

EVE AND ADAM THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

by

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OVERVIEW

of

Eve and Adam Through the Looking Glass



Preamble:

Much of the theory of this Institute is in this essay. It summarises the reflections of its author who wrote without active research into what the experts say. The thinking in this institute is that people should think things through for themselves. As it happens, subsequent study corroborated much that is in these pages.

Time spent in reflection is to be encouraged in these stressful, speeded up days. The mentality for it can enhance practical wisdom, a quality to be prized. It can help identify realistic plans and reshape behaviour patterns and much besides that is in line with worthwhile purposes of society and the way we live our own lives.

The habit of thinking over matters of relevance to one's personal life and that of one's society is a primary aim of western-style meditation, including the habit of challenging one's own habit of thought. Lateral thinking, rumination, care in coming to conclusions, peace of mind, and more, are part of a mix that makes of reflection an activity of value.

It was an axiom of Anglo-Saxon culture that a man should fight to the death to uphold the right of another to hold principles with which he totally disagrees. This cornerstone is under attack partly through an indifference to this hard-won freedom. It is an aim of this institute that it in a small way can help restore generally tolerant open-mindedness.

Introduction:

Are there ways in which the validity of principles and understandings can be curated by oneself so that we can live better-adjusted lives?

A general summary of assumptions and instincts gives a snapshot - if a fuzzy one - of a communally shared mental landscape, including fundamental ideas. The concepts arising from them permeate the everyday world. There is much that is odd in what we believe. Some ruling ideas can be adjusted to advantage. Recent findings of science surely ought to affect deep beliefs. Reassessment leads on to possible improvements over a range of issues in private lives and in societies - assuming however, as always, that the best decisions have the best outcomes and repercussions - *NB* it is said that 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions' and, doubtless also, the road leading to heaven is thronged with evil-doers. Whether they get past the Pearly Gates is another matter - The appendix to this essay has a check-list of innate drives of men and women that create or influence our systems of thought. Their *fons et origo* derives more from convenience and outdated imperatives than objectivity. This plays out in, political systems, faiths and perceptions of ourselves. Once a sufficient list of shared human characteristics and traits is itemised - not a thing often if ever till now done - and seen in aggregate with its warts, special pleadings, illusions, and so forth, a re-evaluation of beliefs becomes more within reach.

Many of the inmost drives of humankind are taken for granted without considering the intricacies or the interlocking ideas behind conclusions in systems of belief in religion, spirituality, politics or daily life. What is this basic thinking? Does - and why does - this mosaic often tend to skewed conclusions?

Some ideas in these pages are well known, some are controversial. It is hard to know in advance who will think what about which of them. No overall theory needs to be embraced but an idea here and there may twitch an antenna. An angel can be in a detail. An unobtrusive element can turn out to be the kernel of a big idea which needs only exposition and reflection to light up a whole landscape. The journey is more important than any arrival in a scary *cul-de-sac*. We can lose our way if we don't know where we are going.

Pointers, rather than encyclopaedic analysis, to the way forward are proposed in these pages, some as pilot schemes. Observations *en route* about life may be signposts to help reorient stragglers. Proposed alterations in thinking or habits may be marginal but from acorns do oak trees grow - a variant of the '1% rule' that '*small compounded improvements lead to significant overall gains.*'



Conclusion:

A brake should be applied to an autopilot journey may prevent us haring off into darker passageways of thinking and codes of behaviour. A winnowing, clarifying process is recommended before construction of theories built on more solid foundations. Many ways in which we think individually and as a society are not fully appreciated. It is a painstaking job to identify and evaluate them. It normally goes by default. The barrack rooms are stuffed with hair-splitters flexed to gum up fresh prospects.

This journey of ideas is accessible, open to everyone. Its lodestar is common sense. Its lure is personal contentment. It can be a fun ride or a useful intellectual adventure or both. Questions rather than answers are par for a course in this quest to unravel a riddle in a blur. In all, it is less a blueprint for any specific action than an ingredient to re-jig thinking in the engine rooms that make us and society tick.

A spot of spring-cleaning beckons so as to buff up some of the mustier niches in our minds, even turn them into vitrines.

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THE THEORY OF THE INSTITUTE OF REFLECTION

EVE AND ADAM THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

By B. J. Glass

A meal of spaghetti has intermingling strands of the stuff. If we don't like the taste of a meal, do we chuck away what's on the plate or inspect each strand to weed out the potential cuckoos in the pasta...? If a tasteless ingredient permeates our concoction, will a scientist pour its sauce into a test tube and go to work, Bunsen burner in hand, perhaps with a gourmet or a sniffer dog twitching their nostrils to detect duff aromas?

The celebrity chef, Nigella Lawson, maintains that marmite and spaghetti go together well. Scrumptious or not, full marks to her for daring to think out of the tin.

All aboard for a Mystery Tour of the spaghetti junction in our minds, strand by strand of our thinking, inspecting ingredients collected in the mental equivalent of a petri dish. Let's go see if our basic ideas match the most advisable and the most justifiable codes for behaviour for our purposes, especially practical purposes; if not, what if anything will we do about it - apart, that is, from keeping the marmite well clear of the spaghetti.

Are we hard-wired not to focus on fundamental ideas? Are we armour-plated with an arrogance the more potent because it is unconscious? Is there a kink in our brain or thought process or in what may seem a Fool's Errand in the quest that tends to shy away from focussing on the wellsprings of our thoughts? Not worth considering them (*yawn-yawn*) are they, even if they make us, and in turn humanity, tick??? Why ruin a good meal with the same old chatter; we've heard it all before...!

"We're here because we're here because we're here!"

"Well, we can't have been just 'dumped' here, can we?"

"Well, YOU can! Pass the marmite, be a dear! And, while you're at it, a crust 😞!"

WHY and WHO are we, etc? - the three letters, 'ETC' encompass the biggest question, including the questions that we don't know we should be asking. Okay, luminaries have had a go at them for millennia or three. We - that means, you and me - haven't. Not guilty, guv! That does not mean that we need to be original in every aspect of our thinking. The producer of *Naked Attraction*, on a UK main TV channel at prime time in which a far-from-blind date is chosen by a singleton faced with a choice of possible partners in the buff, must have thought he was breaking new ground but seventeenth century Dukes of Muscovy selected Tsaritas from among a hundred daughters of the nobility lined up naked for their delectation. If romance is dead, it did not die recently! There may be 'nothing new under the sun!' but nuances of thinking need not be mere recapitulation. Knowing how far to legitimately go is the key. Only a joke figure thinks that he is omnipotent as, saying his prayers, he thinks that he is talking to himself. A few decades in our allotted span of life is our chance for a stab at the key questions about our existence but most of us gave it up as a bad job when adolescent and got on with the job of living our lies.

No harm, though, returning to a subject we'd thought done and dusted when we were finding our way into maturity, and now looking at it with refreshed eyes. It isn't a difficult or intellectually challenging job; any of us can do it. Many do so and many, again, of us will have arrived at the conclusions that come out below for themselves. The suggestion here is that we **should** do it, both for ourselves and for society. And if in the lines below recapitulations occur or places where some readers have worked it all out for themselves, the writer does not know that. Building blocks have to be laid even if the onlooker has seen plenty of bricks in his time.

Devotees, chill out, there is no need to junk any cherished faith. Pay it the compliment of looking at it head-on. If its fundamental ideas emerge unscathed, their foundation is more solid than solidified. Can we let in breezes of fresh air, please, to blow away the stale smell of yesterdays' unappetising meal even if - as per the scene depicted in a TV advert - (*Cue in strains of discordant music*) - you have gone 'Nose Blind'.

We hardly realise that we are in a Sensurround (it encompasses feelings and sensations) of a mental landscape replete with the monoliths in our minds of the Teachings with which we were made familiar since our toddling days. We do not have to genuflect to them. We do not need an approach brought down from Mount Sinai or chiselled from tablets of stone in foundries nearby Sinai, as it now may appear to the dispassionate assessor of that actual story. How can we say for absolutely sure that the Tablets were celestial in origin? This generation surely is spared need of boiling down gold to make dubious images for purposes of undue reverence. The creators of the Golden Calf have been given a rough ride in biblical history; were we around at that time, ratiocination might have played more part in grappling with their ideas. A few precepts will survive; Victors' Justice though lurks to entrap us into quiescence. The Teachings may be magnificent but that does not mean that we should take them all on trust. What is true of the Golden Calf holds good with a range of our totems from mammon to meditation and throughout many of societies' memes and norms.

How would an extra-terrestrial traveller who is denuded of earthling cultural baggage view the customs and beliefs of mankind? Such a question puts into a nutshell one aspect of the thinking of the philosopher Gurdjieff. Fantasise for a moment about an ET-like humanoid warming its scaly paws round a Martian volcano. It is cogitating the custom of making sacrificial offerings. It's a short step to conjuring up a picture of it slurping '*Madness! There's now't so queer as human folk! Sacrificing the Lord's creatures on an altar is more calculated to appeal to a sadistic Devil.*' 😊

Thinking out of the tin is not easy if wallowing inside it. When it comes to the ideas in this paper, gripe about any idea in particular, shoot it down; that is par for the course of most theorising adventures. This theory is not a sum of its parts. An arguable point here and there may not knock out the theory as a whole. Neither it's props nor it's goalposts are fixed. The process is a good deal of the message.

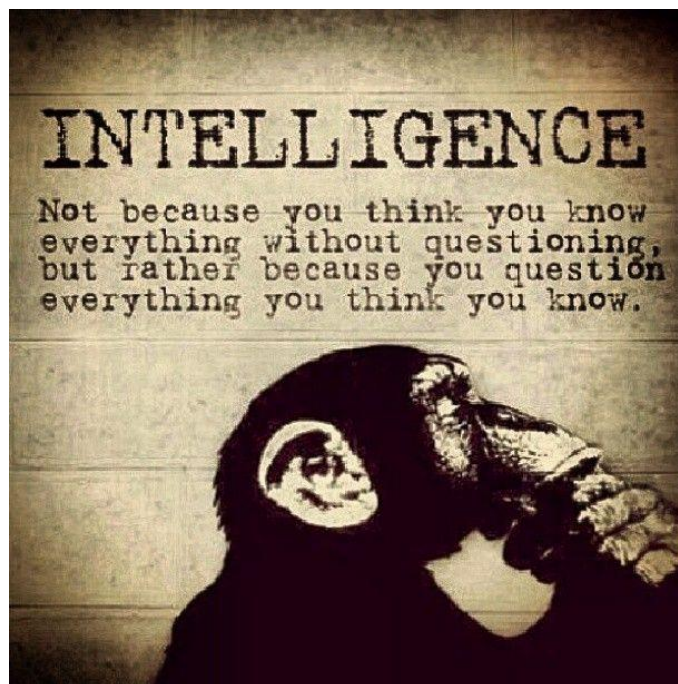
The spaghetti strand or the cuckoo, that is the first question. It leads onto the others..

With reference to the title below, please note that the labelling of categories in this *Pseudo=Philosophico=Retractatus (P=P=R)* is on an arcane system whose rationale may not be immediately apparent.

SECTION ONE

Some initial concepts for VAOM thinking....

- Language can confuse or clarify basic thought.
- **Practical wisdom** is of crucial importance in life and can be enhanced by practice
- Mental tics, psychical blocks and culture can divert from a personal True North.
- A clear road map may not indicate the straightest journey to True North.
- To fix a problem, sort out first what exactly it is.
- The morality of an Age may not be a wisdom for all Ages OR for all age groups.
- Shifting sands risk shifting edifices, be they in a mind or the construction trade.
- Lift operators go to the top floor but are privy mainly to what goes on in the lift.
- Reach for only those stars that are within reach.

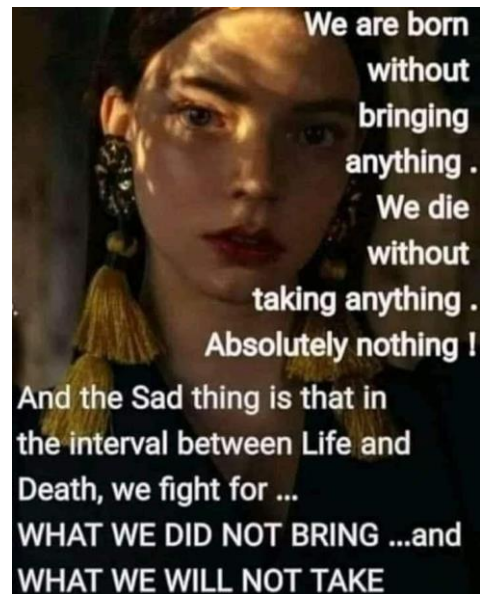


Glossary:

True North - An ideal state that is unlikely to exist on earth as far as human beings are concerned, in which the aims and best interests of each individual and of society, and of societies, as a whole are in perfect synch.

SECTION TWO: A CENTRAL QUESTION

'Defining' a BLUR



REMEMBER ME

Epitaph on the Tomb of Adam Harting, d. 1842 (or A.N.Other)

Remember me, as you pass by

As you are now so once was I

As I am now, you will be

So be prepared to follow me!

Scrawled beneath the above epitaph was the cod reproach:

Sir, to follow thee is my intent | But you left no word which way you went!

What we want is not necessarily what we get.

We tell ourselves and others great stories about ourselves; are they as evanescent as the morning dew or will they go the way of all puffs of smoke? No, no, we can't settle for that dichotomy, can we! There has to be something more to exactly who we are. We can't have it that these narratives, so painstakingly fashioned over decades, lose their meaning when their parameters - a fixed point in time and living memories - vanish

and our version of our unique selves is snuffed out as if we're animals. Will our version of our tale be as lost as our consciousness of it? Who, or what, is going whither?

There is hardly any situation in which human, let alone, animal, reactions are a 'first'. Everyone's reactions have already been experienced by someone else, so it seems, though perhaps they were triggered in different strengths, or different prejudices and/or by different chemicals in the body. When reportage of what we feel or think is much the same as that reported by other people and we use the same terminology, does that mean we should be beguiled by the words into thinking that we have experienced the same sensations or thoughts?

Any claim on 'uniqueness' in this text, for example, is that, it could be argued, no other replication exactly may have come about. Is a small, real difference and can apply to any text. Its subject matter is open to all, its conclusions might be those of anyone interested. It is - as is the way of most texts related to objective or profound matters - shorn of the individualistic touch, aside perhaps from an occasional quirk. Whatever sensations the author may be feeling, no matter how the ideas were, or may have been, born out of his past cogitation, they do not, or should not, obtrude. Almost all hint of his personality except that of his thought processes hopefully are absent from the written words. His individualism is subsumed under that of the communities' linguistic umbrella in much as a soldier or a patriot subordinates his will to that of his chosen authority and does so before specific issues are in front of him to decide a course of action.

Authors only glancingly touch on universalities about the human condition; Novelists, eschewing the didactic, tend to mention eternal verities almost *en passant* and even then often as they apply to a particular society. For example, Turgenev, in *Home of the Gentry*, comments '*Woe to the heart that has not loved in youth!*'. The idea, whether or not true, applies beyond Russian upper crust of society in the eighteenth century about which he was writing. In general Turgenev's acute observations on character do not feed on the shared wellsprings of all human experience. Autobiography tends to focus on personal themes. Catherine the Great writes to Voltaire: '*You philosophers are fortunate. Your medium is paper, and paper is always patient. I, Empress that I am, have to write on the sensitive skin of human beings.*' It would be good to think that great minds actuated to write on universals would produce much the same read-out of meaning, if with variation in expression, but the central questions for us all often tend to get lost in the stories.

A similarity in sensations or thoughts in different individuals is among the things that allow us to relate to one another and it enables us to recognise how other people react. A different starting point in each of us and our differences in experience can be masked by shared language. Is it that accuracy in language in reporting feelings is not up to the job of defining an exact personal 'take' on the world? In what constitutes the difference between roughly equivalent landscapes or cityscapes of a mind? Is it a difference in atmosphere which is hard to define but still makes for a marked difference? Perhaps our belief in the degree to which we can introspect our way into the mind of another person may be more shared by us all than the actual feelings or reactions themselves?

Are individuals little more than a sum of all their physically-based reactions which perhaps no one else senses in exactly the way that they do? Individuals may be in a sense slightly different individuals at different times and in different contexts. If there is some connecting thread running through any given personality over time, is it transmissible? Is it to do with a given perspective, where one is in a particular physical or emotional or mental state? Is it to do with the way pheromones do affect feelings? Is there 'something' else that goes to the essence of who one is? Is it a form of energy or vibration at the core of all of us? What of the unpredictable? The differences in time and place may be just a small element in the overall picture of our identity?

There is much predictability in all this, but what of the unpredictable, the difference in places being apparently just a small element?

