



A BETTER WAY

The Course's Nondualism:

Love Is a Law Without an Opposite

by Greg Mackie

A Course in Miracles is often described as “nondualistic.” Many compare it to the nondualistic Hindu philosophy known as Advaita Vedanta—it has even been called a “Christian Vedanta.” It seems to be a nearly universally held view that the Course and the great nondualistic sages of the world are saying the exact same thing in different words.

I agree that the Course is nondualistic and shares many commonali-

ties with other nondualistic paths. However, I also think there is at least one crucial difference between it and most other forms of nondualism out there—a difference that is the focus of this article. In a nutshell, the more conventional view of nondualism says that opposites (like good and evil, life and death, or spirit and body) are all manifestations of the One. The Course's nondualism, on the other hand, says that only the positive side of certain fundamental opposites is a manifestation of the One (God); the negative side is not a manifestation of God at all, but is instead solely a mistaken product of our own minds.

This difference may sound merely theoretical or academic, but in fact it has a profound practical impact on our view of God and how to live in the world. I personally find the Course's version of nondualism far more attractive, because in my view it is the only one that gives us a *totally* loving God, Whose nature provides a firm foundation for living in the world in a totally loving way.

What is nondualism?

Before discussing these different forms of nondualism, it may be helpful to give a generic definition. To get an idea of what nondualism is, let's start with a definition of its opposite, dualism. My dictionary defines *dualism* in several ways: “a theory that there are two basic substances or principles, as mind and body,” “the doctrine that there are two eternal principles, one good and the other evil,” “the belief that man embodies two parts, as body and soul.” As you can see, all of these definitions converge on a single idea: that reality is fundamentally *two*—there are two substances, principles, or parts, both real and contrary to each other.

Nondualism, then, is a view that rejects this idea of twoness—in fact, Eastern traditions often describe the nature of reality as “not two,” claiming that this phrasing is more accurate than saying that reality is “one.” That being said, for the purposes of this article I think the terms are close enough that we can regard “not two” and “one” as essentially the same. Nondualism is thus roughly equivalent to *monism*, which my dictionary defines as “any of various theories holding that there is only one basic substance or principle as the ground of reality or that reality consists of a single element.” In short, reality is fundamentally not two, but *one*.

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WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT SAYS

A Course in Miracles is a spiritual path. Its purpose is to train us to work miracles—to accept and extend to others the shifts in perception that awaken us to God. It consists of three volumes, which signify the three aspects of its program:

◆ Text : Through studying the teaching, the Course’s thought system first enters our minds.

◆ Workbook for Students: Through doing the practice, the Course’s thought system penetrates more and more deeply into our minds.

◆ Manual for Teachers: Through extending our healed perception to others, the Course’s thought system receives its final reinforcement and becomes the only thing in our minds.

The Course’s message is that the source of our suffering is not the world’s mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it is a realm of pure, changeless, unified spirit. This realization allows us to forgive the world’s apparent mistreatment of us by recognizing that it did not actually occur. And as we see this forgiveness come forth from us—see that we are capable of something genuinely loving and egoless—we gradually realize that we never defiled ourselves. Thus we awaken to the untouched innocence of our true nature.

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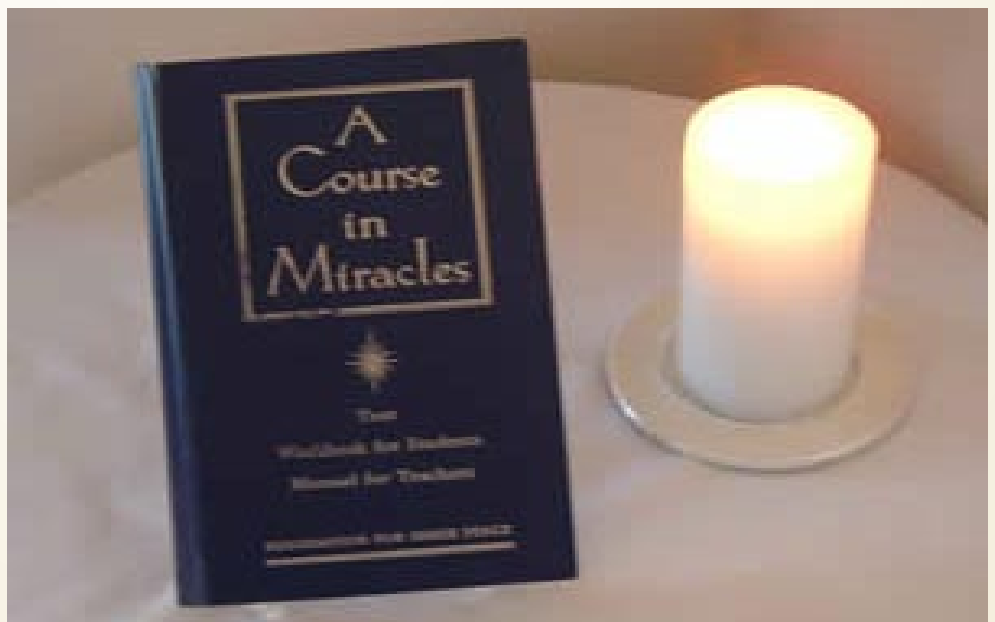
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Conventional understanding: Nondualism means that both sides of pairs of opposites are manifestations of the One

