

## Session 2.1: Knowledge, Choice, and Uncertainty

Metaphysics & Mystery online course  
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Lauren Buckley: This cacao is making my stomach rumble so that'll probably call on the microphone. Yeah it's very human, that and being on camera without showering. So what Charles has said, I feel like my cells are drinking in a really deep level. It brings up a lot of feelings and questions and emotional questions and technical questions and all kinds of stuff, but I want to stay big picture for a little while longer. A question that's come up a lot for me, mostly because of the reaction I've received from other people, is do we have to stop trying to explain these things? Do we have to stop trying to explain the nature of reality? I've noticed since being immersed more and more in these so-called "new age" whatever that means, "spiritual communities," there's a lot of vilifying the mind and I have an inner conflict about it because for me it's fun to think about and it feels important for me, like my natural wiring is to seek truth and to enjoy analyzing big picture concepts and other things connecting with humans deeply in all kinds of other stuff, but this analysis is a flow state for me. I just love it, so part of me is like, if I just love it, could it be wrong? It's also rare for other people to want to do that or to even think it's valuable. Usually they say I'm too in my head, I'm too left brained, I'm over thinking, I'm over analyzing, but I'm just being me. It makes me feel like am I bad and dumb? I wonder maybe has the pendulum swung too far as a reaction to mainstream culture which for so long has vilified at the heart and the senses and direct experiences.

Charles Eisenstein: Well, we have our minds for a reason. One thing that can happen though is that in the many dimensions of the evolutionary process of personal transformation there are some times where it's about synthesizing new information and asking questions and using the capabilities of the mind. There are other parts of that process where that could be a distraction away from applications of that new knowledge to personal/interpersonal issues and you know you don't want to go there so you think more about metaphysics. On one level you could say that yeah, the intellectualizing can be an escape or a form of bypass, but also avoidance of intellectualizing that can also be an escape and sometimes people who are very, very physically sensorially oriented sometimes they hit a wall in life and they're like, "whoa I got to stop and think about things. I've got to face some deep questions. I've got to ask myself these things," so that's a valuable part of the process too. Then on another level we have the collective organ, the collective body of humanity that has many, many organs and one of those organs is the mental organ. There are those of us who constitute that organ and who do that kind of thing and naturally gravitate toward that not just for ourselves but on behalf of the collective. I think we can trust that call and also be aware, you know, is this a bypass of some other physical/emotional/spiritual necessity that is coming up for me. The function of contemplation, the mind's ability to write a story of one's life and one's self, to draw connections between things, to integrate experiences that can then be digested on another level, I mean I think that the mind is an essential part of our overall physiology, so I don't know. To me it's kind of not a huge issue.

L.B.: Along those lines I wonder about what is the role of intellectualizing things and what is the role of experiencing things? Speaking for myself, and this is probably the minority of the population, but I have a hard time taking experiences at face value or even trusting that what I think I experienced is what I experienced. I'm more in touch a lot of the times with my intellect than my direct experiences. Again I could give you a Jungian cognitive function,

Myers Briggs reasons for that. I lead with an intuitive cognitive function and I repress sensing and so do you Charles, so I wouldn't be surprised if you might have a similar experience. So it's like I want that intellectual permission slip and I'm wondering if that's a bad thing or what you think about that.

C.E.: So you're saying that that you have experiences but you don't take them at face value, which really means that you distrust the kind of default meaning that the experiences have for you and are curious about “is this actually saying something else? Does this mean something else?” Well I think that no matter what meaning you make of those experiences they are still giving you information that you may not even make a meaning about. That meaning you make about the experience may be often, usually, irrelevant to what the experience is doing to you. So it doesn't matter. Like shit's happening to you and you can take the face value interpretation of it, you can take some other interpretation of it and in the end something has happened to you that you do not have to put in a box of your understanding. The process that has taken hold of us is outside of our control and one of the things that it does to you is that it compels you to try to make meanings of it and all of the meanings are wrong. Let's just say, usually, all the meanings are wrong and that's OK because the very process of making meanings, trying them out, that's an exploration of a field of potential. This is not something that you have to do right, got to let go of that. Life is given to us and our evolution is given to us much more than we realize.