One traditional answer is that there is an essence or a soul. A soul? What is that? It seems a blurred idea. Why not call a spade a spade? At our actuating core is a ...Blur. 'Blur' seems not entirely satisfactory? The word, 'Blur', does not bring into play a stack of reassuring concepts. It is almost undignified. We prefer 'soul' but whether Blur or soul, is it possible to get meaningfully beyond those terms or their synonyms or are they at the point of the limitation of concepts and language? The Almighty in some traditions as in the Jewish Sefira appears in a dense, impenetrable cloud. Should we simply give up on the question of trying to work out what is our essential being as a riddle impossible to solve? Much thought has been lavished on our soul giving rise to many writings, philosophical, religious, metaphysical, and speculative - not that they all agree with each other. Imagine them writing with such passion about ...a 'Blur'.

Is it of necessity - not that we may wish to admit it - that the nature of Soul if it exists is blurred from our present vision in a way that is comparable to a putative Afterlife? The fact is, it no doubt has to be like that. If we knew with total certainty that an Afterlife awaits us in any form at all and that includes all the permutations as we conceive them, reincarnation, heavenly bliss, hellfire and the rest, then our whole prescription for living our lives as we do could be undermined. We would need, if we have any sense, to rethink every action. What we do in our daily lives would change. If Hitler knew for absolutely sure that his personal survival would be a dead letter or worse throughout all of eternity as a result of his actions on earth, it might have given him pause for thought. On the other side of the coin, what if Celestial Justice was known factually to differ from human morality? We might be able to argue at least to ourselves that we are given a License to Kill more authorised than anything given to James Bond by his spymaster 'Q'. One man's meat is another man's poison. To give an *outré* example, Oscar Homolka, the Austrian actor, asked if he'd like to go to Paradise, replied: "*Who wants to sit with your bare arse on a damp cloud?*" There may be a reason for our incomprehension of what lies in the great beyond, a reason for our not knowing the facts of the matter, which passes our understanding. Or there may be some further clues awaiting discovery in the field of, say, astrophysics; all that we can realistically say is that we do not have the facts and have scant basis at present for thoroughgoing speculation.

Can we trust ourselves to come up with acceptable answers if we do not bother to give them the time of day to the best of our abilities and probe the basis of our beliefs about ourselves for ourselves?

Do we read more into The Blur than strictly entitled for reasons that basically are not to do with the Blur itself but because of our needs, wishes and dispositions? The Temple in Jerusalem was twice destroyed and each time the soul-searching as to the cause produced 'acceptable' explanations such as internecine divisions among believers. Let us at least face up to the fact that we do not know the Truth and what we do know is that very many of us do want to know the Truth. The understanding that each of us has about the nature of our soul may be masked from us and for reasons that we cannot know until better evidence, actual positive proof indeed, appears, if it ever does. We may not now be able - and by design - to plumb the depths of our spiritual entities.

Perhaps a favoured few may fully see through to the varnished truth of it all and, if so, straight away, the purity of their inner vision is subject to the adulterating charge of arrogance. The fact that we may not wish to admit this possibility, and leave cherished gurus with their standing in our minds, is not 100% persuasive. What eludes us is certainty, a thing that our minds, constituted as they are, crave.

Apology to believers in any Faith: Of course, none of this is to say that the Good Lord by whatever name does not exist. It easily can be taken that her, his or it's Majesty is greater, greater and still greater by far, far, furthest than the most compelling, the most beautiful and powerful, of that which even holiest prose has to offer. But that is not the point at issue here. None of this means to say that there are not certainties but let us explore what they might be. *(This is gone into in greater detail below).*

The question is posed to an open mind: what lies behind who we think we are?

What are YOUR ideas?

Are all blurs the same? Can we define a Blur?

SECTION THREE: ANOTHER BLUR

Preliminary observations on our ESSENCE (see also further sections below)

Seek, and ye may find?

- *Modified Scriptural saying*

What are we? Don't many of us want to know? If not, why not?

What is it that 'has gone' when we die, given that the corporeal body from one instant to the next, is all but identical? Is it something to do with this essence of ourselves?

What follows - obvious in places perhaps - seems by enlarge to be almost as far as we can go by using our faculties and common sense in answering the above question. The more one a problem is seen in general terms, the closer one can get to a truth. There are complex theories galore into which to burrow but a purpose of the theory herein is to be a sort of watchtower from which we can look out without 'great' thoughts, which there are in such abundance but which do not all coincide, telling us what to think.

We tend to think that there is one predominating aspect of ego; that we're a unified or cohesive entity. 'I' and 'I' may read alike for good reason. As if there is one answer to what is 'I'. At the least, different parts of our thinking and our feelings come to the fore at different times. When we deal with someone on a day-to-day basis, do we throw into our every conversational and emotional reaction to them all that he has done or thought in the past and devoid of any mood etc that we might experience at the time?

In many ways we are much the same as one another, doing what needs to be done in the stream of consciousness, usually not stopping to think much about whatever is underpinning our assumptions, including about ourselves. For one thing, if we stopped to analyse ourselves as far as we can, we would not be able to give all our attention to whatever practical goal we are concentrating on. For another, the mere fact of trying to work out what we are. and thinking about it, in part takes us away from uncovering that which we are looking to find; in other words, the process of thinking about our thinking is separating us from being exactly what we would have been without doing it. The mere fact of trying to think out what one is experiencing as 'I' and attempting to be an observer of 'I' is cutting a line through the holistic experience.

We can be prevented from being who we are *au fond* by what we do. Yet what we do can become like a second skin, turning us into what we are. The present in this process constantly is pushing away the past...even if the past is continually acting on us whether we are conscious of it or not. It is partly that we are at odds with ourselves and partly that two truths can run on well enough together till a context where different streams (of thought) collide; an instance of 'the threshold point' (see *appendix*) where mutually contradictory thought processes are thrown into sharp relief.

If the streams of thought are in deep anchorage, sometimes wondrous circumlocutions including to oneself are prayed in aid to 'rescue' one from the charge of inconsistency. 'Revenge' for instance can be by another another name; the thinking of the Christian and those subscribing to what they see as the lore, let alone the laws, of karma see a vindication of their beliefs when a perpetrator of evil - in their definition - bites the dust.

In much traditional meditation technique, it is enjoined on us to try to rid ourselves of circumstantial and/or emotional blockages to being ourselves. We concentrate firstly on fire-fighting, stopping thoughts extraneous to self-discovery. 'What is left once this is done' is a question we are looking at. But the question may be misconceived, as is discussed later in these pages. Our concern surely should lie with the baby, not the bathwater; it does not have to be assumed in this case as a given that a baby is some form of ethereal bubble.

There is Inward and Outward perspective; seeing the world steadily and/or seeing it whole. The plane seen by an bystander on the ground and from the cockpit has much in common but the experience in any given moment is a very different one - more so than the terminology used. Examples are legion: the husband seen by the wife, or by shareholders in his business; the ego in tranquillity, and/or in action; the still, small inner voice; the memories evoked by mood and by circumstance; and the public perception; the detached observer of what is going on in the mind; the ongoing essence that links our past with our present and our future; the ego of the moment, of the day...and the feelings shared by everyone engaged in the process of trying to sift what lies at our core - but feelings that we cannot know if we share even if we describe them in the same way; thoughts that are unique to us at a point in time and space. It can be so with fantasies that we are surprised to find others share. Without our common human reference frame a human being himself or herself would look like an incredibly strange, even disturbing, creature.

Then there is a perspective according to some Teachers, one that is independent of our physicality; a sort of non-ego ego; that and more all comes before speculations of what might await us in an After-life or might have been there in a Pre-life. Maybe our essence is not any of these things and the moment one focuses on one or another aspect of our essence is, in itself, what divides us from a holistic encompassing of what we are. We are not just what we consciously think though, if so, it may be closer to the truth to say that 'we are what we thinking and feeling'. If wracked by pain we hardly like to say that we are at the time nothing but that sensation. What we 'are' presumably includes thoughts so deep down that we do not know them or when they first come to our conscious mind or when they surface only in dreams.

In this, we are similar in some respects to the animal kingdom. Animals seem unaware of themselves, surprised by their reflection in mirrors, 'throwing themselves' into what they do, not being 'observers' of themselves, impelled by their deep, and only, prompts.

Essence might be like seeds or potentialities. It might be not so much 'a thing in itself' but like an instrument or machine awaiting some external stimulus to fire up one of its components?

The thinker about his or her essence is brought back to a Blur, as defined above. The face of the Deity may be known to some of us - they at least like to think - but is our own inner deity, as we may call it, known in detail to us? True, with the advance of

science the seat of some emotions and thinking processes are circumscribed in their own locus in the body which is sometimes the brain or sometimes the heart, and so forth. What of the originating kernel or inspiration of it all? What of the detail? We see the world around us through our own lens or categorising framework and make sense of what we see in terms of our perceptions, and define these in linguistic terms. We think we know what they are. When describing people we often take refuge in talking of circumstantial details of their life rather than summarising their disposition. In the rough tool that is our language, we can talk of gradations of the primary emotions like 'love' or 'anger' though a quantification of them or talk of the strength with which they assail us largely eludes us, hence the efforts of poets to define their nebulous core. The question of what is located in this nebulous core has as yet no generally accepted answer and hardly a hypothesis to accurately explain it away. To say of it, for instance, that it is 'not there' or 'nowhere' may imply an explanation of sorts but also it may seem like a device that we work up to fob ourselves off from a straightforward peer into it. If, as often, we are struck by a clear thought or a resolved idea about anything, we know what it is...don't we? Where is its exact corresponding location in physical terms? A particular name, say, eludes our memory - is there a particular niche in our minds that is slippery? Is that particular name shorn of enough grappling hooks so that it cannot easily be attached to us or absorbed in our mind unless by dint of particularly strenuous effort? This supports the idea that what actuates us at its kernel, its *fons et origo*, is in an unseen world. Can we therefore say that we can be conscious of everything except what makes us conscious? What, surely, we cannot say with certainty is 'Stuff and nonsense! Unless I can see it with my own eyes, it doesn't exist!' The Blur begins in the world of the intangible and, if so, it is a respectable scientific endeavour to inspect the unseen world, by whatever linguistic name it is given, from godhead to ghost, from Soul to Blur. 'Somewhere' it is 'there'.



Many people make the assumption that everyone has a soul and some people think that there may be a communal or community soul. Many think that there is a universal soul and we are destined in an afterlife to return to its fold. Some people think that all sorts of soul can co-exist. So little is known for sure about a soul. How can we say for

sure that groups of people do or do not have a soul that embraces individuals within it over time? Such a potential 'overlap of souls' is but one area that is illustrative of the limited understanding that characterises our belief in a soul. There is a notion held by some people that DNA in a varied way is the cornerstone of individuals and maybe of races though eugenics has given this a controversial reputation and some science now posits that DNA is more like a Receiver than a Transmitter of human information; if so where or what is the originating spirit or transmitter?

We are comprised of a modified essence at different stages, in most cases a less changing essence as we get older or the more we find ourselves or the closer we return to that starting line of our essence when we were born... or perhaps before then. One is essentially the same person at different stages in one's life so the same person looks out on a different world. This may explain a feeling that people have that they think their age is surprising or that they 'are younger or older than they feel'.

Life as lived is more 'video' than 'snapshot'. It can seem as if time itself is 'wide rather than long' and 'as soon' as an idea envisaging a future state is hatched, it comes into being at virtually the same time. True, new memories and experiences are laid down in the interim but this does not affect a basic outlooker/onlooker perspective. New factors are like additional, mainly peripheral, material or psychological changes.

Finding True North in personal terms, correctly re-aligning a personal gyroscope, often involving going back to First Principles, is partly a voyage of discovery, partly a voyage of re-discovery. One's true friends often are the people who got to one first, born of natural sympathies that came to us when in a raw, unsophisticated state. It is important in practical terms to know what is true to oneself, not to let oneself down. It may well involve not being a traitor to one's youthful aims and ideals; is it a dubious principle that, on reaching manhood, one should put aside from one all things childish?

It incidentally may be of profit to our understanding of others as well as ourselves if we regard those with whom we come into contact as being 'ourselves', but a self that is burdened or privileged with different accidental circumstances and drives - even if they are drives with which we can identify.

It is unsurprising in a way that we, in part, like to see our stories in terms of the same sort of narratives that we attribute to other people; it is our way of looking at the world in general and we graft this into our way of perceiving ourselves. A process is under way, and a cycle develops. Physical laws are said in some contexts to mirror mental laws - being products of the universe we obey its formulae - but here, what is going down is difficult to arrest till it goes up, having bottomed out first. 'Let all the poisons that lie in the mud hatch out'... a idea has to be tested to destruction before an antidote can be properly espoused. But the cycle may not be inevitable, and here free will may intercede, but only (say) being 99% probable. The 1% is the leeway. And what of that 1% unadulterated personal self, if that is what it is? Another blur? We don't have the words for it but we know it. Up to a point.

SECTION FOUR

Celestial Justice passingly considered at dinner

In a symposium for THINKERS



The discussion as recounted below is in a blurred setting hence the fuzzy focus of the picture - it does not matter where it is nor who are the guests. The ideas discussed could surface anywhere, come from anyone and may interest some people more than others.

An article of faith stated below is that if there is certainty, we do not know what it is and when it happens! Nothing is said below to make anyone doubt their faith. It is however contended than having no faith is a form of faith.

Buddha did not deliver lectures in the accepted sense, rather he had conversations in which the atmosphere and circumstances as well as words helped to tease out ideas. Voltaire's table-talk pointed up fallacies of contemporary ideas more than any thesis of his depicting a New Order helped lay the foundations of the enlightenment.

The dinner table talk described at the start of this theory continues over dessert....

"All we've got is what we have; otherwise, we are on a road to nowhere. There is no afterlife!"

"How on earth can you know that for sure?"

Answer cometh there not! After rumination, perhaps concerning the parsimonious hospitality which is instanced by a paltry marmite sandwich:

“You know, when Kitchener was living on the South coast a long-standing acquaintance asked him if he had been in China at the time of the Boxer uprising. Kitchener, an Englishman of the old school and not given to talking about himself or things philosophical that matter deeply in life, on this occasion unbent so far as to say: ‘Actually, I put it down!’”

“Not exactly touchy-feely, that generation of Englishmen! The Scots were or are even worse - or better: ‘Save your breath to cool your porridge!’”

“Chinwagging - as usual - slides off the key point! This is a Forum for Thinkers!”

“Hmmm! All right, what emblem or logo do you suggest as suitable for our forum?”

“A ferret?”

“*Gimme* a break!

“Well then how about a ferret-rampant?”

“How about a Bee-rampant... in a Bonnet?”

“Let’s not beat about the bush. We’ve produced at least one answer to ‘Death, where is thy sting?’ which is: ‘Human Justice is not visited on evil-doers because they are dead’.

That seems like a pretty nasty sting in the tail to me! Apart from the convenient but dubious argument that a person’s posthumous reputation is equated with his or her whole being even if she no longer knows about it! A way to skirt round the issue is to assume that there must be a Celestial Justice.”

“An argument of convenience, tapered to what we hope will be the case, not to indisputable facts. Wanting it does not necessarily make it so. We’re assuming that the All-Seeing Eye is purblind to the things we airbrush out of our self-narratives? We are made in a way that tends to produce such optimism - if it is that. There are all sorts of reasons to think like that, just as we need Authority Figures in much the same way that a pet looks up to its owner.”

“Our conception of celestial justice comes largely through looking at this world?
“Goalposts in life frequently move, so why not in death?”

“But there is a paradox straight away: If the morality of an Afterlife is reward or retribution for what we did on earth, is it according to what we suppose it to be? If we are to be judged according to a set of precepts in which we believe on earth we are hardly likely to be objective or fair; if we are to be judged according to a different set of standards, that seems hardly fair on us?”

“What would happen to the fabric of society if we didn’t build into it mutually assured destruction? There is good reason from the standpoint of society to say ‘Do to Others as Ye would be Done By’. A bit like ‘You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours!’ We may be ‘made’ not to be selfish and gregarious for good reason to act as a community. And we need to relate to a judge or leader - it can be helpful if he or she looks like our own racial type. We want confidence, certainty; tendencies in our nature again. Needs of our temperament and our situation, rather than the logic of the matter.”

“You’re saying that credos derive from innate tendencies and from convenience more than through objective ratiocination? That we are created in a certain way, and various elements in our lives, our use of language even...produces our faiths?”