Before I go into more detail about this “conventional” understanding, I want to make clear that this isn’t meant to describe every version of nondualism out there. Given the many and varied nondualistic systems, whatever I say is bound to be incomplete. And given the tremendous depth and sophistication of these systems, I will gladly admit the possibility that I’m missing something significant. Nevertheless, what I’m describing here is an extremely common view, so common that the well-known transpersonal philosopher Ken Wilber identifies it with the “perennial philosophy.” He sums it up this way:

[T]he perennial philosophy (the esoteric or inner core of the wisdom religions) has always avoided any of those dualities—Heaven or Earth, masculine or feminine, infinite or finite, ascetic or celebratory—and centered instead on their union or integration (“nondualism”). And indeed, this union of Heaven and Earth, masculine and feminine, infinite and finite, ascending and descending, wisdom and compassion, was made explicit in the “tantric” teachings of the various wisdom traditions, from Neoplatonism in the West to Vajrayana in the East. And it is this nondual core of the wisdom traditions to which the term “perennial philosophy” most applies.¹

In this understanding of nondualism, all of the apparently dualistic opposites of existence—to Wilber’s list, one could add things like love and hate, good and evil, life and death, joy and pain, spirit and body—are really just different expressions of the unified One. Now, it is true that nondualistic systems also regard these opposites as illusions, but they are not completely divorced from reality. They are illusions in the sense that they don’t have reality *independent* of the Reality from which they spring, but they are also real in the sense that they are *expressions* of that Reality. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* speaks of this in a discussion of the great Advaita Vedanta philosopher Sankara:

According to Sankara, the concept of *brahman* in the Upanisads teaches that all particulars of the spatial or temporal world—all objects, thoughts, spirits, and gods (since gods are temporal, they are less than *brahman*)—are real only with respect to, only by virtue of being one with, *brahman*. Particulars that appear real to the observer independent of *brahman* do so because of an all-pervasive ignorance (*avidya*).²

All particulars are unreal in themselves, but real by virtue of being one with Brahman. This idea of opposites being illusions in themselves but real as manifestations of the One is also captured in a famous paradoxical statement attributed to the twentieth-century Indian sage Ramana Maharshi:

The world is illusory;
Brahman alone is real;
Brahman is the world.

The world of manyness and opposites is illusory; all things in it are appearances, and to believe that any of these appearances are real in and of themselves is ignorance. The only reality is the great One, Brahman. Yet at the same time, “Brahman is the world.” The world of illusion is a manifestation of Brahman and actually *is* Brahman. One way this is often expressed is that the world is God’s *lila*, or “play.” It has also been described metaphorically as waves on the ocean. Thus all of those opposites—life and death, love and hate, good and evil, spirit and body, and many more—are “not two,” but instead are equal aspects of the unified Reality from which they flow.

From this standpoint, privileging one side of a pair of opposites is regarded as dualistic. Wilber strongly emphasizes this point. He says that the very nature of enlightenment is the realization of our oneness with both sides: “[If enlightenment is] defined only as a realization of the timeless and unborn...then I must deny that Spirit is also the world of manifest Form, and thus I have a very dualistic Spirit.”³ To do anything but

affirm both sides is to “violate nonduality in a fundamental way.”⁴

Indeed, more than once a follower of one of the nondualistic schools has told me that certain teachings of the Course—like its view that the physical world is entirely unreal in every way—are dualistic. The argument usually goes something like this: To see physical form as utterly unreal and in no way a manifestation of God is essentially to make it a separate and antagonistic “reality,” somewhat like the old Manichean and Gnostic systems that posited a battle between a good power of pure spirit and an evil power that created matter. Nondualism, in the conventional view, means that you have to include *everything* we see as part of the great Oneness; therefore, any system that doesn’t regard everything as part of the great Oneness must be dualistic.

