Mindsets

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



Remarks by preacher Joseph Frederick Berg, addressed to Joseph Barker:

> “My opponent's reasoning reminds me of the heathen, who, being asked on what the world stood, replied, ‘On a tortoise.’ But on what does the tortoise stand? ‘On another tortoise.’ With Mr. Barker, too, there are tortoises all the way down.”

It sounds absurd, of course, to imagine the world resting on an infinite stack of tortoises. But the punchline is not really about tortoises. It is about explanation. About what happens when you keep asking what supports what.

My version is simpler: it is mindsets all the way down.

By “mindset” I do not mean a motivational slogan or a personality trait. I mean something quieter and more basic: a configuration of assumptions that makes a world show up as the kind of world it is. A mindset is not only an opinion you hold. It is a way reality becomes intelligible, actionable, and familiar.

Everything we know, everything we interpret, everything we recognize as “real”, arrives through such configurations. Not as a single filter, but as layers. Sensation and memory. Language and culture. Habit and expectation. Fear and desire. Education and ideology. Even the sense of being “me” in here while the world is “out there” is part of the configuration.

This does not mean there is no world. It means we never encounter a world without conditions. We never touch reality in the abstract. We meet it as a formed field of relevance: this matters, that does not; this is danger, that is safe; this is mine, that is yours; this is a chair, that is a shadow.

Some layers are explicit. You can switch them, at least a bit. You can adopt a political framework, drop a religious one, learn a scientific one, unlearn a superstition. These are the visible lenses.

Other layers are half-invisible. Identity is one. Not just the story of who you are, but the felt geometry of self and other: where “I” begin, where “world” begins, what counts as threat, what counts as meaning. Much of what we call thinking is the maintenance of that geometry.

Deeper still are embodied patterns that do not look like ideas at all: attraction, territoriality, shame, dominance, bonding, flight. These are not “beliefs”, yet they structure experience powerfully. They decide what gets attention before any story is told.

And at the deepest level are the assumptions that feel like reality itself: objecthood, space, time, causality, continuity, separation, inside and outside. These are not conclusions. They are the stage on which conclusions become possible.

The more unconscious a mindset is, the more it feels like plain fact. We no longer notice the lens. We simply see through it. That is why arguments about truth so often go nowhere. Two people can be perfectly rational inside two different configurations.

So what is truth?

If truth means an absolute view from nowhere, it is not available to us. Not because we are stupid, but because we cannot step outside the conditions by which a world appears at all. But if truth means coherence, usefulness, predictive power, ethical clarity, or the capacity to reduce unnecessary suffering, then some mindsets are plainly better than others. “No absolute truth” does not mean “everything is equal.”

A mindset can loosen. It can harden. It can merge with another. It can become fanatical. It can become invisible. It can even collapse, briefly, leaving experience oddly unframed. And then another configuration grows back in, because living requires stabilization.

There is no escape.