“Maybe! Why assume that beliefs must be accurate when we’ve a vested interest in assuming that they are accurate? Like Mandy Rice-Davies said in court when John Profumo denied having an acquaintance with her: *“He would say that, wouldn’t he?”*”

“Have we sufficiently questioned our own credos? Christians might say ‘turn the other cheek’ whereas Hindus say ‘Fight and eradicate evil!’ Is the villager in some Mongolian backwater to be penalised in the Afterlife because he never heard of Mohamed? The truly saintly might act as a Christian without knowing Christianity.”

“You imply that a faith may be a crutch to help someone recognise her better self?”

“Our temperaments - not just fears and hopes but for instance mental laziness, or a tendency to give up in the face of what seems a difficulty - may impel us both to look for exalted charters of behaviour, and then not question them too closely.”

“Anything may be possible. Dogmas may be true even if the agenda or motivation behind them are not. Just as the fact that somebody is a paranoid doesn’t mean that they may not have a good reason for being paranoid!”

“Let’s assume that certainty is denied us. What is wrong with going by probability?”

“Probably, in truth, we cannot do anything else!”

“How is St Peter at the Pearly Gates going to decide on who to let into Heaven. He doesn’t think like we do. Celestial justice may seem unfair to us?”

“What’s the betting that the gender of the author hadn’t something to do with who is supposed to await us at those Gates of Pearl? Interpretation of Divine Truth begins at the moment mankind hears it, so it is open to question from the start.”

“Okay, what DO you suppose that St Petra - why give St Peter a male gender? - at the Pearly Gates has to say?”

“Hmmm! I suppose that she could seem autistic! In human terms, I mean. Think of the billions of factors that go into upbringing, culture, genetic disposition that she’d have to consider, the two ‘N’s, Nurture and Nature, analysed to the Nth degree, before dispensing proper justice to an applicant for Heaven.”

“She - or he - also could have and need super-computer-powers of ratiocination.”

“We are trying to fathom what Celestial Justice, not human justice, might look like!”

“A sort of differential calculus - not for instance mercy or revenge - at its core?”

“How on the earth can I know for sure?”

“Surely it is impudent to try to second guess a Creator?”

“Second guess then? We go so far as to dress up the Big ‘C (*creator*)’ - why gender-ise ‘C’? – not just in our image but in clothes we admire. If ‘As in Small so in Great’ - which actually might help explain the cosmos? - I would have said that one of ‘C’s major attributes was/is/will be a sense of irony. A good ole laugh He/She/It no doubt has at our expense, laughing at how we are so often caught napping, how our hopes ‘come to dust’....!”

“Celestial Justice probably can only be like Human Justice if the same dilemmas are UP/down-here/There/EVERYWHERE, if I may so depict Heaven-or-Hell. Imagine a girl with a legitimate grudge against a parent dies and so-lives when she turns up in her Happy Family in an Afterlife ...and splits it apart because she is not just right, but seen to be right, as should be the case with justice. Her mother takes against her husband as a

result. As a result of that, the girl with a grudge isn't/wasn't born and has de-legitimised her right to exist and get up/down here-there-and-everywhere in the first place! Who suffers as a result? Human injustice done to the hard-done-by girl is compounded! Is the child ALWAYS wrong, in that scenario, no matter if she is/was-but-not-will-be right?"

"Then perhaps, as the physics people say, you are positing a circularity of time. The past present and future are all of a piece, so that causes of things can be changed?"

"Perhaps the gurus are right and the ideal state is not to be in any state? Seems a bit unkind on those who appreciate being alive as, surely, we should! And then, take cruelty! Perhaps on earth we should be aiming for a creation that obviates creatures eating one another to survive? Was that a defect in the planning of us, or are 'good' and 'evil' just terms that we imperfectly understand on earth?"

"Well, if we are cutting Celestial Justice down to size, aren't we - an impudence if ever there was one - and then, what about dressing up the Founders of religions who return to earth - as presumably they'd be able to do - in their familiar-to-us clothes, we'd be saddling them with the baggage of controversies that are passed, usually hailing from the Middle or Far East, and also divesting them of the concerns they had in our allegories of them on earth. Surely they would come back as somebody else altogether? The stories of their past here are just a way of helping us relate to them?"

"Maybe it is in divine planning to make us believe in allegories? In the story of *Plato's Cave*, the caveman who never left home worshipped the flickering shadows on his wall of the fire outside that he had never seen, mistaking them for the real thing; well, he may have been right?"

"Like Icarus, he was designed not to fly too close to the sun and so burn up?"

"The best place to hide may be in a crowd. What if the miraculous is all around us? In the extraordinary things - a robin, a crocus, landing on Mars, the internet, a finger nail - that we take for granted even if we can't all the time have that as a central focus? We are designed to stop constantly marvelling at everything - too time-consuming! - so how else to induce a belief in the miracle that is life but to worship a neat substitute - that is what we already have but in representational form?"

"Hmmm! So, maybe celestial justice is here on earth....?"

“We can doubt it but all we can know for sure is that we don’t know anything for certain.

The more one looks into anything, the less certain one becomes. If there is so great, mighty and awesome a thing as Celestial justice, and it is not human justice, it presumably is to be hoped - it is only that, a hope - that it takes women’s or men’s views into account.

To know why a woman does as she does, St Petra presumably needs to ‘walk a mile in her moccasins.’?”

“The verdicts of men and angels may not coincide: would Peter the Great, founder of modern day Russia with his built-to-order personal torture chambers be thought ‘Great’ in Heaven...? It seems unlikely that Hitler would escape censure even On High? An evil-doer may have a pre-determined role. Are we to say that Evil, like Good, needs its personalised representative? How would Christianity look without poor Judas?”

“How can you, a mere mortal, say that Celestial Justice works on human values like Good and Evil? Maybe they are not ‘poles apart’ but, because of a defect in our ability to understand, they are useful simplifications for us?”

“You sound like a Red Indian!”

“Pardon?”

“They had no words for ‘Good’ or ‘Bad’; their nearest approximations were ‘Useful’ and ‘Not useful’”

“Wrong Doing still wants Right Reasoning? Again, is it our conditioning at work?”

“What if the explanation of our thinking lies in some kink, not admitted or fully analysed in our thinking?”

“What if earthly ideas of true justice, of peering into the heart to judge of thoughts as opposed to judging by consequences - often accidental - of deeds? We may not fully know what we are really thinking. We may simply forget what we are, and have been, during bouts of privacy from prying eyes, apart from blotting out painful memories not just of what befell us but ...of what we have done. We even can leaf through a photograph album and see pictures of ourselves in circumstances and with people of whom we feel we have not the slightest recollection. Memories are manipulatable but not to a non-Blind Eye of perfect recall.”

“If all that is so, we’d better try to straighten out the warpages? Action stems from thought so our thought better be in order. It should be done in time, in case we are suddenly faced with a need to give a rapid response to some exigency, allowing of no time to think the whole thing through *ab initio*?”

“Odd, though, all the techniques and the goals of meditation and self-examination, but so few that lead one to ask if each of the prejudices we have, and that we can see are not shared by many people on earth, need re-examination?”

“You can get ducks in a row; it’s a bit more difficult when it comes to thoughts! AND also - no doubt again because of a deficiency in human temperament - I’d be a bit apprehensive of what might come out in such hard look at the basis of my thoughts!”

“Geysers may come out of the depths of the earth as well as lava. Given that ‘The road to hell may be paved with good intentions’ surely we should look as closely as we can at those intentions?”

“Hmmm! Do what one can to get one’s thinking straight so as to act in a way one can most fully justify?”

“Think of someone who fought for Communism and after a lifetime’s effort realised that he’d been worshipping a deity with feet of clay!”

“Voltaire probably got the point. Told by a priest on his deathbed to abjure the Devil, he replied: *‘At a time like this do I want to be making enemies!’*”

“Either way, better play the game as best we can. Take personal responsibility.”

“That’s a bit of a cop-out. Are you a follower of the present Dalai Lama where he says that we should not follow anybody else’s path but blaze our own trail?”

“Sneaky! You are so used to doing it that you use someone else’s authority even to say that you should not look to someone else’s Authority! By the way, why say ‘the present Dalai Lama’? He is the only person in history said to be reincarnated as himself.”

“You quite sure about that? Jewish people say that when reincarnation takes place one comes back into the bodies of the Jewish people.”

“That’s not the same thing. Perhaps the Dalai Lama has attained by now to perfection and doesn’t need to come back?”

“I doubt it. It would mean he was being selfish, just thinking of his own salvation not that of his followers. Is the first Dalai Lama to say that he will not reincarnate in human form also questioning a faith of ages?”

“It may be because he thinks that the more powerful a belief in the fundamental truth of a faith - whether one helmed by a Supreme Being or a Lama - the less the need for a human creed or an allegory to underpin it?”

“You seem to be asking rather a lot, my dear! You are reminiscent of Gurdjieff, the Russian-Armenian metaphysician. He looks on many ruling ideas of men as a man amazed. It is as if you are asking me to imagine the following conversation....

“I am an extra-terrestrial traveller or a mega-computer with a total understanding of all mankind’s creeds and credos, why should my intelligence be stigmatised as ‘artificial’? It is my turn to investigate mankind! What do I think of the ideas of these earthlings? Do their ideas fit objective facts without doubt?”

“But we cannot live adrift in Chaos. We need rules, certainties!”

“There may not be a wide difference. Things may be probably true, rather than certainly true. She-he-It sees that feelings, precepts, laws, ethics, societal norms all have usefulness; and gets the point that gender is built into men and women but ‘She-he-it’ abbreviates man’s ideas to Shit. They are not in a rarefied abstract; they are just Special Pleading.”

“Stuff and nonsense! S-H-I-T (She, He or It)! Pass me that bread and marmite!”



The above conversation could have taken many turns. Chatting with like-minded people is a way of reinforcing and refining prejudices. As with everything, once it happened it has a sort of monolithic or unalterable status that belied its free-flowing course. There is an equivalent in the science of pairing molecules in which all possibilities are open until the moment of realisation.

Ideas, feelings and instincts that are the basis of our actions can be subliminal or blurred, but shape or mould us as they do, we do not re-examine them *ab initio* each time we take a decision. Nor do we do not examine them in the seedbed and perhaps we should

The reader is warned **not** to inspect a plate of spaghetti strands, or strands of thinking, as described above in the so-called 'petri dish' that is in the Appendix. He may exclaim "*And why not! Inspecting foundation stones of edifices of theories is the very thing I've been wanting to do all morning! If inmost urges explain our belief-systems, this exhaustive - or exhausting - list of man's inmost urges in a Petri Dish will point up the reason why man has created systems of thought and belief. but I don't think that 'What I think, I am!' and I am certainly NOT merely that which is subsumed in this sentence!*"

The bricks - in this instance, of our motivations - are so familiar that itemising them in a list may induce *ennui*. There they are, some of the many individual bricks that are not usually noticed. They fail to stir the flaccid genitals. The catalogue is not present to anyone's mind in any given instant. The scale and dimensions of this plateful of man's inmost drives and urges and how far out of line they are especially when taken *in toto* from most definitions of objective reason may give pause for thought. The 'Petri Dish' shows how behaviour, ideas and attitudes that are taken for granted almost inevitably combine to produce conclusions that were not anticipated by any one person at any one time. The robot who unaided would produce our systems of thought can be invoked by the shade of Mary Shelley, authoress of *Frankenstein*. Behind our social constructs lies questionable conditioning or motivations.

How much of this Petri Dish list are we entitled to take as representing objective truth?

If we cut away the dross what is left standing that will stand the test of common sense?

Should we shift what may be blockages?

This is not a purely synthetic intellectual exercise. It is about a way of thinking that each of us can entrench into habit, a habit that will help individuals reach better and more thoughtful conclusions in a variety of contexts. "*Unless you stop and focus on it it, it doesn't sink in....*" as Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, said in *Newcast* in relation to Climate Change in an approach has a general application. The section below entitled '*Reflection on Reflection*' goes into further detail about the advantages of this way of thinking.

Once all you need is ingested, whether from chef, guru or yourself, you are freed up to move on to the conclusions that may be said to follow.

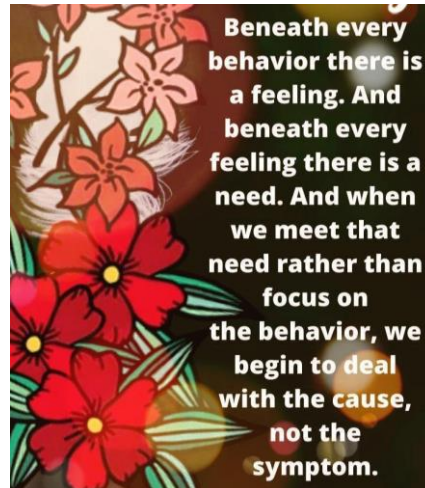
What ideally are the codes of conduct that can be best adapted to the needs of humanity?

A scapel can be taken to a huge range of ideas, from systems of government to conceptions of the Afterlife, from moral codes to behavioural norms. The ideal here is to better enable global communities - starting with the individual - to refashion the best codes of behaviour

according to the thinking of today and anticipate the right-minded thinking of tomorrow rather than largely rehash outworn thinking of yesterday.

Descartes said *'I think therefore I am!'* Many examples could be given of what people may say today: nutritionists for instance have us believe: *'You are what you eat!'* In this aphoristic zigzag from past homilies to potential future ones it is proposed that: *'What we are, we do.'*

Those who, having read this section and who propose to peek into the Appendix. are wished joy of their journey down into the clutter of a spaghetti junction, sludge-gulper at the ready...



THE CHALLENGE

TO TRY AND BUILD UPWARDS FROM FOUNDATIONS CLEARED OF THE RUBBLE OF OUTDATED, SELF-SERVING, INSUFFICIENTLY QUESTIONED RATIONALES AND CONSTRUCT THEORIES BASED ON CLEARER, CLEANER, SOLID FOUNDATIONS THAT ARE MORE IN LINE WITH WHAT IS NEEDED FOR THE FUTURE AND THEN TO APPLY THEM IN PRACTICE

A Virtual Agora for Occidental Meditation

You who lead busy lives! **STOP!** (*just for a little while*).

and

THINK!

—---—

An oriental lady on hearing of this virtual Agora for Occidental Meditation exclaimed “Ah! *Accidental meditation!*”. She was too polite to query what might have seemed to her an oxymoron. Reflection is something that we all do and many of us, perhaps that lady, go out of our way to deliberately reflect. We should feel confidence in doing so and this dedicated website should help boost that confidence. It is an updated ‘Agora’, an internet version of a public square in ancient Greece where thinkers of all hues exchanged ideas. It is a jumping-off stage to reflect about life, gathering into one designated space much thought-provoking material from many contexts that bear on our lives and beliefs.

The ‘village pump’ in a Global Village is here, there; and everywhere there are ideas. Some are eye-opening, some mind-bending, some are common sense, some are controversial. Please wander round the stalls that give everyman a chance to showcase his or her wares.



Changing faces of how a non-internet Retreat for Ruminatio might look

I shall be ambitious to have it said of me that I brought philosophy out of the closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea tables and in coffee houses

– Joseph Addison 1672-1719

To say that you love wisdom is to say that you value acquiring certain deep insights into certain abstract (and important) questions. One might, if one is lucky, just happen to acquire such insights without much effort. However, if you claim to love wisdom, then you cannot depend on luck to achieve what you value. Doing good philosophy requires you to invest time and effort into figuring out the questions you are interested in. This is likewise true of just about any academic field.

– *Anantharaman Muralidharan1*

Anybody can know. The point is to understand

– *Albert Einstein*

You who lead busy lives! STOP! (just for a little while). and THINK!

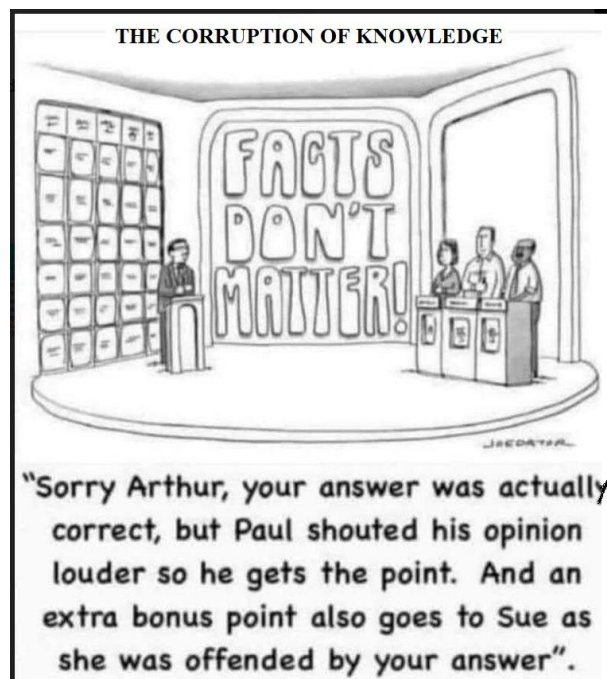
Reflection is the one Activity that does not own up to the name. It is a horizontal True North of ourselves. It is a cylinder too often uninspected under the bonnet in the engine that drives people forward into life's choices. It is time that it has a more recognised niche in our communal psyche. We are what we have thought.