Course understanding: Nondualism means that only the positive side of certain fundamental pairs of opposites is a manifestation of the One

The Course, while it never uses the terms “nondual” or “nondualistic,” agrees with nondualistic systems in asserting that reality is fundamentally “not two,” but one. Yet it has a quite different way of applying this idea to the apparent dualities of this world. In the view described above, the One is beyond all opposites, yet also manifests both sides of the opposites in the world. But in the Course’s view, with certain fundamental pairs of opposites—including many of the ones I’ve already mentioned, like love and hate, good and evil, life and death, spirit and body—it is not true that both sides are manifestations of the One (which in the Course is God). Rather, only the positive side of these pairs is of God, while the negative side is not an aspect of Him at all. (I use the phrase “certain fundamental pairs of opposites” because this isn’t true of all the opposites we can think of; with many, like “hot” and “cold” or “up” and “down,” the Course would claim that *neither* is an aspect of Him.)

This is a difficult idea to grasp, because in the world we see, it seems that each side of a pair of opposites requires the existence of the other: “Here is opposition part of being ‘real.’” (W-pl.138.2:2). Every coin must have two sides. But from the Course’s standpoint, the reality of only one side is a matter of simple logic. It says that whatever is real or true is total: “Truth must be all-inclusive, if it be the truth at all” (W-pl.152.2:6). If this is so, then whatever is real or true cannot have a genuine opposite: “Truth cannot have an opposite. This can not be too often said and thought about” (W-pl.152.3:5-6). Therefore, if one side of a pair of apparent opposites is true, the other side must be false, because it contradicts an all-encompassing truth.

You can see this principle at work in Course quotes like the following:

A mind and body cannot both exist. Make no attempt to reconcile the two, for one denies the other can be real. If you are physical, your mind is gone from your self-concept, for it has no place in which it could be really part of you. If you are spirit, then the body must be meaningless to your reality. (W-pl.96.3:4-7)

Either all things die, or else they live and cannot die. No compromise is possible. (W-pl.163.6:3-4)

You see the flesh or recognize the spirit. There is no compromise between the two. If one is real the other must be false, for what is real denies its opposite. (T-31.VI.1:1-3)

Although you are one Self, you experience yourself as two; as both good and evil, loving and hating, mind and body. This sense of being split into opposites induces feelings of acute and constant conflict, and leads to frantic attempts to reconcile the contradictory aspects of this self-perception. You have sought many such solutions, and none of them has worked. The opposites you see in you will never be compatible. But one [truly] exists. (W-pl.96.1:1-5)

If you have the gift of everything, can loss be real? Can pain be part of peace, or grief of joy? Can fear and sickness enter in a mind where love and perfect holiness abide? Truth must be all-inclu-

sive, if it be the truth at all. Accept no opposites and no exceptions, for to do so is to contradict the truth entirely. (W-pl.152.2:3-7)

As I've mentioned, only the positive side of these opposites is a manifestation of God. Thus, there is *only* good, *only* life, *only* spirit, *only* joy, *only* peace, *only* holiness—all else is pure illusion generated solely by our own minds in our mistaken attempt to separate from God. Thus we can see that the Course's view is quite different in this respect from other nondualistic systems. The Course never says anything like "God is the world." (Since God created only Heaven, the physical world cannot be real.) The Course never calls this world God's "play"; instead, it says that the world is *our* cruel game, played with "sharp-edged children's toys" for the purpose of delaying our homecoming to God (see W-pll.4.5). God is in no way responsible for things like hate, evil, death, and bodies: He is a Being of pure Love, and therefore these things cannot be part of Him or His creation at all.