L.B.: So you've talked directly to how I'm feeling about why I'm here. I'm curious; a lot of people in your audience, a lot of people around you are probably interested in this metaphysical understanding, yourself included. I'm curious what you think the common mistakes are or the common... maybe “mistakes” is the wrong word. The common ways people are making it more painful or harder than it needs to be or heavier, I don't know.

C.E.: The mistakes are part of the process so they aren't really mistakes, but there are dead and trails and pathways that have been explored enough times that maybe we don't need to go down them anymore. They've been explored; the mistakes have been made on our behalf by other people to whom we should be very grateful. Maybe one of them is thinking that the metaphysical inquiry can only be satisfied when a theory of everything is revealed. Because the driver for the inquiry is on a much deeper than intellectual level, merely meeting it intellectually with some theory is not going to satisfy the drive and you're going to think well OK, that theory could be right, but why should I believe this person? And there's a feeling of rightness, but I don't know. Unless there has been a movement and a shift and an evolution on another level, that feeling of satisfaction won't be met just by finding the right answer. This is not a matter of there's this question and there's the right answer and so and so has the right answer. Then someone's like, “no, no, no, I've got the right answer and no, it's the Bahá'í that I have the right answer. No, no, no, it's Islam. No it's Kabbalah. No!” Everyone has the right answer and each of those traditions meets people at a certain place with an answer that coincides with the fulfillment of that process, the fulfillment of the ripening of the process of inquiry and why am I here and so it meets it at the right moment and it can be very useful because something has to meet it. These wisdom schools and lineages and offerings, these are not useless you know. The gurus and the sages, it's not like this knowledge is irrelevant. Not saying that. We do need to be met with spirituality you could call it. The whole quest for spiritual knowledge, which is not an adjective I use a lot, spiritual, but the whole quest for spiritual knowledge, it's not some big mistake and we don't really need that. Maybe after it has met the inner development then you do not need it anymore and it seems like you didn't need it, but it's there for a reason. Yeah and you can see

that I'm not like offering teachings here. That's not my role. If you want that read the Tao Te Ching. Read the spiritual classics. There are people who do that. That's not what I'm here for because I don't know.

L.B.: Yeah, that's why you are a unique perspective. You're not the spiritual teacher. You're the guy on a similar quest.

C.E.: Yeah. I definitely do not identify as a spiritual teacher.

L.B.: This leads me to a very large and abstract question. I guess what else is new at this point? But the question is what can we know and what cannot be known? It seems like certainty is impossible. We have tons of unknowns and yet my life is happening so there is this feeling of like what do I do? Because even if I think I'm not making a decision, because I'm uncertain, I'm really just making an unintentional decision.

C.E.: Yeah, I don't like to get too much into these philosophical distinctions between belief and knowledge and certainty and faith and what is it to know. The word tends to, in our current time, have connotations of you know something if it is an accurate, justified belief, so corresponding to an external reality. If that's a workable definition of knowledge and I really doubt it, but if so then it's obvious that people very often think that they know something, where they believe that they know something, when they actually don't know it. You know for decades of my life I was told that science knows, we know that dietary cholesterol causes heart disease. This was something that was in the category of we know this and turns out after all these decades and all these medical practices built on it that it's totally wrong. So does that mean that we didn't know it or are we speaking of knowing as a feeling state? When people tell me, "well I have a knowing," I immediately get wary. It's the way it is to make a claim to something, to a position or belief that's beyond reproach because it's beyond evidence, because it's a knowing and in a way they're right. If you understand knowing as a feeling or an experience then yeah, they know it, even though it could be totally wrong. So you know if we're talking about knowing like I'm not even sure what we're talking about, but it's clear that what we call knowing is not what we mean by knowing because we're so often wrong about things that we thought we really knew. I would say that we are living in a time now where a lot of what we thought we knew as real and true is revealed as illusion and we're entering a time of "wow," I didn't know after all. We didn't know after all. I think I'll leave it at that. Not sure if that's what you were looking for.