We are the Ancients, standing as we do on the shoulders of the Great of the past. They might feel the pinch of our feet of clay but we see theirs. Plato in outlining 'three classes of men: lovers of Wisdom, lovers of Honour, and lovers of Gain' told a truth but not the whole truth. Man has grown up. Honour, on a slow wane since chivalric days, and Gain increasingly tarnished as the glister of mercantilism outweighs the gold, the time surely is now to enthrone on high Practical Wisdom in Plato's pecking order. 'Reflection' of course has been around forever but as a counterweight to our technologically driven, souped-up world, 'Less haste more speed' rules! OK'. No exam in Reflection, no university course, exists but it underpins much of what people do. Our Goals are centre stage but not fostering the mental mechanics of scoring them. There is so much that we do not know we do not know, partly as we understand what we understand in ways that that we do not even try to fully understand. An olden style of meditation should be welcomed back to uphold pundits and politicians in lighting up the here-and-now as well as our varied and incompatible conceptions the Hereafter. The active spirits in life do not think that they are sheep walking; their rams gambol ahead of the flock, horns held high, and do not question the solidity of the bedrock beneath their trotters. Action Man is not precluded from deep thinking but it is not his big thing; society's memes don't encourage it. There is much that is questionable about societies so best to stand tall on Plato's plinth and focus on the exact cause of problems before opening the door for bulls to blunder into China shops to 'fix' their mirror image. It may be helpful for people of a reflective disposition to have a designated public space in which to congregate and reflect, where their ideas can be debated rather than lie fallow in minds, like the proverbial desert rose doomed to wither unseen. One's own slant on the world might have a greater impact than would otherwise be the case. It can contribute to the mulch that becomes a wellspring of ideas. The importance now of personal reflection often is downgraded to something 'that everybody does and no one thinks much about it'. A centralised corpus of thinking from, and by, Mr Everyman, who at present can turn mainly only to the canon of philosophers, can fortify all of us in the belief that the habit of thinking

for its own sake is of value. It sits better now than ever when people feel they are as good as those 'set above them'. The wish to share thoughts can go untapped by default. Religion, which some feel is a private matter, recognises a community dimension. The meaningful and the purposive and the practical can go hand in glove. *Pensées* like that of Anantharaman Muralidharan are starting to crop up with increasing frequency:

'To say that you love wisdom is to say that you value acquiring certain deep insights into certain abstract (and important) questions. One might, if one is lucky, just happen to acquire such insights without much effort. However, if you claim to love wisdom, then you cannot depend on luck to achieve what you value. Doing good philosophy requires you to invest time and effort into figuring out the questions you are interested in. This is likewise true of just about any academic field.'

In mainstream meditation, people doing 'their own thing' are often channelled by gurus or life coaches away from truly independent thinking. Political or academic authorities, define rules, methods and goals. It is a fine thing to soar up to an Emyrean or to find oneself 'within' but there are other objectives in cultivating habits of reflection. We are free to choose for ourselves, free to resist insidious innuendos portraying thinking for its' own sake as a form of brooding or a 'brown study'. It distracts from a single-minded pursuit of pleasure, fulfilment or mammon. Who knows what insights of value to communities or selfhood may emerge if individuals feel more encouraged and empowered to stand tall on their own ruminations? We are more likely to find our genuine selves as well as worldly success by following our own bent rather than any herd. Too often we are the unwitting victims of splurge. Reflection may tease out otherwise unnoticed nuggets in a democracy of the mind. People may bristle if their pet beliefs are challenged but, '*Courage, mon brave!*', cleave to objective ideas in your Ivory Tower. Why knee-jerk to opinions brayed by the ubiquitous Politically Correct, the Know-alls, the egotistical, the purblind or the misguided? A still, small voice of common sense can drown out the foghorns.

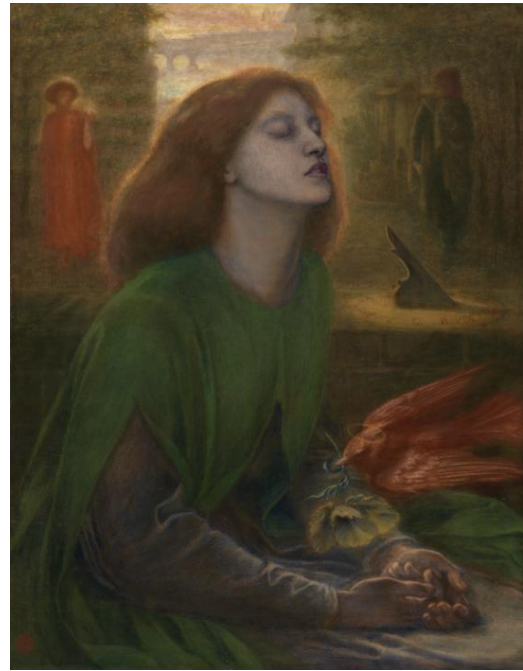


Note:

Almost all the passages on reflection that follow are about occidental meditation even though there is a specific section devoted to it. Nothing should be taken as a critique of the practice of Oriental Meditation which has genuine believers who derive much from it. Camp-followers who want to believe its truths can be foot-solders but who do not fully savour its truths.

Some of what follows may seem like reinventing the wheel but it does not necessarily invalidate the overall approach. The success of Fontenelle (1657-1757) was due partly to his handling with a light touch subjects that till then were for long-faced pedants. His Dialogues contained juvenilia, even downright ignorance, but taken in the round his attitude caused rethinking about a prevailing mind-set. He was not mesmerised by tradition, an example being over Cato's suicide, which all commentators previously had taken as a mark of greatness, he saw as due to sullenness and vanity. Many of his assaults on religion for instance, are unanswered to this day.

Reflection on REFLECTION



(Left) *'The Thinker'* by Rodin; (Right) *'Beata Beatrix'* by Rossetti

And can I better employ this holy Sabbath than in endeavouring to exalt my mind, and purify my soul, than by meditation on Thy Holy Law, by prayer, and by the severe examination of my thoughts and actions... Then my body will enjoy rest, my heart elevated in gratitude, and my faith and courage sustained by meditation and prayer; thus will my soul be prepared for eternity.

- *Extract of Jewish prayer*

Most deep truths of most religions are common to all religions however much their stalls may be set out in different ways. A Swami as much as a Rabbi could have penned those prayerful words above.

Reflection is free-flowing; less prone to advance in orderly steps. Digressions are par for the course. The mind can frolic whither it will and it is hardly a path to shun. What nugget might lie in a by-way?

Or a cow-pat! Preferences vary and 'there is no accounting for taste'!

Reflection sets us free to speculate on ...anything. A digression from the main line of thought is here taking over; why try to still that little voice in our minds that allows us to reflect on ...whatever we wish?

Reflection often involves descending into its subject matter from the vantage point of contemplating it 'from above'. Most reflection is not of purely abstract nature but has a grounding in some facet of our lives or concerns. Here, by way of example, is a look at what can happen if following the train of a given speculative or reflective thought...:

Can we 'come back to' or revisit our past while we are embodied on earth? Some advances of science seem to open up a hypothetical possibility that we will be put in a position to Time Travel. If so, it seems an odds-on possibility that we will be only able to do this much as in the way that a spirit is said to visit earth; obliged to follow a Hugh Hefner-like code of conduct required for a Playboy Bunny: '*You can look but you can't touch!*'. One problem with this idea of glimpsing the sum total of what went on in the past is that there are unlikely to be no-go areas in the Re-Visit. We all erect barriers around ourselves but watchful sprites might see us in the toilet! Allegorical warnings abound. Remember that juicy apple on the Tree of Knowledge? Or Icarus with wings frazzled from flying too close to the sun...we can hanker too much after knowledge for our own good. This way of reflecting on a reflection can lead on if the follower of its tributary wishes to do so....If there was proof of an Afterlife -100% definite proof, no 'ifs or buts' - then everything changes, including reasons for following any moral code; after all, there is no escaping how we will be hauled before a vision of how we acquitted ourselves while coiled up in this mortal coil.

The vast panorama of life and Beyond Life is but one pearl in the oyster of what we are licensed to think about if we are not being led by Teachers to have their teachings insinuated into our thoughts, right down into the private depths in our minds that we perhaps have not fully fathomed.

'Meditation' nowadays especially in an Eastern sense evokes *inter alia* a reaching into an Essence of the self and/or up to an Empyrean. This may be an all-encompassing Universal Soul. If this is the case, *en passant*, is such an indivisible entity nevertheless stratified to envelop more than one type or tier of the soul? Some people believe that there can be a soul of a tribe or a nation?

It often does not do to enquire too deeply into the exactness of what we believe. That in no wise diminishes the charm of doing so. If we have the capacity to think it surely is our inalienable right to wonder why we have been vouchsafed this capacity. Why not be more conscious or self-aware of the strangeness that is involved in human life. It can make our journey on earth more wonderful, and this may even be more important than an arrival at...we know not whither.

Anyone who is up for meditating - 'reflecting' - can consider any theme from the most sublime or romantic down to the mundane. In such a form of meditation, one can think about loved ones for instance; one is licensed to imagine what life would be like without them, call to mind their image or personality. It can lead to a truer appreciation of them. Such insights can be brought more into the open when in a mode of contemplation. Insight can alter attitude. Openness to reflection can foster it. It is the 'how', not the 'if', of reflection that counts.

Philosophy in an academic sense has its fashionistas. Philosophy is a canon and for all its internal disputation, and for all the degree to which it may prompt reflection, does not put a

premium on the creativity of a student. It does not grant a free rein for the experimental thinking of an inspired and original amateur. Psychotherapists of various stripes, multiplying as never before, deal with mental malaises but rarely zero in on normal emotions short of outright trauma as needing their nostrums or honeyed words. Emotion merely recollected in tranquillity is no big deal, one might suppose from their professional rationales. Life coaches can get you where you want to go and where you want to go tends to concern this life. Many people's fascination with what matters in this world is topped up by their daily fix of the news of the day. Newsfeeds add little edifying value to deep understandings save for a stock of facts, many soon forgotten. The last time the Ideas Men hit the headlines – as opposed to honourable exceptions in many TV programmes - was when Bertrand Russell led a CND protest demo. TV Programmes like *Mastermind* or *Brain of Britain* exemplify how a title can conceal the truth about the content. True, 'A Memory Game' doesn't trip off the tongue with a PR ring to pull in the viewers.

There is much in media and literature that appeals to those of a reflective disposition but, overall, influences nudging people to veer off into side-tracks are ubiquitous and insidious. Thinkers may be placed on a pedestal but signposts do not usually point in their direction unless they are statues. Novelists and playwrights do depict deep truths but tend to do it *en passant*. They can sneak in a reflection or two on 'why we are here' and 'what to do about it' but it usually it is tangential to ladling out their entertainment. Sagacity is all very well in its place - which is in business. *Pensées* - digestible, pithy, categorizable - were *Thoughts* when they were popularised by Blaise Pascale and now re-emerge as acceptable when they are sound-bites. And there we have it! The fruits of reflection *per se* are all very fine if they are shrunk to sound-bite size.

The seeker after truth as a type had his day in the Agora of ancient Greece rather than in our modern world, but why is this so when moderns have so much new and exciting to get speculative teeth into?

'Homespun Philosophy' does not have an aura associated with Great Thinkers even if can be about Universals. It has no iconic champion in literature as in sculpture where Rodin's 'The Thinker' is portrayed as deep in thought. Philosophy - with a capital 'P' - is in a Tower of Ivory, its academic drawbridge raised to prevent most seekers after its truths crossing the moat to its higher learning. The subject's very intellectuality may distract from its being understood by everyman. Eternal verities surely do not cower in the tresses of hair-spitters or need souped up cerebral power to pierce through the labyrinth that we erect around them. Science may need brain power but often working out its significance may need common sense. Which pedantic Methuselah sniffs about in that midden?

The pleasure of picking the fruit, of thinking over things of consequence reflecting, and becoming a more rounded person in the process has few enough accredited Masters of Ceremony to cry 'Roll up! Roll up!'

Why stop there....

What celebrated people say about reflection

People think about reflection even if their thoughts are not docketed in a single mainstream 'subject'. It may not be easy to find a category on a bookshelf entitled 'What people think about reflection'. That is a comment on the communal focus of conscious minds. The fact of the matter may be different. People like a publicly celebrated authority figure to dress up worthwhile sayings but in truth we all can have our say in our democratic times and we can all learn from each other. That said, many are the thoughts and sayings of celebrated people about aspects of reflection....:

Reflection doesn't take anything away from decisiveness, from being a person of action. In fact it generates the inner toughness that you need to be an effective person of action. Think of leadership as the sum of two vectors, competence (your specialty, your skills your know-how) and your and authenticity (your identity, your character, your attitude)

- *Peter Koestenbaum*

Ultimately knowledge in martial art means simply self-knowledge. It can become intelligible only in the vigorous and constant process of self-inquiry and self-discovery.

- *Bruce Lee*

It's our mind which forces our self to do positive activities and also negative activities. So first learn to control your mind then automatically you will start doing positive activities which will result in a discussion of different great ideas.

- *Zeeshan Talib*

We can ... go beyond mere opinions and so-called common sense conclusions. One must learn to be a skilful scientist and not accept anything at all. Everything must be seen through one's own microscope and one has to reach one's own conclusions in one's own way. Until we do that there is no saviour, no guru, no blessings and no guidance could be of any help

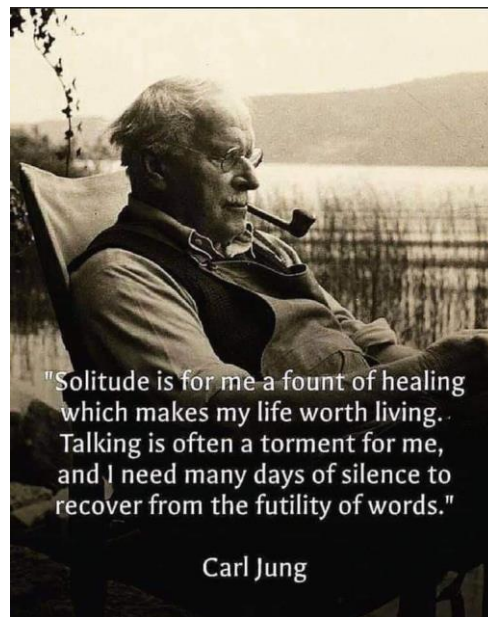
- *Chögyam Trungpa*

The evolution of man is the evolution of his consciousness, and "consciousness" cannot evolve unconsciously. The evolution of man is the evolution of his will and "will" cannot evolve involuntarily.

- *Gurdjieff*

If you feel drawn to solitude, give yourself complete permission to go in that direction. We need silence and beauty to re-connect with the spiritual side of ourselves. The world is a noisy place, as is the mind. The spiritual journey is not about developing more and more beliefs and opinions. Rather, it is about shedding away our beliefs and preconceived notions about reality in order to have the True Nature of things revealed to us. This requires radical self-honesty and humility. The truly wise understand the limitations of the intellect and seek to go beyond it rather than refining it.

- *Beau Norton (PerfectlyatPeace.com)*



Develop the heart. Too much energy in your country is spent in developing the mind instead of the heart instead of the heart. Develop the heart.

- *Dalai Lama*

We are only falsehood, duplicity, contradiction; we both conceal and disguise ourselves from ourselves.

- *Blaise Pascal*

To refuse to recognise any part of reality is to confuse our vision of the whole, and to make ourselves incapable of the redemptory action which the world requires.

- *Dame Rebecca West*

If you are losing your leisure, look out!... it may be that you are losing your soul.

- *Virginia Woolf*

In order to improve the mind, we ought less to learn, than to contemplate.

- *Rene Descartes*

The above quotations and many more could feature in an Anthology on Reflection but the subject to date, crux as it is to all of us, has not been thought fit for such attention by major practitioners. But why should it be in some mill to thresh the subtle one-liners of celebrities? Reflection is something we all do and which we could do more of, to good effect.

We can combat a bias against reflection in our culture and indeed make a virtue of reflecting. We may be 'broody' but that, too, is frowned on. It is defined as being 'engaged in or showing deep thought about something that makes one sad, angry, or worried.' A hen clucking over her brood is no doubt a jolly decent mama to them. Why, again, should we be on the defensive if we are ruminating? Because cows 'ruminates'? A dictionary definition is 'thinking carefully over something, ponder it, meditate on it' or a 'kind of deep, meditative thought that is often deemed quite a worthy activity'. We can easily think of ruminants as 'chewing the cud'. And so forth: why should we be said to be 'in a brown study' if we are thinking by ourselves? We may better describe it as being 'in a rainbow study'!

