Irony

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



Beyond knowledge, short of belief

My partner sometimes lays tarot cards, for herself or for others. I used to do the same. What has never really left me is not the question whether tarot “works”, but what it would mean for something like this to be meaningful at all.

As knowledge it hardly stands. The outcome is not reproducible, not falsifiable, not separable from the situation in which it appears. There is no method that guarantees a next result. From the standpoint of science it can only be coincidence, followed by interpretation.

As belief it does not fit either. There is, for me, no conviction that “the cards speak”, no doctrine, no metaphysical framework that carries their meaning. What remains is an uneasy middle ground: something appears as meaningful without being accountable as knowledge and without being held as belief.

When explanation relocates the problem

The same tension appears in family constellations. Strangers are placed in a room as “father”, “mother”, “sister”, and yet movements, sensations, emotions arise that are often experienced as recognizably related to the person’s actual family situation. One can point to suggestion, unconscious perception, micro-movements, group dynamics. These are plausible explanations. But they do not dissolve the question. They relocate it.

They translate strangeness into mechanism without touching what first called for explanation.

What silently governs these translations is a deeper assumption: that whatever is meaningful must, in principle, be reducible to causal processes. That meaning becomes legitimate only when it can be anchored in explanation, measurement, and control.

Perhaps this assumption is stronger than any religious belief.

Because whatever does not fit within it is immediately assigned a lower ontological status. It becomes projection, illusion, noise. Or, at best, “psychologically interesting.” What it is not allowed to be is an indication that our very way of knowing may be bounded.

Not-knowing as experiential category

Jung spoke of synchronicity: meaningful coincidences without demonstrable causal connection. The term does not solve anything. It names a fracture. It marks situations in which coherence appears without ground. And precisely for that reason such phenomena largely remain outside the field of what counts as knowledge. Not because they have been refuted, but because they cannot be stabilized.

What concerns me here is not the hope that “the universe is mysterious,” but the suspicion that our distinction between knowledge and non-knowledge is

too crude. That there are modes of appearing that cannot be fixed as knowing, and yet cannot honestly be reduced to belief. Experiences that present themselves as meaningful without granting us the authority to claim them.

Perhaps this is what not-knowing actually names. Not a lack of information, but a way in which experience can occur. A mode in which coherence is sensed without being possessed. In which order shows itself without becoming a structure.

From this perspective, not-knowing is not a problem waiting to be solved. It is a phenomenological category. A way the world can be present.

The taste of irony

There is, however, another aspect that keeps returning in these questions, one that is rarely discussed in philosophical or scientific contexts: the presence of something like humor or irony in the way reality sometimes unfolds.

Not humor as entertainment, but as structure. As a way in which patterns appear to play with themselves. Situations arise that are too precise to be purely random, too untimely to be merely functional, too fitting to feel accidental, and yet refuse to solidify into meaning. They arrive as if with a raised eyebrow.

It is difficult to speak about this without immediately sounding metaphorical. And yet the experience itself is not. There are moments when coincidence seems to comment on the situation in which it occurs. When events mirror questions, when outcomes invert expectations with almost theatrical timing, when complexity condenses into a gesture that is at once exact and inexplicable.

What strikes me is how closely this resembles what, on the human level, we call irony.

Irony is not chaos. It is patterned deviation. It is order that bends without breaking. It exposes the limits of intention, the fragility of control, the theatricality of our seriousness. It does not destroy meaning. It destabilizes it.

A universe without play

That such a sensibility might not only belong to human psychology but might echo in the texture of events themselves is a disturbing and fertile thought. It would mean that what we experience as humor is not merely a subjective overlay, but a resonance with how situations can organize themselves.

Biocentrism comes to mind here, not as a doctrine to be adopted, but as a gesture in this direction. An attempt to think life, experience, and awareness not as late

accidents in an otherwise indifferent universe, but as factors that participate in how reality articulates itself at all.

Whether or not such models are defensible is secondary. What matters is what they betray: a growing discomfort with a picture of the universe as a mute machine, entirely serious, entirely literal, entirely without play.

For a universe without the possibility of irony would be a universe without distance to itself. A universe incapable of surprise. A universe that could only repeat its own necessity.

When coherence becomes gesture

Yet much of what appears, from quantum behavior to evolutionary improvisation to the strange elegance of mathematical structures, suggests something less rigid. Something that experiments. Something that deviates. Something that does not merely function, but explores.

In this light, not-knowing no longer names only a limit of cognition. It names a sensitivity. An openness to the possibility that coherence itself may have textures we have not yet learned to recognize. That some forms of order may announce themselves not as laws, but as gestures.

Humor, irony, play. Not as properties to be proven, but as modes in which reality may sometimes be felt.

If so, then experiences we hastily dismiss as coincidence, projection, or anomaly may be doing quiet philosophical work. They may be reminding us that meaning is not only constructed and not only discovered, but sometimes encountered in a form that refuses both categories.

And that refusal itself may be one of the most precise expressions of not-knowing.