L.B.: Intentionally open ended, I think the remaining piece of that question is. So like you said you don't even know what we mean by knowledge, it's kind of beyond our capacity. So what do we do with that in our life which is happening anyway?

C.E.: Yeah. I mean one way to understand knowledge or what we call knowledge is that it's an extension of a state of being that we are in. It's the world that we construct in correspondence with who we are right now and something seems true if it resonates with the state of being and the self that we are right now. Then as that self evolves, the individual and collective self as it evolves, then things that we thought we knew come under question and we begin to have doubts about what we knew. I'm not saying that that there's no objective reality, I'm not saying that reality is whatever we think it is. What I'm saying is that there is an intimate relationship between inner and outer, between self and world and that they co-evolve and that as we change what is revealed to us about the world changes as well. Beyond that the world itself changes to meet us in certain ways. So I'm not advocating for solipsism, I'm not

advocating for the postmodern position that the world is a text or something, that all meaning is a construct, that all stories or human constructs. My metaphysical position on that is that yeah, it's all a story including the idea that it's all a story, that's a story, and that these stories have an independent existence, that they recruit us to tell them, that they are waiting for us to tell them and that they are part of, again, a state of being, part of a reality that we can enter into, but we are not the creators of that reality. Yeah, you can meditate on that one for a while. Indigenous people believe that though. They didn't think that they made up their stories. Sometimes when you're telling a good story maybe you have the feeling that this is supposed to be in the story and that isn't and I'm serving a story. I'm telling a story that is supposed to be a certain way. I have that feeling when I'm writing sometimes and I put something in like, "no, no, no, that's not supposed to be in there. That way of thinking, it's not supposed to be in there." That is a way of confirming an independent existence to the story and I think that the same is true of our civilizational stories and our myths and our archetypes. We do not create them. If anything they create us. We're small players in the play of reality. It's mystery upon mystery upon mystery. The scientific world view that we grew up in is anemic and boring compared to what's really out there.

L.B.: So in this great mystery of life do you have any insight about how we might navigate through it and best make decisions?

C.E.: I wish I knew that answer. Maybe I do know how to best make decisions and I'm just not doing it. Maybe you're the same. Maybe you also know how to make decisions and you're also not doing it. Maybe what would be helpful is to give attention to your actual knowledge that you do know how to make decisions and to let go of the story that you do not know how to make decisions. Perhaps you know how and you're just not doing it. Then the question is, "why am I not acting on my knowledge?" Every animal knows how to make decisions and we're animals so we know how to do it too. Maybe we've kind of forgotten or gotten out a practice so I'm not going to give the answer of here's how to make decisions.

L.B.: Fair enough. We have so many different ways of making decisions available to us that maybe other animals may or may not. We have our executive brain, we have our emotional body, we have our gut instincts, we have what feels exciting or good or right. Sometimes they're in conflict.

C.E.: I would say that we don't actually make our choices based on the reasons that we think we make our choices from. Usually when someone asks you why did you choose such and such, why did you decide to do such and such and you produce an answer, that answer is almost always a lie because it's not that you're lying on purpose or that you might be, in fact there's a lot of training to lie on purpose. When Mom says, "why did you do that?" immediately what you do is you try to produce the answer that is going to get you out of trouble. Then you internalize Mom and when you are asked, "why did you do that?" you again, from a deep set habit, produce the answer that is going to get you out of trouble, that's going to conform to your image of yourself and your image of how you make decisions and the way that the world should be and so on. So basically when you ask somebody why did you do that you're inviting them to tell you a lie. Normally we do not know why we do the things that we do. What can be useful if you want to gain greater sovereignty over your choice making is to review key moments of your day in which you had the feeling of making a choice and being very careful with my words here, where you had the feeling of making a choice and to recall what you were feeling right before that. What was the state of being from which that choice followed and to take that in as an information point, not as a vow that I'm going to choose

differently next time I'm feeling that, but just as a survey of your landscape. How was I feeling before I made that choice as I made that choice. That will give you new information that will ultimately change the choices that you make. This maybe bears a little bit on the question of what's the purpose of intellect and so forth. This might be an example where over intellectualizing is a problem or is not useful, where the attempt to fit your choice making into an explanatory framework doesn't actually help you take in the information of, "here's the state I was in before I made the choice." Maybe it's just an unnecessary add on or maybe it would even give you some other insight into something about yourself. I would really stick with this practice of reviewing those moments where you made a choice, how you felt at that moment from which the choice followed.