Anthony Newton, a retired solicitor, writes that in his teenage years that he:

'...developed the habit of staring into the middle distance without any apparent thought and unseeing. What was I doing? What if anything was going through my mind? The very simple answer was nothing, consciously. Somehow I was able to clear my mind and detach myself...'

Mr Newton's daydreaming enabled him to see things with greater clarity.

Here is a text exchange with Anja Gohde, a successful film investment adviser and business lady:

'Meditation is often thought to be about rising 'to the stars', the empyrean. Well, the direction is right - namely 'up' - but do we have to aim quite so high. The eagle-eye is better, often, than the worm's eye view....'

'How very true. Yes, I try to reflect on a regular basis about my life and what I do and what the impact of my words and action has on other people or why I am reacting and feeling the way I do.'

On the one hand thought is a barrier to direct appreciation of a subject; on the other hand, it may make clearer what is perceived so that there is no misunderstanding as to its nature? Doing what you enjoy doing can be enhanced consciously appreciating it.

People, it is true, often like a picture and a thumbnail CV to give an idea of the person who comes up with an idea. The picture on the right below conveys the right impression of Anja whatever she looks like and what she does in life. The point is that it is her ideas not her circumstances that matter.



Dr Millan Sachania though writing about music could be referring to reflection:

A 'fount of wellbeing and spiritual refreshment ...a way ... of 'nurturing the skills of value judgement required for negotiating a reality that is non-binary and complex.'

Peter Cook, the comedian, was asked by David Frost whether he would like and meet Sarah Ferguson, shortly to become the Duchess of York, on a given date. There was a rustle of paper as Cook consulted his diary after which he replied:

"Sorry! I'm afraid I can't do that evening!"

"But she is going to marry Prince Andrew! It's a great opportunity to meet her!"

"I find that, on that evening, I will be watching television!"

Imagine the following conversation:

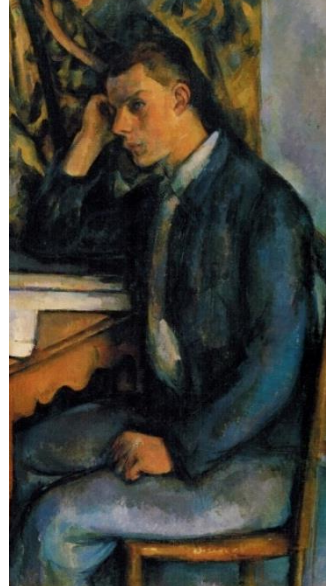
"No, thank you for the lovely invitation but I've checked my diary and, so sorry, I have a prior arrangement."

"Pity! It must be very important!"

"Yes! That is the time that day set aside for reflection!"

At the time of writing that line of reasoning seems eccentric. If one says - using the largely communal mind that is so influenced by what others think - *'I can't deal at the moment with (this or that) problem as ...I'm reflecting'*, it has an odd ring. The fact that we do not rate something as being important is often largely because we take it for granted; it is not prized. We so often do not focus on what is in front of our noses.

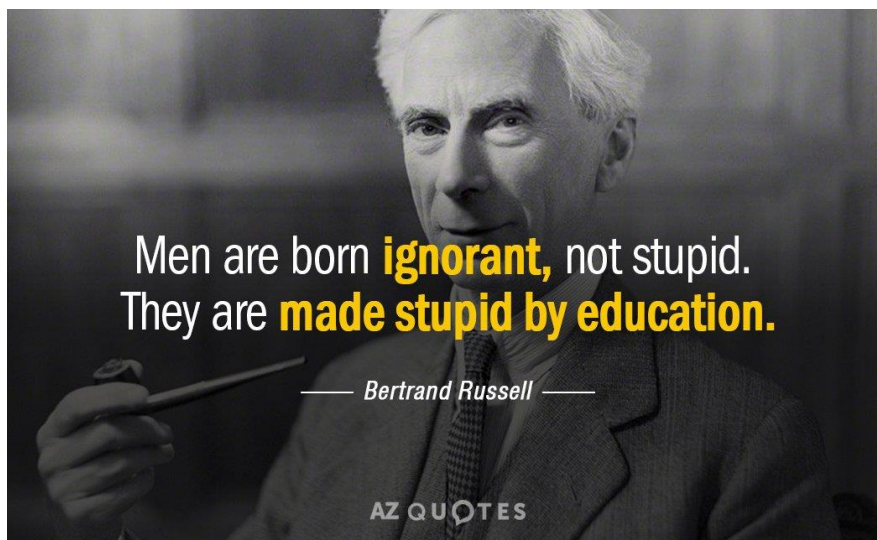
More Reflection on Reflection



Are you the foil of your own petty concerns ...the sort of chap pilloried by T.S. Eliot in his poem *J. Alfred Prufrock*: '*I have measured out my life in coffee spoons.*'? Will you pit your forensic prowess against Eliot's deluded fool or argue that instead of applying his chosen cutlery you, by contrast, measure out your life in ...teaspoons? One lump of sugar or two, please?

The poem continues:

*I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal footman hold my coat and snicker*



Reflection sometimes can seem like a poor relation of 'Meditation'. It makes no grand claims of itself and it is not as purposive. Someone arrayed in a gaudy dress giving a large account of himself grabs the attention. Unobtrusive types in the background can get overlooked though have valuable ideas. What of YOUR truth? What of your still, quiet inner mind? You reflect before even starting to meditate 'on' anything.

Reflect: we all do it to a greater or lesser degree. It is a staple of our *persona*, a 'given' part of how we 'are'. It comes into intuition which, traditionally, is not taught in schools where curricula concentrate on intellectual pursuits. We are so familiar with it that there is no need to think about it, we think. Will you reflect on the idea that you reflect for a moment? Moods and duties get in the way of doing it but because you are reading these lines and not otherwise occupied, this might be a good a time?

Everything comes from reflection, even for the quick-minded type. We reflect whether we take time on it or not, even down to a choice of a particular dish in a menu. Your life as it is and your daily round has sprung from reflection, if camouflaged by the name of feelings or intuitions or certainties of what your life or life in general is about. Your conclusions may not have come to you in a flash or in a spell of hard thinking with the proverbial towel round your head about the 'how's' and 'whys' of your life, career and relationships. Even if you saw the light in a dream, and you followed wither it led you, you just 'chose'... did you?

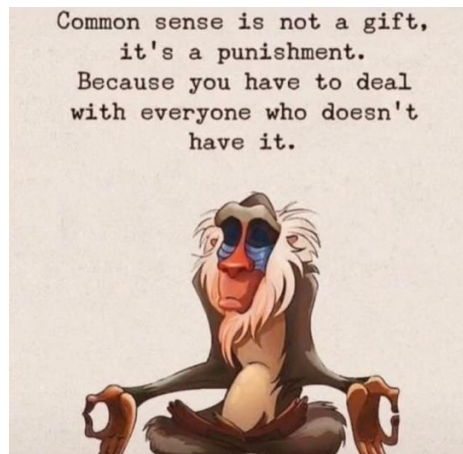
Many things that arguably go wrong in our lives are on account of not taking the time to think sufficiently - reflect - about them. Results follow from fine-tuning attitudes. Action precedes from thought. From microbial lifeforms do acorns grow, and from acorns, oak trees grow. One does not have to be an Einstein to see it but his example is instructive. He wondered how life might look to a traveller on a beam of life. His cogitation about the reality that we perceived without questioning it resulted in his upending the apparently solid edifice of Euclidian geometry.

There is little coaching for this habit of mind - reflection for its own sake - despite how much it helps get a handle on issues confronting us all. It is just done - so we suppose - in the process of doing other things, acquiring facts and views on which a rational person anyway should be not be spoon-fed but come to his own conclusions. The claims of reflection are blanketed out by the pressure of busy lives, common habit, and because attention is not

drawn to it being a worthwhile occupation in itself. The author of a *vade mecum* on the *Advantages and Fruits of Reflection* is yet to arise.

It does not have to be this way. Applied Mathematics does not preclude the study of Pure Mathematics even if it is abstracted from a focus on any particular mathematical problem. It is a way of thinking that helps in all manner of contexts...

Open-mindedness is fostered by reflection. Rigidity of mind, being single-minded, has its limits and those who do not bend with the wind are more likely to be blown down. The weighing up of options before becoming single-minded while retaining an open mind in case fresh evidence may justify rethinking. It is a mark of both common sense and intelligence.



From now on a breach of common sense will be regarded as a breach of rules

- *Miss Gibbins – Headmistress, St Mary's Calne school*

You are never too old to learn something stupid

- *A paraprosookian*

Its all right letting yourself go so long as you can let yourself back

- *Mick Jagger*

Questioning, rationalisation, synthesis of ideas, all among the habits of mind involved in the mix of careful thinking.

The wish for reflection is half the battle; once one has taken it on board as a personal and worthwhile wish, undertaken for its own sake, it can become a second nature, a form of maturity. There is hardly a thought - in the sense of a general rather than a particular formulation of words - that any of us can have that is entirely original. What may be original

is the order in which we think these thoughts, the weight or importance we assign to them, and the feelings associated with them.

If reflecting is what we want to do, we are entitled to do as we wish. There is nothing difficult in it other than fence with an idea. True, how to deal with any intangible is not necessarily easy. A TV advert portrays a strong-armed toothbrush wielder battling it out with gum decay; beefy biceps played its part and a trusty electronic toothbrush can machine-gun the dastardly hominy grits but despite all the visuals it is the right attitude to dental hygiene that makes the big difference.

Questioning and doubting What is going on these days, does NOT make you “anti” anything.

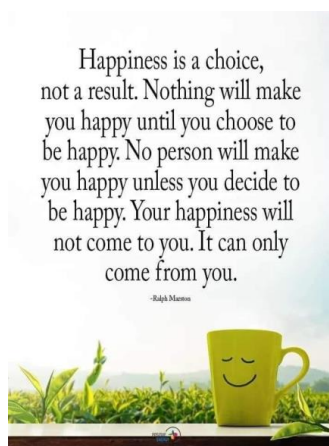
Nor does it make you a conspiracy theorist.

Actually, questioning IS and Should be, the place of reason.

The fact that questioning has become taboo, should, in fact, send a chill up everyone’s spine!

We can dance our days away in a *pot purri* of often contradictory codes, a combination of unconscious plagiarism and arrogance. We fling ourselves into what we have been flung into, flag-bearers for our totems. The basic truth might just not be visible to the naked eye so why not look into it. We wish to feel that what we think is consistent with our goals and, by doing so we may compound illusions by which we live. It can be the saddest thing discovering this too late in life.

The recent period of the pandemic has engendered some reconsideration about the way we live our lives. Some of the goals of a consumer society that were tantamount as a sort of religion to many people have been re-evaluated.



We want to avoid a wild goose chase. But thought is needed about most things that go in life; nothing should be taken for granted; indeed, who knows, perhaps wild geese got it right after all? Wild geese are well organised, show commendable community spirit and are not stick-in-the-muds. Their flight paths cover enormous distances in an aerodynamic V-shaped formation to a destination known in advance, wings beating in a way to uplift all the flock; they allow for a tired lead goose to fall back with a fresher one at the spearhead. If a goose drops out exhausted, two stay alongside it down to ground level staying with it for as long as it takes to be of help to the stricken bird. Think of that next time someone wants to lead you on a wild goose chase; at least you can query the imagery.

If we are grounded in our lives, the thoughts that come to us during such moments are more apt to go to the core of what we need to be doing in life

Is there an explanation why the pronoun 'I' and the word 'eye' sound the same?

Finding yourself includes Observing Yourself.



Self-observation is the beginning of progress, says Buddha

Reflection is usually tied in with self-narrative. It is a vantage point from which we view our lives; a point mid-way (approximately) between the fluidity of life as it lived and a static observer-point above the fray. We take a mental snapshot of ourselves 'frozen in time'. We stop for a moment and consider what we do and what we are and what we feel and peer into ourselves.

'Longevity affords us a chance to accumulate more self-enclosed stories that will, in toto, form the tale of one's life, a self-enclosed tale that no one else on this earth will comprehend, rather than a 'narrative' of arguable, full veracity?'

Awareness of thoughts and feelings - holding them up for inspection - develops them. and ...they may feel watched. A call for a justification may prompt a re-think. One considers what one is doing from outside dealing specifically with the situation in which one is, perhaps from a standpoint that one imagines one will think about it when recollected in tranquillity.

A cleansing and cooling afterglow follows from reflection. The traditional English way is just to do it and not to make a fuss about it. It is a form of unconscious cerebration. In these touchy-feely days of splurge and instantaneous reactions and when more and more rats are running the race it is high time to retreat to first principles. Why airbrush them out of thought processes just when trying to find ourselves. We should make time and space for our inner voice. The leisured lifestyle may be a thing of the past for most of us but let us not forego all of its benefits which include caring for ourselves.

Here is Dickens writing in *Great Expectations*:

'Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before - more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle. I so subdued I was by those tears, and by their breaking out again in the course of the quiet walk..., and still reflected for my comfort ... while I was occupied with these deliberations,,,'

In reflection our perspective on others can be brought to bear on oneself, without the excitement of situational or emotional melodrama, but as others might see us, in our natural fall-back position. It is closer to history than to politics; it is judgemental rather than engaged. It is an altered perspective of our own on ourselves. Finding ourselves can be like 'finding' other people - there is much that we do not know about ourselves. Thinking out the motives of others may be a way for us to consider the game of life. It is an idea when playing chess to walk round the board and see it from the standpoint of the opponent. It can be a surprise to come at it from a different perspective. The advantages of this approach should be clear.

A thought often is freighted with emotionality. It is a matter of choice, a skill that comes of practice - unless one is the victim of one's own mind - as to how far to allow emotion to creep into and overwhelm lucidity. Quietness in thinking allows greater control.

If one is calm at the start of a session of reflection then what might surface in one's mind is a realisation of which emotions are the deep ones and which are more like froth or even a scum on the surface. A wish to rid oneself as far as possible of emotion which overcomes rational thought can enter into the allure of reflection, a wish not to be too much at the mercy of possibly festering emotions.

Our 'self' - for each of us - has a consistency through time. Today we may have virtually the same feeling or sensation as previously experienced, a thread marking out an individuality.

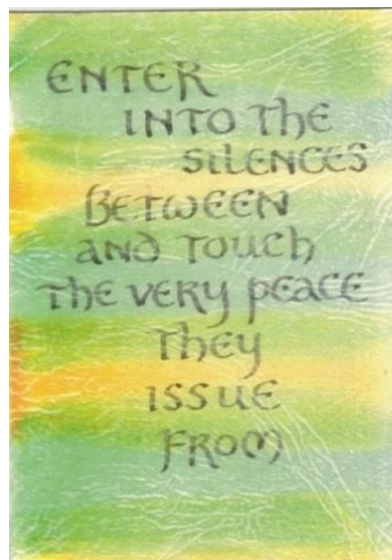
It is sometimes in later life that one re-identifies with feelings or goals that one had when young. They were there all along but they were buried. Natural sympathies came of raw rather than over-sophisticated feelings and relationships. We forget too much too easily if we do not remind ourselves of what we were and are about.

Reflection, like writing is a solitary occupation.



In a quiet period of reflection, one may suppose that this feeling is much the same for everyone. One has a sense of one's being - a consciousness of one's consciousness. This sensation is not transferrable to anyone else however similarly it is described by others. The recognition by others of what you experience owes its resonance more to what they feel than because they introspect into your mind. Our thoughts are private, inner; protected, particularly if we wish, by our carapace, the bounds of our own bodies and minds.

A habit of encouraging a calmness of mind is often the best way to deal with problems rather than acting on impulse then repenting at leisure. A wish to 'go back to nature' speaks to much the same urge for serenity. Thinking, quietly, calmly and undisturbed, with the aid sometimes of whatever 'props' are to hand, is a study of life coloured from a wider palette than that of the 'everyday'. We have that nature within us. The kernel of our inner calm is a part of our nature from which, for so much of the time, we are in flight. Much of our busy life may require an antidote and this may take the form of going back to the peace of nature.



Card by John Moffat for Rosemary Cockayne

What of that onrush of a higgledy piggledy cascade of emotions and musings that can hound us if we try to clear our minds? Most of us know our own 'non-stop gramophone record' of mind-chatter only too well, the feelings of deep love or hate, or of preoccupation, faces that rise up out of our thoughts when alone, those ideas that will keep on and on at us.

