



# Considering Non-Duality

Arguments for the Worldview  
Impossible to Prove

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# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
The Conceptual Nature of Our Selves .....	10
Discovering the Proper Terminology for my New Perspective.....	13
<b>Introducing Non-Duality .....</b>	<b>15</b>
What is Non-Duality? .....	15
<b>Topic 1 Neuroscience .....</b>	<b>23</b>
Delineation problem .....	26
The Rubber Hand Experiment .....	28
<b>Topic 2 The Scientific Method and Logic .....</b>	<b>31</b>
Principle 1: The Burden of Proof .....	32
Principle 2: Falsifiability.....	33
Principle 3: Ockham's Razor .....	35
Two Modes of Data Collection .....	36
The Question of Consciousness.....	37
Consciousness and the Burden of Proof .....	39
Falsifying Duality or Non-Duality.....	41
Consciousness and Ockham's Razor.....	42
Renowned Physicists and Consciousness.....	47
Your Interpretation .....	48
<b>Topic 3 Freud's Psychology and Beyond .....</b>	<b>50</b>

The Ego of Sigmund Freud .....	51
The Ego of Carl Jung .....	55
The Ego of Modern-Day Psychologists .....	58
Your Interpretation .....	60
<b>Topic 4 Etymological Clues.....</b>	<b>62</b>
Language for Referring to Oneself.....	63
Verbs and Nouns.....	64
Matter .....	65
Thinking and Feeling .....	67
Your Interpretation .....	68
<b>Topic 5 Experimenting with Making Clouds Disappear .....</b>	<b>72</b>
How-To Instructions.....	73
After the experience .....	74
<b>Making Up Your Mind.....</b>	<b>77</b>
A Brief Recap.....	77
How Much Research is Enough? .....	79
<b>Resources .....</b>	<b>81</b>
Books about Ego Awakening .....	84
Online videos.....	85
Non-Duality as a Mindset.....	85
Resources used for this book .....	88

# Introduction

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It's the winter of 2016. I'm finding myself quite unhappy as my start-up is stalled by political games between Parliament and the Dutch Central Bank. Neither seems willing to push for the legislative changes my non-profit project requires. It's time to call it quits, which is painful as I have invested a lot of effort and money into this project. But, to be frank, it hurts mostly because I haven't found the kind of satisfaction I hoped to achieve, just as I didn't with my previous project and all of the projects before that.

Instead of shifting my focus to a new project or exciting job, as I had always done before, I felt it was time to face the fact that my life strategy wasn't leading to much satisfaction. Thinking about it, I wasn't even

sure what brings satisfaction in life. Would it perhaps be time to explore those self-help books I had been avoiding all my life? I had yet to meet a single individual who had become happier from those books or methods, so that approach didn't make much sense. Instead, I decided to approach it like a researcher with a proper research question. Starting, of course, with the science-heavy books and papers about what brings satisfaction in life.

After months spent burrowing into this rabbit hole, coming across a great variety of ideas, I stumbled upon a book with a captivating title, *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*, by *The Guardian* journalist Oliver Burkeman. I promptly ordered a copy along with literally dozens of other books. In fact, I ordered so many books that I had forgotten about coming across the book a few days earlier and ordering it – a realization that dawned on me when I received my second copy by mail. Despite feeling a bit silly, I took it as a

sign to prioritize reading *The Antidote* over my other purchases.

While certainly not the most sophisticated work of literature, *The Antidote* felt like the right book, as it was basically addressing the same research question I was working on with the same level of skepticism toward self-help. After reading about the development of treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy – one of the most praised types of therapy of the 21st century – I encountered a rather surprising yet intriguing concept that sounded a lot like New Age thought at first. But since it was coming from someone I didn't perceive as unscientific or sloppy, I considered the possibility that I might be missing the essential meaning that Burkeman was driving at. Thus, I decided to commit to understanding it before deciding on (read: probably discarding) the idea.

The idea I was struggling to understand goes by the name of *the backward law*. The principle states that our trying to make things right is a big part of why things go

wrong. To illustrate the meaning, Burkeman includes the following quote from Alan Watts, an eloquent philosopher of the 1960s who many might know from Youtube videos: “When you try to stay on the surface of water, you sink; but when you try to sink, you float.” Burkeman goes on to explain that the same rule applies to, for example, the feeling of insecurity – that it's the result of trying to be secure.

While I could relate to the example of sinking and floating in the water, I had a hard time applying the metaphor to my unsatisfactory life circumstances. If anything, I felt I had made too little effort over a long time, and this was what had got me into the mess my life was – like when we avoid looking at our taxes for a long time and eventually have to do them anyway, but by the time we get around to the task, we find ourselves with a poor recollection of where the receipts are or what each relates to. Was Burkeman making some sort of plea to do even less? This conclusion didn't make sense, and I trusted



the author enough to assume he was making sense. I was just not getting it.

While digging deeper, I discovered that the idea of efforts having the reversed effect has echoes in Stoicism, so I decided to read up on this millennia-old Greek philosophy. Meanwhile, I also delved into the works of Alan Watts, whom Burkeman quotes several times throughout his book. I purchased Watts' *The Wisdom of Insecurity* – another captivating title – and I started listening to some of his lectures on Youtube, which were perhaps even more captivating, if only because of his soothing voice and humor.

To cut a long story short, a few weeks or perhaps months later, the nuanced meaning of the “backward law” dawned on me. At first, I felt a strong feeling of understanding it after immersing myself for hours in Watts' lectures, but whenever I tried to capture this feeling in words, I would somehow lose the feeling. Then, one day, I suddenly got why the insight was so ephemeral and burst into laughter. This special feeling was coming from shifting into a state of non-conceptual

awareness – the exact opposite of when we think in terms of words!

I realized that my attempts to capture the feeling in words (which are concepts) immediately shifted me back to the conceptual mode again. I then began attempting to subdue the urge to conceptualize, to shift out of the conceptual mode and simply stay with the feeling of *understanding* life and the universe. As a result, I started to feel much happier and also became more aware of the things I actually wanted to do but often didn't act upon, such as talking to strangers who seemed interesting to me. I noticed the narratives my mind was creating about these interactions and how they activated my conceptual thinking, including a concept that both Alan Watts and Oliver Burkeman made me question: the concept of a “self”. Yet, regardless of my failures at times, I suddenly started to feel satisfaction from my actions.