L.B.: So there seemed to be maybe three main paths people take to try to understand the nature of reality; science, spirituality and philosophy. There are probably others, but those are the three main ones that I'm aware of. I'm curious what wisdom each of these paths offer and what they do not.

C.E.: Yeah. Maybe I would talk about what they at their best have to offer. This is just one way of looking at things. I mentioned before that I don't often use the word spirituality because it's hard to say what it means. The same is kind of true with science actually, like science can mean many things. It can mean a set of institutions. It can mean a method of inquiry. It can mean a set of unexamined metaphysical principles. There's a lot that goes under the umbrella called science. Philosophy is maybe even a more amorphous term. It could be just pondering the deep questions or it could be a certain tradition of discourse among people who call themselves philosophers and have their own specialized language. These words are hard to pin down, but I might say that science is the study of the measurable and employs a specific ritual that is called measurement, that converts observations into data, into numbers, and it has a certain power. There are things we can accomplish through that ritual practice. Magic can be accomplished, just like it can through any elaborated set of rituals. If science is the study of the measurable, then spirituality could be the study of the unmeasurable. There is certainly a gray zone of things that we do not yet know how to measure and how do we know what we don't know how to measure? How do we distinguish that from what is inherently unmeasurable or beyond measure? The ideology of science says that there is nothing inherently beyond measure, that everything can be encompassed in its own peculiar ritual practice called measurement. I'm not going to say whether that's right or wrong. It is an ideology. It's a story whether it's right or wrong. Still we can say that spirituality is the study of that which we cannot measure and so we call it Spirit, distinct from matter which we think that we can measure everything about. Ultimately these distinctions break down in the end. Philosophy... I don't know. I mean originally philosophy and science were not distinguished. Science was called natural philosophy. It was the application of reason to our sensory experiences. So yeah, I don't know. For me this tripartite categorization of these paths towards knowledge, it's not super useful.

L.B.: I could probably stay high in the clouds for too long. I'm going to try to get slightly more specific now. Why do you think gurus are such a big thing and why do you think people follow them? Why do people cling on to such specific stories about how reality works and feel certainty about it? In follow up I want to add; even in secular spirituality there seems to be a lot of dogma or certainty or like specific stories. Does it help or does it hurt?

C.E.: Yeah there's a lot that can be said and is said about gurus. The critique being that you're surrendering your own ability to discern truth to an outside authority. On the other hand,

what if you don't know truth and you're stuck in what you have thought was the truth and here's somebody who's gone places where you want to go and can be a guide to those realms and that there's no other way to get there, or that maybe no need to reinvent the wheel. Maybe there are guides who are drawing on a long lineage who can be of service. I don't have a strong opinion one way or the other. I'm like yeah; I could see it both ways. There's certainly been a lot of abuse of the role of guru in modern times. Sometimes I say that the age of the guru is over because the evolution of consciousness is so broadly based right now that no one person can hold all of that. I don't know. I find value in surrendering trust, like surrendering sometimes. When it's the right thing it's really natural. It's like if you want to learn carpentry and you run across a master carpenter and there's just no denying that this guy has knowledge at a highly refined degree that you really want and that there's a lot to learn from this person and they don't have to coerce you into it or dangle spiritual rewards and punishments in front of you to maneuver you into letting go of your doubt. It's a feeling of instant trust and there's no "wuh oh!" There's none of that, none of that. There's not that warning sign, that red flag. I don't know, I don't really want to dish out advice on how to pick a guru or not pick a guru and what to look for. Just because somebody has amazing spiritual knowledge or metaphysical insight doesn't mean that they're trustworthy in other realms. Would you trust the master carpenter with your money? Would you trust him with your money? Not necessarily, that kind of trust needs to develop in other ways. Would you trust him with matters of sex and power? Not necessarily. Just because he's highly evolved carpenter or highly evolved metaphysician doesn't mean that he's trustworthy in other ways. I think that that might be something to keep in mind. I mean there is something to be said for stepping into humility stepping into "I don't know" and willingness to learn from people who know and not to be like, "well, I'm going to make sure that I agree with it before I take it in." To open to somebody... there is something there and there are so many other unmet needs that can be projected onto that figure too, but this is kind of ordinary psychology and I don't think you need me to be telling you this. So, anyway, I just mentioned it. Fundamentally I'm not also going to untangle this whole issue of do you need a guru or don't you need a guru? Different wisdom traditions have different answers to that and different relationships to the guru. Again, martial arts, you have to go through a phase of doing whatever the sifu tells you to do and it doesn't make sense, for a while, that you should be doing this. He cannot explain. So there is a release into trusting somebody. I don't think that we want to conveniently discard that as giving away your power. I hope that I've introduced more confusion into this than you came in with.