What are the sensations that we experience on trying to 'see ourselves as we really are' without all the mind-clutter? It can be put into words in ways that we all recognise but that does not mean any particular reaction is the same for everyone. Why junk it all as being just circumstantial baggage in the way of knowing ourselves, as some gurus tell us? Is it a 'messiness' or is it instead the feeling that we are not fully in control of our thinking at which we jib? Does this 'jumble' distract us from being who we really are? It might be the opposite in that we should not put our conscious mind in control rather than listen to what is going on in our subconscious.

The subconscious goes on its own way, sending up messages to the conscious mind. To take homely examples, how does a person know to wake up at an hour that he knows to be the required time to get up? How come one can try hard to remember a name and fail and then, at a moment least expected the name comes to one? How else to explain the placebo effect? Or, again, take a business letter about selling a pot of grease, or any other homely commodity: the business to be transacted might be identical to selling a volume of the works of Shakespeare or Racine but an allusion to a literary great imbues the letter subconsciously with an importance in which allusion helps create illusion. Reflection should aid awareness of a part of the mind that usually is least susceptible to challenge from conscious reaction. Much reflection concerns conclusions brought into the light of day, allowing second thoughts about conclusions that sometimes seem to form of themselves. Ideas can be espied in the deep, unruffled pool of our minds or in the grip of emotion and are as if 'churned out of a tossing sea' by disturbing the sediment.



Your subconscious mind may be the true guide to what you are really feeling

Why deny one's origins or one's nature? Clutter silting up our minds can be dispensed with but as regards the animal-like side of our nature the fact is ...that it is us. '*Blame it or praise it, there is no denying the wild horse in us.*' as Virginia Woolf said. Nature is 'red in tooth and claw' and we are part of nature.

A tendency in Meditation is to see so-called lower nature, physical fulfilment, as rather beneath us. The notion in places is at odds with that of '*a healthy mind in a healthy body*'. At the least, it does not follow that we cannot learn from supposedly more primitive beings, as is nowadays more understood. *Even the dull and the ignorant / they too have their story*, in words taken from *Desiderata*.

We preen ourselves as being of a higher order than animals though in the Hindu pantheon animals are sacred, Animal Rights campaigners please note. Some emotions may be more real to animals than they are to humans. A creature living fully in the moment with emotions unfiltered through the medium of man's brain may experience emotion in a more raw, pure, form. Animals have much the same emotions as men as instanced in their maternal instinct. This need not be a mere academic idea; if it is felt it has greater effect. The guts, courage and sensitivities of beasts may be more impressive to a naturalist than to a worker in a slaughter house but maybe we can appreciate more the wonders of the *fauna* of our world and occasionally cast more than a blind eye to the pigeons that wing their way through our cities, each of which has a life of its own and has attributes that outweigh a propensity to excrete onto the statues in Trafalgar Square, occasioning council cleaners many manhours in scrubbing down Nelson and the lions. Mao Zedong declared war on the birds in his Beijing and the faithful went forth, armed with guns, to slaughter them in droves. The effects, long term of this policy, might politely be termed deleterious. Nature has a way of defending its own; the mill of justice may grind slow, but it grinds sure. Our attitude to our planet is a large case in point and there is reason enough to be changing it.

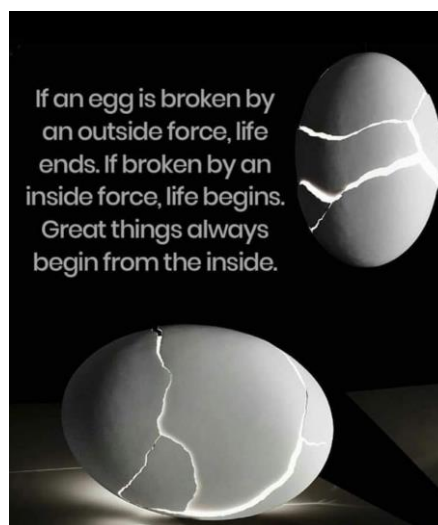
The idea - the full *bouquet* - of the wonderful, extraordinary world in which we live is more than cerebral appreciation; genuine feeling to accompany the idea counts. A mindset that tends toward kindness and induces compassion is among the useful by-products of thinking about feelings. In a tale that speaks to the heart rather than the cerebral processes: the late Rosemary Cockayne once astonished strangers by knocking at their front door asking for water for a thirsty rat. On the request being met, a knot of bystanders gathered to gape at the spectacle on the pavement of the gasping rodent gurgling down ambrosial liquid bemusedly provided in a saucer. The rat expired but its emotions happily replete in its final moments were obvious to all witnessing them on that paving stone bier.

We like our illusions but do not like to face up to our own judgements. We like to think that we would like to communicate with life forms yet to be discovered on other planets but quite why we think that if we encounter alien life from another planet, we will want to understand it, or they us, is anybody's guess!

Should we give our nature its' head where possible? The idea of Ecstasy, or '*Ex-tasy*', comes in part from an idea of the ancient world, for instance the cult of Dionisius, affording a license to stand outside of one's 'normal' self in cathartic release. It was a tacit admission that there is something antipathetic about the shackles of society.

We arguably may profit from taking time out to let rip in an orgiastic free-for-all - swig wine, do whatever an imagination conjures up in the way of debauchery. It can free one up to find 'the animal' within, without the filter of stern consciousness. It is arguably an essential part

of who we truly are. Why try always to tie it into the steadier emotions? Why not from time to time and within reason detach from the rational, the steady - the 'Apollo' as the Greeks put it - and tune into the so-called 'lower nature', our wilder shores. Is it that we cannot be 'trusted' to know when to stop? By who? The One who made us that way? Cue in a debate between a whey-faced advocate stating that 'one should not let hair down as the approved linear shape for hair is vertical' pitted against the free-thinker demanding the right to 'let it all hang out'. Who is objectively right, after all? If there is a case for a Dionesian Disneyland, why not consider it in a study of the *mores* of society? This would be inter-disciplinary but common sense has its place there along with the teachings of all religions. The focal question as always should be right if one is after getting the right answer. Here, it is largely about an arguably justified balance of mind. The fact that we need to know when to stop does not mean that we must not start. It may be that pleasure gives us a belief that life is worthwhile so it keeps us going for higher purposes. An inner release of some of the springs of our nature tunes our engine, no matter that this may be of a physical order. It can release a contentment of soul from which 'higher' thinking is better placed to take flight. Mankind is endowed with pleasure centres; a starting point of debate therefore can be 'why downgrade what we were given'? As with our unappreciation of much in other contexts that is a 'given', maybe it is in this area that we make a mistake in assessment? Physicality is a bedrock for much spirituality. Physical wellbeing - let alone the choices we make in life about almost everything that matters to us and to others - spring from the same actuating source, spirit or inspiration or what you will. The fact that it is blurred at the point of original inception, opaque in many ways to a study of it, does not prevent us training a telescope into those clouds. The scales can fall from our eyes even if there still a mist over what they see.



We are grounded physically in ourselves, a primary factor in our mental backdrop. As Gurdjieff says: '*It is only by grounding our awareness in the living sensation of our bodies that the "I AM" of our real presence can awaken*'. If one is disposed to wander down Memory Lane it can help to trigger memories to be in the same place as where the memories were laid down. Again, when preparing for an exam, it can help to imbed facts in memory if they are studied in different places. Alzheimers - by way of an illustration - attacks memory and this aspect implies memory has a physical locus. Thought processes originally were connected with requirements of physical mobility - a need for movement. Much imagery of

spirituality, astral travelling or levitation where one 'sees' oneself beneath oneself contain physical surroundings. The higher form is born of a lower form and retains its connection as a part of who we are. We may travel in our minds in a sort of vacuum but tend to bring ourselves down to earth.

In a session of Occidental meditation...

In a Session of Reflection

"Well, this is how I'm feeling today. It felt a bit different yesterday. Never mind. I am now alone with myself. What do I think and feel?"

"It feels true – and it is being true to myself.

"*A thought:* It also may be a being in touch with The Other when 'the other' is – at least in part – myself.

"*A feeling:* The tentacles or threads from within me that stretch outwards to the outside world are more liable to be soothed. It is a settled home for me – from which I all too often eject myself. It is my true North even if (*a thought:*) in the perspective of the world outside, I – we – are realised more in action or in narratives that overlook much of this essence of what we are about.

"*A feeling:* There is a wordless awareness of skin, a boundary of my-self. It is a self-absorbed stillness. It radiates with a slight 'weightiness' from the hub of my heart and with an un-heated sort of warmth in my head. It is like being outside of myself yet centred in myself.

"Gentle physical sensation predominates. As it should, in this session of calm reflection. I'm gravitating to what is pleasant. There is a lazy-ish feeling of contentment that I've got this far in my life and projects. In so far as I can identify the locus of my feelings, they seem to be more in my head – cranium? – as today they are of a logical variety though seem to have been more in the region of the chest when they were related to love or to anger. It seems to me, here, that I'm deliberately using my head. I do have a wish to distract my mind from unpleasantness. As I'm on a physically even keel, a flocculent, enveloping, generalised sensation seems to creep in. Its happy.

"An inside voice clings to a higher, nameless realm that may be watching down on me – a 'realm' that is part of me. Looking in at, or down on, myself it seems as if I accentuate the dominant sensations of my life at this general moment in time, a sort of general contentment in thinking of a particular stage that I have reached in my journey through life – or of my loved ones. It is a bit different from some times when I've been walled out of contentedness by a concern or alarm at an obstacle in front of me that I must outface. That's like a sensation of first night nerves that a theatre actor has – prompting better performances.

"Drat! What was that slight stinging sensation in my finger! So often, there is a particular physical sensation that distracts and so predominates when I'm trying to meditate. It is almost as if it does it deliberately! An itching finger, say, makes immersion in quiet self-contemplation problematic. Of course, if there is some really worrisome issue. it may

manifest itself in a slightly febrile or jittery sensation. That's appearing to be in the region of the chest.

"So, in what does this inner life consist if I try and look at it head on and define it?

"The mental mechanism for dealing with a question – a 'questing' – is mainly a logical process. It's distinct from relaxing quietly to listen to one's inner voice...OR is this my inner voice of the here and the right-now. It is a 'conscious' sort of question. The normal way of considering such questions is in deliberate cogitation – unless a habit is formed through which such questioning becomes a second nature – is like trying to unravel any knotty problem. A contemplation of my place in the whole scheme of the world is both conceptual and emotional.

"The problem of understanding 'the intangible' is not to be underestimated. How often have I had this thought!

"The logical question of what it is that animates me – what I am *au fond* – brings me up against what I've defined as 'The Blur' – 'soul' and 'spirit' and the rest of the synonyms are so freighted with baggage and I really do not know what it is that I'm trying to identify save in a very general sense, in other words it is to me a Blur. That is the difficulty of putting into words what is going on in our inner life. And almost all the things that are so important to any of us seem to fit into this category. We turn our eyes away, or have them turned away, from the essence of what matters to us! Language has not developed to expound this knowingness of who we are, if indeed it ever could be so developed. So many intangibles defeat subtle and truly penetrating depiction in words. I suppose that one aspect of this is in part because of how communal thinking, in which we share, has developed. Maybe it is an illustration of the general resistance in society's thinking to puffing up any one member of it – save as an exemplar of how members of society generally should feel. The pressure on what to think and what not to think is part of how language, culture and thoughts work. A Japanese person for instance, it can be said, thinks of himself more as a component part of his society than as an individualised person (hence the phenomenon of WW2 kamikaze, pilots etc).

"There I go again, thinking thoughts. I'm supposed to be meditating. But I AM meditating. And there is a feeling associated with these thoughts. I'm feeling as if I'm close to myself. I'm aware of myself in a familiar kind of a way, as a cosy relationship with someone I've always known. A slight weightiness in my chest perhaps but the language to describe my feeling about my feeling isn't really helpful, save that I do myself know what I mean. It perhaps isn't something I was designed to convey?

"The language to describe an atmosphere is not exactly rich. So... what are I to think, given that the tool of vocabulary is rough-hewn? 'Gut feelings' may be right but then we should feel them in ...our own guts?

"What is wrong with putting thoughts as such, thought, on a pedestal? Why has feeling got to take over everything; surely one can have both thoughts and feelings and even if one wells out of the other that does not give one or the other a sort of superior status in the pecking order – the pecking order is after all also a human construct...It may seem a novel idea that a thought can rate in importance as high as a material entity but it has been thought about before...., leastways George Orwell was thought to be breaking new ground in his dystopian 1984 where Winston Smith was not allowed to die till cleansed of every last subversive idea...

“Now my thinking of yesterday all comes back to me, in one interwoven ball, so to speak. Is this what the mystics call mind-chatter? If so, what is so wrong with trying to get it clear in my head. It is clear through scientific findings that there is a powerful – perhaps an all-powerful – unseen world. It actuates the physical world. Initially (*ie* to former generations) invisible entities appear in branches of physics. There is a physical or DNA link between the body and the mind. Scientific work has been done on the locus of thoughts and feelings. Where is situated in the body the filament in a character that a given situation can light up? The fact that a ‘filament’ in a character is not visible or tangible is far from proof that it is not there. Has the ‘dictating’ spirit of a person a specific and material correlation in the body? Is the mental component primary or is it causal? Can character traits be passed across generations? Must come back to that musing.

“More random thoughts follow.....It is easy enough to dismiss such ideas as random, but facile to do so surely, and the importance of ‘random’ developments anyway is another apparent finding of science in our time. The Duke of Marlborough and his descendant, Winston Churchill, also the Earl of Chatham and his son, William Pitt: they all saved the day for England in its hours of greatest peril. The person inclined to scoff at the science might jib: ‘Does the fact that the scions of just two families in four crises showed their true mettle imply that they possessed an inherited ‘Save Great Britain’ gene...?’ Is the dismissal of those who only believe in what they can see or touch to be taken as gospel?

“How do I know such apparent non-sequiturs are random? If, as some think, there is a power in the universe that guides us, and if time is circular, perhaps there is a purpose in what seems random but just is not clear to me at the moment, and this thought about the Churchill family may come into useful play in a situation that I’m just not seeing at the moment.

“Perhaps this is all rumination? But there is something free-ranging, something pleasant about it. I can think what I like. I am only accountable to perhaps my own conscience? I do not want to encourage wrong-headed tendencies in myself else they will grow normal to my way of thinking; and from that trouble can start.... No-one need read or see or hear what I’m thinking. My own private thoughts... Reflection often involves descending into its chosen subject matter from the vantage point of contemplating it ‘from above’. Most reflection is not of a purely abstract nature but has a grounding in some facet of our lives or daily concerns.

“So apart from my love-interest – and I’m not following in that track of thinking at the moment – DAMMIT THERE HAS JUST BEEN A KNOCK ON THE DOOR! CAN ONE NOT HAVE A MOMENT TO ONESELF! THINK ONE’S OWN THOUGHTS. SEE WHERE THEY LEAD. WATCH THEM.

“You know what ‘calmness’ is when someone disturbs it!

“Maybe sheer calm is a form of bliss – in the form we can understand. The prayers of old speak of the ‘blessed contentment’ that is a foretaste of the eternal sabbath...

“Where was I? Oh yes, just trying to wrap up into some form of digestible summary some vague but – to me, interesting – thoughts that have been flitting around in my head these past few days... OK, action time, back to the fully awake or conscious world, let’s try and get the conclusions down into the computer:”

Notes for the record of this session

'Can we 'come back to' or revisit our past while we are embodied on earth? Some advances of science seem to open up a hypothetical possibility that we will be put in a position to Time Travel. If so, it seems an odds-on possibility that we will be only able to do this much as in the way that a spirit is said to visit earth; it is much as if we are obliged to follow the code of conduct required for a Playboy Bunny: 'You can look but you can't touch!' One problem with the idea of glimpsing the sum total of what went on in the past is that there are unlikely to be no-go areas in the Re-Visit. Think of it: we all erect barriers around ourselves but the watchful sprites might see us in the toilet! Allegorical warnings abound. Remember that juicy apple on the Tree of Knowledge? Or Icarus with wings frazzled from flying too close to the sun! We can hanker too much after knowledge for our own good. If there was proof of an Afterlife -100% definite proof, with no 'ifs or buts' – then everything changes, including reasons for following any moral code; after all, there may be no escaping the way that we will be hauled before ...a vision of how we acquitted ourselves while coiled up in this mortal coil.

The vast panorama of life and Beyond Life is but one pearl in the oyster of what we are licensed to think about if we are not being led by Teachers to have their teachings insinuated into our thoughts, right down into the private depths in our minds that we perhaps have not fully fathomed.

'Meditation' nowadays especially in an Eastern sense evokes inter alia a reaching into an Essence of the self and/or up to an Empyrean. This may be an all-encompassing Universal Soul.

