teachers, and because they further enrich and crystallize the two questions: of intuitive vs. analytic languages, and -- this is one rivulet of the immanent/transcendent “Cave” question -- the (confusing?) relationship between rhetoric about an “ultimate subject” and the dissolution of both subject and object.

The first one’s very short indeed:
“Listening is the background of all that appears.
It is stillness.
Your body, senses, mind, and all states come and go, but you are this timeless presence.”

--Jean Klein, “The Ease of Being,” page 2

The second piece is here -- **only the last page, “On Welcoming!”** The other pages are quite dispensable extra credit. (Forgive my tech incompetence, not sure how to make them separate files). Of course you’re most welcome to read the other two dialogues as well, but you’ll be sufficiently up to speed for our meetup without them. The longer first one (“Bringing the perceived back to the perceiving”) is my own fave.

Jean Klein Selections.pdf

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*For my presentation I don’t plan to revisit much of the background material in these pages at all! Instead I’ll just offer a meditative exploration, in somewhat the contemporary style, of certain Advaita claims about the fundamental nature of experience. Hopefully, with this as an object lesson, we’ll then be well-equipped in the ensuing discussion to consider questions of intuition and analysis (and their proper languages); of immanence and transcendence; as well as just the validity or invalidity of Advaita assertions (or Platonic or Neoplatonic ones).*