L.B.: I very much appreciate that. To reiterate once again, I'm not looking for you to give me the answers or for you to tell me whether I should have a guru or if you should be my guru.  
(Laughs)

C.E.: I'm not in the guru business.

L.B.: (Laughs) Or if "oh sure" should be my guru or whatever, but I appreciate hearing somebody else's pondering on it. Often I'm just in my own brain pondering these things so thank you. Something that would be really helpful for me and I think a lot of people who are you could say "aggressively curious," is a lay of the land. What's on the menu of metaphysical perspectives? What are some of the potentially valid routes you could go down to explore this mystery of life? It's a really big question, I know, I don't expect you to be an expert in all traditions, but there are things like materialist science, atheism, nihilism, New Age, whatever that means, organized religions, ancestral traditions like shamanism or

Animism or paganism and more traditional spiritual paths maybe like Buddhism or Taoism and probably a bunch of others that I don't know about.

C.E.: Sure. Yeah, this is a question that does not have a generic answer. It depends on your own makeup and whatever you encounter that is given to you to follow. I think that all of these can be very useful paths of development and that maybe you'll recognize one when it comes to you. You'll just feel, "yeah, this one's for me." It may stay for you for a while and eventually it may no longer be for you. Yeah, I don't have any set of guidelines that this kind of person would be suited for this and that kind of person would be suited for that. I mean I might be able to come up with that if I thought about it, but those are kind of after the fact. I don't think that they're really going to be that useful as guidelines. I think that in your inquiry and exploration I can say that the process of searching for the right one for you will tug at reality and bring it to you and it won't seem like you found it, possibly. It may not seem like you found it. It may seem like you stumbled across it and that it had nothing to do with your search and in a way that's accurate. It's that your search brings to you what you're looking for, but what you really are looking for is outside of your existing purview. It may be something you didn't know to look for. It might be something off your list. You just gave me a list and it might be something off that list, but looking at everything on that list and trying to find it alerts that which is off the list to your search and it says, "oh here's a sincere person who's ready now." Ready maybe when she's exhausted everything on the list and given up and this one is not for me and that one isn't for me and these new people and these grouchy old Buddhists and this and that and none of it's for me and I tried, I looked, I searched. That is a state of helplessness that attracts help.

L.B.: You're like a piece to that.

C.E.: Yeah and really part of that piece is an induction into a living universe, an intelligent conscious universe that listens and watches and witnesses your search and that says we're not alone here. There's a feeling of rightness to what I just said isn't there?

L.B.: Yes.

C.E.: Yeah. There is a certain coherency to it, certain logic to it that people like us find aesthetically pleasing and there's also, you could say, a ring of truth or a resonance with a state of being that is so wanting to happen.

L.B.: Yeah, it feels... when you talk about that I don't even exactly know what you mean, but there's like a deep resonance of truth or longing or something. There's definitely something there.

C.E.: Mm hmm.