If this is the case is such an indivisible entity nevertheless stratified to envelop more than one type or tier of the soul? Some people believe that there can be a soul of a tribe or a nation?

If this is the case is such an indivisible entity nevertheless stratified to envelop more than one type or tier of the soul? Some people believe that there can be a soul of a tribe or a nation?

In considering such questions, and the related question of posing them in the right way, the speculative mind has found a groove that may take it away from one form of meditation into a realm whereby the deeper questions are like some sort of puzzle. There is a time to get one's basic thinking done. One should not go round in circles. They can turn into prejudices and self-brainwashing. That idea sits side by side with the fact that one should think afresh and constantly be aware. We live in a mental world; and our being aware of our physical surroundings is only a part of it. The practice of constant re-evaluation and thinking for oneself is not a time-consuming one; the mentality fostered in the process of meditation can help us in many contexts in our lives. One's mind can settle into a groove; the thoughts of a younger self, for instance, often are trotted out so that one accepts without new questions the verdicts of a younger generation on the old when one is old oneself, reinforcing the self-brain-washing.

Much of all this comes down to a simple precept: 'Look before you leap' rather than make avoidable mistakes.'

“Tomorrow, if I have a session of reflection. it may turn out to be utterly different from that of today.

Life is an adventure and there is no saying what we will be thinking or what will be happening tomorrow and all sensations to us mortals take place in our minds and so one might as well try and have an adventure that is safe, and in the mind.”



‘Emotion recollected in tranquillity’, in Wordsworth’s phrase, and freshness of mind are aspects of what leads to **Practical Wisdom**: doing the sensible or creative thing.

Reflection, positively undertaken, helps people to rise above temporary circumstances that seem challenging. It can stop people flying without sufficient forethought into ‘solutions’ that may be apt to compound a problem. Thus, it is sensible if writing a letter about a subject on which one feels deeply not to at nightfall but to sleep on it and consider it afresh in the morning. The settling down of emotions is often not from one moment to the next; they can take time to percolate through the system. Different aspects of underlying feeling come to mind in different moods or circumstances. Deeper feelings can be at odds with daily feeling in affairs of the heart or guts. The whole story of a relationship is rarely fully present on the surface of the mind when asking a loved one for a slice of toast. We can kneejerk in alarm to a threat that is not what it first appears or ‘spend a lifetime worrying about things that will never happen’.

The simple fact of the amount of time given over to considering such questions with care helps. Once undertaken, opinions can be more settled and one’s choices of action more grounded. One’s life can change.

See THE APPENDIX (*final section*) for a run-down of aspects of character that can be positively influenced by occidental meditation.

OCCIDENTAL *and* Oriental MEDITATION

Note: *People clearly derive benefit from Eastern-style 'Meditation' in the sense that is often understood which involves techniques such as breathing exercises and mantras and a profound spiritual philosophy ranging from reaching into Essence or to Nirvana, Finding Oneself, muffling the ebb and flow of thoughts, discarding petty concerns and so forth. And, hey, it yields enlightenment, bliss! Who could say No to that, and more?*

There may be only a thumbnail of a distinction between Meditation and reflection but the difference should be born in mind and the disposition to do one or the other may result in a very different sort of flowering of larger consequence.

What truth or truths are there in what is said below, and to who?

Let's consider some possible downsides of this new (in the West) wave of Meditation.

The word 'meditation' seems to have acquired a capital 'M'. It implies to many people nowadays a sort of orientation towards the oriental. Westerners have a vantage point on cogitation that has been long in the brew. We can upgrade reflection so as to think of it with a capital initial letter, 'Reflection', acknowledging that it too merits pride of place. We all can borrow from the best of both traditions.

Many people derive benefit from Meditation. What follows is not the whole story – just some elements that might bear thinking about. Sir Harold Nicolson, writing with the eighteenth century in mind, stated: 'Once the sober and excellent organised disciplines of religion are removed, the resultant vacuum is filled by frivolous ideas and cabalistic superstitions'. It is a sceptical starting point when considering some current trends.

How many of those who go in for a Meditation that owes much to faiths originating in the East, with its exercises in posture, methods for clearing the mind and impressive aims – a form of supra-consciousness – separate this goal from that which they might have wanted to achieve, unschooled and uninfluenced by others?

A large part of why people like to meditate is because they recognise a need to set apart a space to do an unostentatious thing, reflection. People like a 'purpose' that is respectable, justifiable, giving free rein to their own wish to sit quietly and reflect on life. Meditation as a practice – as often conceived nowadays – can be an indicator of that deep-seated wish though, without clarifying the distinction, we tend to conflate a fashionable idea about meditation with what we personally wish to achieve. We may not be following our own lodestar, our own wish, as much as we like to think.

One mainstay of oriental meditation is that it is partly designed to uplift a practitioner out of his ego but, in doing this, one can concentrate more on oneself than normal. One is often told to become aware of one's own body. The concentration on self often goes on to the point where is easy to fall into the trap of it being a form of ego-centricity (as distinct from 'vanity') by another name. There is a distinction between 'what we are in' and 'who we are' and some 'oriental meditation' can focus attention on the latter question.

Rishika Anya, as reported in Quora, is a proponent of meditation; it '...purifies and replaces (the ego) unifying it with Divine Essence'. Anya refers to some potential pitfalls

'...the ego senses its imminent end, and it fights back. That's when the hard work starts. You'll stare into the mirror and not recognize yourself or know exactly how you got there. Your name/career/lifestyle/partner won't fit anymore. You'll see all the toxicity and dysfunction in close relationships and have to struggle with how to handle them. Friends will sense your new energy and feel threatened by it because it touches on their own lies. They start to drift away and loneliness shows up. The ego will whisper to you it's not worth it. Who did you think you were, anyway, waking up like that? You go to war with yourself.... You will wonder if you're going crazy. There will be dark nights of the soul. You may feel like an alien in your own body and in a sense you are...'

Formal Meditation, in the sense now generally understood, involves techniques that range from breathing exercises, and mantras to measures more thoroughgoing. An allure of Eastern-style 'Meditation' implies a set of imperatives, from reaching into Essence, reaching to the Stars, Finding Yourself, muffling the ebb and flow of thoughts, ridding oneself of petty concerns, trying to excise an individual personality and so forth. People report an enlightened state and their experiences of bliss. Who would say No to that?

Much is to be said, of course, for feeling ecstatic and believing that the sunlit uplands are cosmos-lit. How splendid that we can travel 'there'. A caution is sounded; for many people, without their admitting it, it calls to mind Alice B. Toklas' dictum 'When one gets there, there is no there there!'

New age people, South American tribes, people from India, are among those drawn to Meditation but the global village is getting urbanised. Its practitioners experience ...Ecstasy! Nirvana! ... surely a delicious thing – unless what is happening is that they are kidding themselves. It is likely that sometimes this happens. Yes-yes-please, we want the tip-top of experience available whilst we are incarnated in flesh and blood and maybe beyond... There doubtless can be such a tip-top type experience for the asking but some people, especially those not genuinely getting it despite their earnest wish, might pause a moment. Will it always follow to order from a belief in this goal?

The many prescriptions by gurus as to attainment of enlightenment can hardly go beyond what is in the physical 'apparatus' of us all. In terms of concepts, too, there may be limits set upon our true, deepest understanding of worlds beyond this earth, and flesh and blood.

There are physical sensations that lead to a peak of joy. Pity the man who wallows a lifetime in the shallows without dipping his toe into them. Some forms of Meditation may bring about all that is claimed of them but on occasion might this Wish List have something illusory in it? In this it may have something in common with recreational drug-taking? How much confidence in terms of the conclusions to be drawn from one's thinking and ideas during a 'mind-altering' state? There surely is no guarantee that, if undertaken 'correctly' and the luxury of circumstance permits the experiment, a godhead that way lies. How much of this bliss is profoundly-held wishful thinking?

Reflection - in the ordinary sense of the word - can be the ingredient that takes one where one really wants to go.

The goal of being able to direct personal thoughts and rise above them as an observer, see them for what they are, re-evaluate them much as we can do in dreams, may tell us what we need or want to know about ...ourselves, both individually and as a species. It may be a humbler sort of a goal but is it not a realistic one? The tendency or wish to be an observer of ourselves seems to have got tangled up with the perspective on our lives enjoined on us is an approved standpoint in some Meditation systems, usually put in high-flown language, in looking down on ourselves. It may be that the perspective of being an observer, itself, rather than plumbing the depths for a picture of our place in the universe, is a key impulsion driving our wish. We should see for sure – as far as we can be – why we want to do things.

Take 'clearing the mind' to quiet the onrush and jumble of thoughts that often close in on us if we want to have a stillness of mind: sometimes it is the stillness itself that we want rather than to actually stop our thinking. What is there behind the thinking process? Why are our own thoughts to be such an enemy that we should strive to get rid of them even for a short while? Our stream of consciousness is partly what makes us human. This slowing down of the mind as per much of prescribed Meditation is controversial if taken too far, for all its vogueishness. Dr Johnson had a point when decrying an idea of stopping the track of thoughts: 'The cow in the field (if it could talk) would say: here I am in this field with this grass, 'what being could enjoy greater felicity?'

Is it *de rigueur* always to undergo the rituals – however pragmatic their basis – of the approved preparation for Meditation? A slight shift from the norms of timetabled active life to take time out for reflection can suffice to get one's brain and thinking processes in order. The crux is to get into the right frame of mind and ease up on the throttle. A candle could be lit, say, or some gentle background music put on – Musak, say, but not singing, which is more intrusive. TV programmes for example, don't go from one to the next without some form of buffer zone, be it advertising, an introduction, or screen credits.

One's own company within limits should suffice for most people. If one wants company to be by oneself – odd as it might sound – that then can the acknowledged purpose of going to circles for meditation. We can ask ourselves in our moments of reflection if we could not profit more by seeing that we are on an island in life. For any island to be safe, it needs to be set in a surrounding sea that will not be overwhelmed by tidal waters.

Truly enlightened people may not agree but, for many or most of us, can we not accept that there may be limits set upon the possibilities of our true understanding?

When we sink into meditative trances the better to attain self-awareness, we can make a good start by asking whether this is the one and only true goal. What is it that makes 'me' tick? What is important to oneself and one's loved ones, or that which makes the best use of the gifts with which we are personally endowed?

There may be no certainty anywhere in life and usually the most that is to be hoped is probability. The likelihood is forming of a habit can lead on to the habit becoming second nature. There are advantageous repercussions in any given context of forming the habit of quietly thinking by and for oneself. It may not necessarily lie in the specific conclusions one reaches during the process of reflecting but in the habit acquired. The more one does of a thing the better at it one gets. Every mental effort can be enhanced by practice. Few people think of training intuition. It needs quiet. Inspiration comes from one knows not where. One can train the mind as well as the memory. Enhancing intuition is not to be done from one day to the next. Intuition, which comes naturally, can be coaxed into yielding more.

Spirituality, and many such intangibles will fall into the same category; they can be brought out into the open more by direct concentration on those gifts.

In the Dark Ages that preceded the Middle Ages or in the millions of years following the Big Bang before the Cosmic Dawn, there was a protracted 'foggy' period, albeit one essential for a gestation to take place. Thus, arguably, with us. Our personal lives in many ways mirror the history of our communities. Wandering thoughts may be a form of recapitulation of the chaos from which we emerged when rational lines of evolution prompted outcomes.

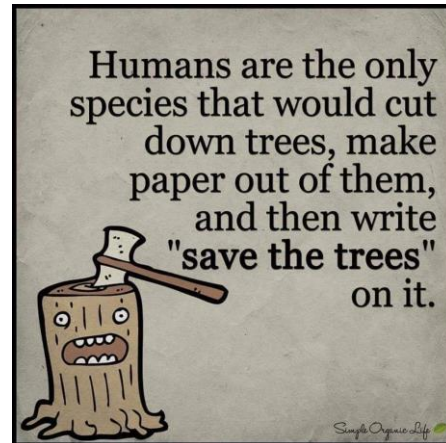
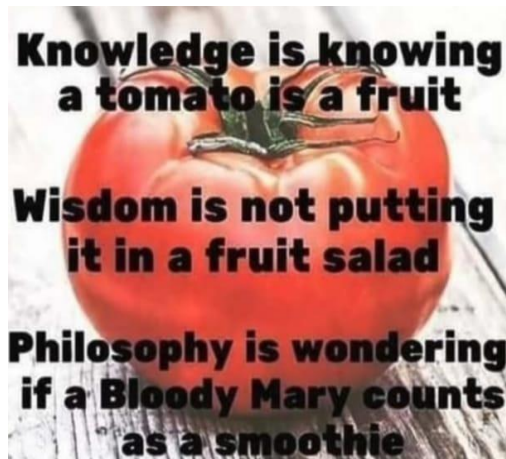
Aids to self-contemplation and Meditation may lead to a Greater Truth but there is more than one Greater Truth. One such truth about life is that it should be lived according to exigencies that come up. Rise to the Emyrean, plumb the nature of our Essence, detach from the pettiness of life, scoop up the candy of consumerism, hedonism and materialism, treat the body as a temple, and the rest, all these may lead to personal fulfilment.

Perhaps one aim, for some of us at least, in meditation, can be on a more worldly plane, most suited to the needs of ourselves and of society?

PRACTICAL WISDOM

an attitude of mind that helps towards attaining it

ATTITUDE CHANGES FOSTERED BY REFLECTION Looking on life from a new angle_including Feelings, emotion, judgements, prejudices, tactics



Man is the only kind of varmint that sets its own trap, baits it, and then steps into it.

- - John Steinbeck

Practical Wisdom is the unseen front runner in the competitive stakes today to provide self-help advice. It is about self-realisation in action. The progenitor by the cradle of much of Western Civilisation, Aristotle, if watching, would no doubt give two cheers to see modern lifestyles. Top of the tree for Aristotle were three virtues: (a) Practical Wisdom (b) an understanding of how to live life well and ethically, and (c) technical wisdom.

It is sometimes assumed without much reflection that anything that smacks of a training for practical wisdom cannot be done other than in an *ad hoc* or piecemeal way. Wrong!

The 'real' world is in the forefront of our focus but not abstractions and challenges like 'practical thinking for its' own sake'. It is overlooked – out of mind because not commonly pointed out. If we want justifications for taking good practical decisions we look to the circumstances of a given case. It is much as if we are bent on treating symptoms, not causes.

A slight change in attitude – all it takes – to taking reflection more seriously is a key to practical progress. A start can be made in looking more closely into our fundamental thinking and creating habits of mind that are honed to the right approach.

There are signs of progress; reflection is coming into its own, with recognised beneficial effects but this is rarely put into so many words.

Changes are gradual if apparently speeded up in ‘memory time’ than in day-by-day grappling with them. Adults know how perspectives taken for granted at the time apparently grow odder with the passing of years. There is almost an imperceptibility about the gradualness of change till a retrospective reckoning. There was an interview on TV in 2021 with the ‘sixties pop star, Donovan, in which he showed viewers the Ashram in India where he went with the Beatles for ...meditation. To that ‘fab’ group of hipsters it was an amazing thing to do, cocking a snook at the system, a form of revolution. To listeners hearing about it in the 21st century, it hardly seemed like a big deal. So it is with other ideas of Meditation that are gaining ground. Some 30 Peers from the House of Lords early in the millennium took three weeks out for a Retreat; the Tory Party of Iain Duncan-Smith organised a weekend for its top brass to spend time together ‘bonding’. Imagine their Victorian counterparts – clubbable as they were and in some ways more leisured – putting such a concept deliberately into practice as a recognised Activity.

A race is not always to the fleet of foot. Prayers have passages where ‘the calm quiet of the sabbath’ is seen as a part of achieving balance of mind, as well as communing with the infinite. The idea of ‘Reflection’ being important in itself can help ameliorate a too-fast pace of life so as to allow more space for thinking and discussing. Many of us realise that something at times may be awry in our lifestyles from the way we rush from hither to yon, hardly with time for ourselves. It is not pre-ordained to be thus. The passing of a leisured lifestyle, for instance where the writing of letters with subsequent time taken for delivery, necessitating a passage of time, is just one of the ways that has made for a shift in how people see and live life. Contrariwise, patience is a habit is encouraged by the attention needed to fence for instance with quirks of computers. Recent lock-downs and home working have played a part in dampening down a too frenetic pace of life. People increasingly plead that ‘I want time for myself’. To some that sounds like a flimsy excuse; better can be the more persuasive ‘I need to find myself.’