From this standpoint, privileging one side of these pairs of fundamental opposites is not dualistic at all—in fact, it is exactly what the Course *wants* us to do. It says, "It is essential that you realize your thinking will be erratic until a firm commitment to one or the other is made" (T-3.II.1:5), and makes clear that because we are of God, only a firm commitment to God's side is really possible. Enlightenment in Course terms is exactly what Wilber warns against above: the realization of our oneness *only* with the timeless and unborn, which logically requires denying the reality of the world of manifest form. From this perspective, then, it is regarding both sides as manifestations of God that is dualistic (though the Course never uses that term). The Course's nondualism means that you have to include only things God created as part of Him, and let go of all the rest.

Love is a law without an opposite

Why bring up this distinction between these two forms of nondualism? I'm sure some students are probably wondering if I'm doing this just to put down systems other than the Course. But in fact, I have a deep admiration and respect for the great nondual systems of the world. They have many things in common with the Course, and all of them have produced saints and sages who have been great lights to the world. I hope, then, that this discussion will be seen as a loving exploration of diverse views rather than denigration of other paths. With that in mind, I will list three reasons why I think the distinction between the conventional and Course views of nondualism is important.

First, recognizing the difference is important simply for the sake of clarity. After years of studying the Course and learning about other nondual systems (both through extensive reading and through actually practicing Zen Buddhism years ago), I've become convinced that these really are very different versions of nondualism. If that's so, then it's crucial to be able to tell the difference between them, in order to avoid muddying the waters in our dialogues with each other. Without such clarity, it can be easy to get into arguments that stem from unrecognized different understandings of nondualism. As we saw above, what's "dualistic" in one understanding is "nondualistic" in the other. But if we recognize that we are talking about different understandings here, confusion can be avoided. Whichever version of nondualism we find more convincing, at least we can be clear on what we agree and disagree about.

Second, these different understandings lead to significantly different views of God. While many people find the view of God that conventional nondualism gives us appealing, I have to admit that I'm not attracted to it. It gives us a (usually impersonal) God with both loving and unloving elements, a God that generates a world of opposites in constant battle. God's "play" *is* a cruel game; as the Buddha's First Noble Truth says, "Life is suffering." Yes, the Buddha and other nondual sages also give us the good news that it's possible to liberate ourselves from that suffering, but only a rare elite have actually done that completely. The rest of us—rocks, trees, animals, unenlightened humans like me—are condemned to suffer for eons until that great liberation is finally accomplished. If the world is suffering and "Brahman is the world," how loving can Brahman really be?

The Course's God, in contrast, is not responsible for those battling opposites. He plays no cruel games.

Nothing He manifests produces suffering. Instead, He is a Being of pure Love, without a hint of anything else; “Love is a law without an opposite” (W-pl.127.3:7). Because of this, I find the Course’s version of nondualism far more appealing than the conventional form. It gives us an *entirely* loving God, with all positive qualities in infinite measure and no negative qualities of any kind. What could be more desirable than a Love that is radically “not two,” a Love that is literally all there is? This is a God I can love without reservation.

Finally, the version of nondualism one accepts has major ramifications for how to live in the world. Another thing that troubles me about conventional nondualism—especially in some of its modern forms—is that it can easily lead to unloving behavior. Now, don’t get me wrong; I’m not saying that conventional nondualism *must* lead to that. In fact, the great nondualistic paths of the world all have ethical norms that are considered essential to the path (like the Buddhist Precepts), and these paths have produced people of great love and compassion (like the Dalai Lama). As with the Course, the ultimate goal of these paths is egolessness, and one who has truly achieved that goal cannot help but become a beacon of true love to the world.

That being said, the idea that the One is beyond all distinctions and manifests good and evil alike leaves the door open to a blurring or even elimination of ethical distinctions in this world. This is especially apparent in the modern form of nondualism often called “Neo-Advaita.” An article in the magazine *What Is Enlightenment?* addresses this unfortunate trend by quoting a number of noted Neo-Advaita teachers on the nondual view of ethics and morality:⁵

Tony Parsons: “[Hitler], like everyone else, played out the character that consciousness chose.... Once awakening happens, it is seen that there is no such thing as right or wrong.”

Wayne Liquorman (speaking of all the deaths at the World Trade Center on 9/11): “[F]rom the point of view of the bacteria that got to feed on those bodies, it certainly wasn’t a tragedy, so who are we to judge what’s right or wrong?”

Esther Veltheim: “What one culture sees as bad, another finds quite acceptable. You may say they are wrong, but who made you the morals police?”

