Obviousness

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



For most of my life, I assumed that reality simply presented itself as it is.

The world appeared obvious. Trees were trees. People were people. I was myself, looking out at a world that existed independently of me. None of this felt like an interpretation. It simply felt like the way things are.

Only much later did I begin to notice something curious.

People living in completely different worlds experience exactly the same certainty.

A committed materialist has no difficulty explaining reality in terms of matter and physical processes. A devout Christian experiences the presence of God as something self-evident. Someone immersed in non-duality may feel that the absence of separation is more obvious than the separate self ever was. Each of these worlds has its own internal coherence. Each feels entirely natural from within.

What fascinates me is not that these worlds differ.

What fascinates me is that each of them feels obvious while it is being lived.

This obviousness is remarkably persuasive. It rarely announces itself as a belief. It does not feel like an opinion that might be revised tomorrow. It feels like reality itself. That is precisely why it is so difficult to notice. We rarely question what appears completely self-evident.

Looking back, I can recognize this pattern in my own life.

There was a time when I was convinced that enlightenment would reveal ultimate reality. Later, during encounters with non-duality, there were moments when the disappearance of the familiar boundary between self and world seemed so unmistakable that it

felt impossible to imagine ever doubting it again. Had someone questioned that certainty at the time, I would probably have thought they simply had not seen what had become obvious to me.

That realization has stayed with me.

Not because it makes the experience less meaningful, but because it raises another question. If every stable world eventually comes to feel self-evident, what exactly is this feeling of obviousness? Is it a reliable indication that we have finally reached the foundations of reality, or is it itself one of the ways in which a lived world stabilizes?

I no longer know how to answer that question with certainty.

What I do know is that obviousness has accompanied every world I have ever inhabited. It was present before I became interested in philosophy. It was present during my years in neo-sannyas. It was present in non-duality. And it is present now, while writing these words.

The feeling itself has never disappeared.

Only the object of certainty has changed.

Perhaps this is one of the quietest but most powerful activities of human experience. A world gradually organizes itself until it no longer feels organized at all. Its assumptions become transparent. Its distinctions

become natural. Its explanations become reality. Once that point is reached, alternatives no longer appear as alternatives. They simply seem mistaken.

This is why genuine dialogue between different worlds is so rare.

It is not because people are unwilling to listen. It is because each person begins from what already appears undeniable. When someone says, "Everything is consciousness," or "Everything is matter," or "There is no self," the sentence usually expresses far more than a conclusion. It expresses a world that has become obvious from within.

Seen in this light, obviousness is neither a mistake nor a proof.

It is a characteristic of lived worlds.

Recognizing this does not force me into relativism, where every claim becomes equally true or equally meaningless. It simply reminds me that the feeling of certainty cannot, by itself, establish the ultimate nature of reality. However compelling a world may become, I remain unable to step outside experience in order to confirm that this world alone has finally escaped the conditions from which every world emerges.

Oddly enough, I find that realization reassuring rather than unsettling.

It allows me to take experiences seriously without demanding that they become metaphysical conclusions. It allows me to appreciate the coherence of a world without mistaking that coherence for proof that it is the last possible world. And it leaves open the possibility that tomorrow something else may become just as obvious as everything that seems obvious today.

Perhaps obviousness is not the end of inquiry.

Perhaps it is where inquiry should begin.