The Marquis de Sade: “Similar to the concepts of virtue and vice, [justice and injustice] are purely local and geographical; that which is vicious in Paris turns up, as we know, a virtue in Peking.... All universal moral principles are idle fantasies.”

Charles Manson: “If all is One, then nothing is wrong.”

Okay, I pulled a fast one there. The last two quotes aren’t from Neo-Advaita teachers. But they *are* in the *What Is Enlightenment?* article, to underscore the point that article is making: The ethical views of these teachers are virtually indistinguishable from those of some of history’s most notorious sociopaths. While I’m sure these teachers aren’t themselves sociopathic, their views certainly don’t encourage a commitment to love as an absolute positive value that entails refraining from thoughts, words, and actions that are unloving. To see any real difference between being loving and being unloving is to see something as *wrong* (a word the Course uses 77 times, not including the many similar words like “wrong-mindedness,” “mistake,” and “error”). In this version of nondualism, to see something as wrong is hopelessly dualistic and means you just don’t get it.

In fact, Veltheim claims that love is not a positive virtue at all:

When it is said that “God is Love,” the world love signifies neutrality. It has nothing to do with the opposite of hate. God is just another word for neutrality, and neutrality denotes “not helping or supporting either of two opposing sides....”

...[T]here is no point, no purpose, and no meaning....

You see if you understand your True nature IS neutrality, caring and making things matter is really missing the mark.

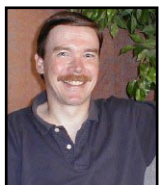
This material illustrates perfectly the difference between Course nondualism and conventional nondualism (at least the Neo-Advaita variety). In Course nondualism, God *is* Love and nothing else. “Hate must be the opposite of love” (M-7.4:7), and God is wholly on the side of love, which alone is real. His love means that He cares for us. “You are His care because He loves you....His concern and care for you are limitless” (T-5.VII.1:5, T-15.VIII.1:5). And He has given each of us the holy purpose of caring for *each other*: “And to each [person] has He allowed the grace to be a savior to the holy ones especially entrusted to his care” (T-31.VII.8:3). But in Veltheim’s nondualism, God is *neutrality*. He doesn’t really love *or* hate, for to do either would be to take a side. He doesn’t care for us and doesn’t want us to care about anyone or anything. Veltheim calls this “Love,” but what a strange kind of love! Imagine someone saying to you “I love you,” and then clarifying it by saying, “Well, I actually mean that I’m totally neutral toward you. I really don’t care. After all, there is no purpose or meaning to anything so you don’t really matter to me.” Would you feel loved by this person?

As I’ve said, the great nondual sages don’t travel this cold, amoral path (and I should add that more than a few Course teachers and students interpret the Course in a Neo-Advaita way), but it is an easy path to slip onto if your very vision of reality is of God the Great Neutrality. To me, the beauty of the Course’s nondualism is this: The fact that God Himself is *only* loving gives us a firm anchor in reality for a life that is a true *imitatio Dei*, a life of pure love. True, the Course never gives us a list of behavioral norms, but it does constantly call us to live a life in which all of our thoughts, words, and actions are reflections of the purely loving nature we share with God. To use the list of characteristics of God’s teachers (see M-4), the advanced teacher of this path lives a life of perfect trust, honesty, tolerance, gentleness, joy, defenselessness, generosity, patience, faithfulness, and open-mindedness. This person is far more appealing to me than the one who is “beyond” right and wrong, and too detached to even care.

This, then, is the great benefit that the Course’s nondualism offers us: It gives us a vision of reality in which everything—God’s nature, our own true nature, and the lives we lead when we let our own true nature shine forth—is pure, unadulterated love, the endless manifestation of the glorious truth that love is a law without an opposite.

• • •

1. Ken Wilber, *The Essential Ken Wilber: An Introductory Reader* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), p. 52.
2. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “monism.”
3. *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World* (Boston: Shambhala, 2006), p. 236.
4. *Integral Spirituality*, p. 237.
5. All of the block quotes that follow are from Jessica Roemischer, “Who’s Transforming Anyway? Stacey Heartspring Encounters the Post-Modern Craze of Neo-Advaita,” *What Is Enlightenment?* Issue 34 (September-December 2006), pp. 146-165. This is a reprint of an article that originally appeared in Issue 22 (Fall/Winter 2002). The Manson quote is from the new introduction by Tom Huston.



E-mail your comments to the author at: greg@circleofa.org

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