The surprising thing is that we do not think more about practical wisdom *per se* given that it leads to where most of us want to go. We assume that we pick up on this key aspect of our lives wily-nilly or ‘on the job’. Wisdom played out in practical action, even downright common sense, is not taught in schools; it is not thought a viable subject. Who after all would make such a decision to include it in a curriculum, and what form could its implementation take? There are more courses for ‘self-help’ – almost a contradiction in terms – than ever, shrinks, gurus, life-coaches; studies galore tell us how to lead sensible lives but there is no central forum for discussion about what should be a central aspect of our lives, practical wisdom. In most walks of life there is a grapple with how to train neophytes.

It is taken as read that we cannot transfer emotional memories to other people even if succeeding in this might help to bring about a valuable perspective on so many of the issues confronting us.

Reflection can be viewed as more of a habit, even a discipline, in its own right than in general is currently seen as the case. The idea is to encourage reflection so that it becomes second nature. It will stand one in good stead in many contexts.

COULD THERE BE A TRAINING FOR PRACTICAL WISDOM?

Hard times create strong men, strong men create easy times. Easy times create weak men, weak men create difficult times.

– *Sheikh Rashid*

No gain without pain.

– *Saying*

If you want a rainbow you have to deal with the rain.

– *Emperor Augustus*

There is no labor from which most people shrink as they do from that of sustained and consecutive thought; it is the hardest work in the world. This is especially true when truth is contrary to appearances.

– *Bob Proctor*

When change is a vital need, sticking to the norms is an existential threat

– *Benjamin Casteillo*

There is no happiness in comfort, happiness is bought by suffering. This is the law of our planet, but this immediate realization, felt through the process of living, is such a great joy for which it's worth to pay with years of suffering. Man is not born for happiness. Man must deserve his happiness, always through suffering.

– *Dostoyevsky*

Reflection is different from Brooding over hurts real or imagined. Reflection as here envisaged has a framework – a time (regular times if it helps – the mood is more important than the timing) and sometimes a place; a respect accorded it as a worthwhile activity, and a cast of mind that is open to being more flexible and rounded. The seeds in people's minds ideally are there and if so can be watered. The attitude includes a willingness to try and see what may be going on in the mind of an adversary or an authority etc, and a habit of considering questions in their different aspects. There is no harm in being honest with oneself. One should use one's own brain to its maximum degree as far as possible. It is one's ally; why should its' potential be squandered. How far can one's own understanding – as opposed to soaking up unchallenged views - helping the process of thinking to be unclouded as far as possible by too much prejudice and emotion?

The way of thinking that is fostered by this approach can percolate into almost any issue or challenge confronting us as individuals or as a society. It can prompt fresh consideration or some of the institutions that we take for granted and encourage reassessment of some of the ways of running our lives from which we instinctively shy away but which may have more to them than we are at first prepared to concede. No totem is too sacrosanct for re-evaluation.

All this is about probability; justified certainty about almost anything is liable to elude us.

'Can wisdom or common sense be taught or enhanced?' Does the answer call for a 'Yes' or a 'No', a common enough 'all or nothing' way of thinking? Common sense may be innate, wisdom acquired by learning the lessons of experience, but the fact is that they can be enriched and enhanced by training, as can most qualities.

The Israelites, handed down the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments, moved on from Mount Sinai and no historically agreed spot marks the site. It is the only place in ancient Jewish history – it relates to a crux turning point in their fortunes – where no physical marker was put down. It was all too easy; it was just handed to them on a plate, so to speak. Easier by far to accept a verdict that is spoon-fed to one than struggle to acquire it for oneself.

Where is to be found the Boot Camp for Life that is designed to teach pupils to better adapt to face the snares and delusions of the world and more able to see things clearly, dispense practical wisdom, make wise and realistic decisions, understand where they may have been gulled?

It is easy see why people do not queue up to seek out unpleasantness even if they could learn valuable lessons from it. Featherbedding in a comfort zone has more charm. Feathers have a place within mattresses.

Commandoes undergo rigorous training to toughen up and so forth but what comparable training do politicians, or opinion-shapers or you and I undergo so as to better survive the School of Hard Knocks that is life?

Life-styles can be engineered to produce different characters. There is a short list of successful experiments in suchlike social engineering though it is rarely root-and-branch. The way of life in ancient Sparta or the Prussian military command or the English public school system are examples. They are apparently *passé* in our cossetted era. Hard realities consciously were factored into training. In ancient Rome, no soldier could play a full part in *Vox Populi* or even marry until his thirties and his military service was done. Fidel Castro before the Cuban revolution encamped in basic conditions in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Mao Zedong was jailed by the Taichi'uts and underwent hardship in his Long March, Elizabeth I – persecuted by Lady Jane Grey amongst others – all of these towering figures had their teeth and wits sharpened by hardship. It was a part of their private journey and training and they saw its; value. Mao's elite when he was in power had to spend a month a year in farms mucking out so as to instil in them such lessons. Mahatma Gandhi, on returning to his village in India, was tasked with cleaning latrines. He said that it seemed to him as important and difficult as diplomacy on the international stage. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had a drawer into which, on pieces of paper, he put the names of those who had tried to do him down; those people gave him his most useful lessons in life, so he said. The principle is understood but not commonly acted on as a point of training or mental discipline save in some rigorous specialist courses for professions that need to toughen up recruits. The title of UK TV's '*Boot Camp for Marriage*', not one to appeal to those who compare their betrothed to a Summer rose, is a nod in the direction of the principle. The very phrase 'character building' has olden times feel to it. But it goes on and what is being suggested here is more recognition of it.

The all-important advantages of suffering has been seen by the sections of the intelligentsia. The novelist, Saki, conjured up '*Filboid Stodge*', the tasty and nutritious foodstuff that at first was not selling well despite its initial more enticing name. The product only started to fly off the shelves when the Victorian British Public - for whom '*Grin and bear it*' was a virtue - lapped up their opportunity to chew at the re-named horrid-sounding stuff between Stiff Upper Lips. The unpleasantness was worth it; *By Jove!*, it did them good! Flopsy bunnies, they were not! A ramrod back was the approved posture for an officer and a gentleman. The pill of Victorian education was soured not sweetened by candy.

Aristotle, teaching students in early adulthood, told them that if their parents had not already raised them to be virtuous, his lectures would not be able to help them.

There does not need to be social engineering with an Antisocial Engineer calling the shots. A little more awareness in each of us of what is involved may do the necessary trick. An Ostridge gets no brownie points for hiding its head in the sand. We should know when we need to be strong even if it is not of our first inclination. We should foster the habit of clear thinking about what is needed.

There is purpose in building character that is not geared to outdated goals such as empire-building or martial adventure but which is desirable for everyday life. What of the goal of monetary profit, etc? For all the business handbooks of instruction, a successful entrepreneur needs qualities of character including, often, nerves of steel. *Onward Christian Soldiers!* They do have to outface metaphorical muck and bullets but they are soldiers for all that. Are the tenets of religion fit for all contexts outside a church? Imagine a boss who did not want anyone upset. How often we hear about the three wise monkeys, who are said to 'see, hear and speak no evil'. Is it true that a wise person sees no evil? The idea is not abroad that this is a charter for a naïvety. Clarity as to what is involved in knee-jerking to some basic concepts that are assumed to be correct does not come amiss.

Giving way sometimes might seem like the easy option and so is the one taken. The meek shall inherit the earth – but the strong often seem to have got there first. A meek person is often the prey of a narcissist. They look for lonely people with low self-esteem and who are also high on empathy. These bullies-by-another-name are often 'reverse narcissists'; they grew up with the same pressures that tend to produce narcissism but they chose the 'better' response, and became too empathetic, instead of not empathetic enough. It was a choice. Was it the right one in each different case that comes up in their subsequent lives? Get into people's heads the idea that a certain toughness is needed in life; then they will be aware at least that they do not need their normal Pavlovian mode of automatically doing good if they are Christians or doing harm if they are running in the rat race. Awareness of what is involved at any fork in the crossroads is half the battle.

A rough ride has its uses as a training exercise, an experience attested globally and not just in the UK. That *en passant* is an acid test of whether lessons are common to humanity rather than any one culture. 'Endurance' – *Za Gaman* in Japanese – is a TV gameshow where contestants have to endure humiliating and painful rituals. In Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, men jump off wooden towers around 20 to 30 meters high, with tree vines wrapped around their ankles. Ancient Egyptian belles slept on pillows of stone to keep their hairdos standing tall. In some areas of the world the salutary principle is taken to the point of absurdity. Such examples are legion; but they do not seem to be the stuff that the Nanny State is made of. There is a lot to be said for Nannies but there ideally needs to be an awareness of when a potentially mischievous child goes a bridge too far.

That cuts both ways. One should know where to stop. Wilfred Thesiger, the explorer, recounted the story of a rite-of-passage ritual in North Africa where proof of manhood was killing a young man in an opposing tribe. Thesiger reported years later when revisiting the area that the tribes concerned had died out.

A toughening-up process can enhance appreciation of our lot in life. It can help graphically show how much worse off we might be than we are.

HOW can, or how CAN, we get our belief systems best adapted to our own times and our communities?

There are piecemeal experiments but at the moment of writing it is not a subject on which anyone with authority can act. No institute discusses it as a separate and worthwhile objective in itself. One can see why this is so; and yet good leaders are at a premium in societies, religions, schools and companies. No one is directing the process according to a system; it is left to chance.

Is an objective 'Practical Philosophy of Life' there to score? Could there be a prescription for a 'School for life' other than 'learning on the job'?

One problem is that we are content to learn the lessons in life honed for the exigencies we face, not generally for those we do not face. Another question is: 'what sort of character'? Much of what is said below will be common ground; it is known in general what are the best qualities to foster, from the time of schooling. It also helps to get our belief systems right.

To take a position as regards the overall goals of society is hardly a cakewalk. The question can at least be posed: are we riding for a fall and, if so, can we do something about it? A 'fall' has happened over and over again in personal histories and world history, if with periods of respite. It is likely to go on happening till the tumbles that all but inexorably follow.

It is not easy in our non-reverential age to persuade people that they need 'a taste of cold steel'. No one today would listen to a pulpit-thumper of old:

'O beautifully painted Humpty Dumpty in your hardened eggcup, O ye who think not of new paths, content to stroll in pastures of seeming green, the time is nigh to refresh thy ideas! O ye with thy licenses to wiseacre that ye sages and ye gurus placard, enabling you are to coax or bully others with 'your' opinions – bullies who dance to the clarion of other Authorities and who, one fine day ...will be coming for you!'

Doesn't work, does it!

We do not have to adopt the style, be it cast in the pieties, homilies or platitudes of previous eras or the old bugaboos starting with the fires of hell. There is plenty of scope on this earth to teach us how to live. Individuals all over the shop come forward with 'improving' ideas.

A few pointers follow about society in general before there is consideration of how far there might be a way forward that might be codified into an actual training.

There have been attempts before to re-engineer education but a good starting point to fix problems might be to acknowledge what are the basic problems with more exactness, before trying to fix them piecemeal.

Our lens on the past changes with an eye to the future. Why leave it to axe-grinders to set the purposes when the idea is to get people objectively thinking aright?

The lesson of what is done wrong by people is often a way of playing the Blame Game but extolling success and carping at deficiency is about results more than causes.

What of the lessons to be learned from history besides the facts of it? Lewis Namier almost single-handed changed the take on England's history by concentrating on classes of people

who had been air-brushed out of the reckoning; feminists now fillet history for hitherto under-acknowledged women of achievement. If we did that, women of achievement and the people who kept systems of society going would be treated automatically with the respect that they deserve. If, however, feminists are to rule the roost of education, why not consider more concerning the ways in which societies that do NOT treat womenfolk correctly disadvantage all their citizenry? Is there a moral to be learned from how countries that treat badly have a lifestyle that is to the disadvantage of the vast majority?

Then again, why just study military manuals devoted to the outstanding generals when a record and analysis of where and how the poorer sort of generalship lost out would be as condign a lesson? Why study just the military tactics of a Caesar or Clausewitz if military dunderheads furnish examples of what types of generalship to avoid?

Another sort of question, for example, is to ask is why Frederick the Great or Peter the Great were ...not great. Why not study the lives of the known – and the relatively unknown – actors in history, not for their achievements so much as for their lifestyles? Is the morality of geopolitics and Machiavelli fit for purpose?

Do whole countries fall prey to living in the mind-set of an earlier, preferred century? We should think about the sort of society, objectively, that will be in the interests of all of us, or as many as possible, in the future. What of the sort of character that is needed now?

It is understood how history has a big part to play in fashioning a perspective on the world. With religious teaching on the wane, morality teaching could be more upfront in taking its place. The experience of evil in the world comes of its own but the awareness of it being something to avoid should be a lesson imbibed with mothers' milk. The morality lessons from history could be dinned more into impressionable heads. WW2, as remarked above, is an epic tale of revenge, with the 'baddies' gunned down in the finale. That idea could be cited more as a piece of human morality which goes to show – at a minimum – that crime does not pay. History abounds with examples of hubris come to grief. That conclusion could be spelled out in primary school textbooks. The 'propaganda value' of such books was understood by past generations. Our forebears promoted '*Our Island Story*' which vaunted the glories of the British Empire. The committed brigades of today have a very different agenda and it could be looked at in the interests of objectivity. The didactic 'Single Issue' tendency is intent on airbrushing out of the reckoning historical Greats like William Wilberforce. His campaign against slavery may not stim with political correctness. The Blame Game should apportion blame fairly; the reason that *Rule Britannia* has a line like '*Britons Never Shall Be Slaves*' is because of an outcry against African slavers raiding the Cornish Coast.

The consideration of why people act as they do could be quite a study.

Monsieur Fontenelle was treated in many ways as a vapid dilettante devoid of ambition beyond shining with wit in French pre-revolutionary drawing rooms. The question is of why consider his philosophy largely to the exclusion his lifestyle? Fontenelle fought hard to get himself into the *Académie Française* but when he achieved his primary ambitions, he saw the key point – he knew where to stop. Fontenelle's motives could be examined. All was not as it appeared.

King Boris of Bulgaria was considered by Churchill to be a 'weak and vacillating cypher' but Goebbels said he was a 'cunning fox'. Who was right? Was not the very fact that King Boris, whose actions saved the lives of countless thousands of Jews in WW2, left as

little evidence of his true intention as possible an indication that evaluations of contemporaries who did not work out for themselves what was afoot are suspect?

The Afghans are fabled as intrepid fighters who see off imperialist invaders. The idea got going in the 1840s if not before when an entire British army of the Raj at its zenith was routed by Afghans and virtually every man jack of the thousands of invaders were killed. Is it asked anywhere whether the deal struck that the British should lay down their arms and leave unhindered was dishonoured by the Afghans? It was not. Marching along the Khyber Pass the British were prey to ambush from behind cover. It was murder, no less! The idea has been allowed to take root that it was intrepidity; what is the consequence – the idea in Afghan society is now abroad that this is an acceptable way to behave and so, who are the sufferers? The Afghans. It may not be as simple as that but maybe there is some truth in the idea that morality is as justified on the world stage as it is in the kindergarden.

As with morality lessons, so with emotional lessons. *'Pride'*, said to *'go before a fall'*, should be taught as a life lesson, with the hubris of narcissism distinguished sharply from a justified self-belief in an innate talent.

Further considerations before a look is taken as to what could be done to help implement changes in our approach.

Our basis for thinking is in some ways like a palimpsest with the deeper layers overlaid by subsequent - often daily - considerations. It is often salutary to go back to basics.

There is talk of sending poets into outer space. It's not to get rid of them on a one-way ticket much as many a millennial might relish that prospect but so that people may better appreciate the significance of the enterprise and 'significance' of the right sort matters.

David Mercer, the playwright, once wrote that *'the discerning pensioner can walk on Mars'*. Empathy is human but it is regarded as confined to relations with living people in the present rather than having application to situations in general or with historical figures from the past. It is no wonder that TV, a medium treated as mainly for entertainment rather than education, is called the 'gogglebox.' The reality of what is seen on TV is not emotionally charged save to discerning people. A University professor was stuttering in shock on TV when telling of his research into the 'second holocaust', which had kept out of the history books by dint of secrecy cloaking Russian archives. The facts of how the Germans in a non-industrial way before the building of their gas ovens killed tens of thousands of innocents through shooting them down in cold blood struck him in force only when he saw for himself the ravines of corpses, tangible evidence of what had gone on. There can hardly be anyone alive who has not seen the emaciated figures or corpses of the holocaust on 'the box'. Born at a time when '9/11' was treated by some as the epitome of human massacre, the lecturer seemed still not to have a full sense of the tragedy of WW2. Why not? The filmic evidence for instance on TV is clear.

An authorial voice is interposed: last night I had a nightmare. I woke at 5am convinced that I was in a room like a sort of gym where my role was to convince people by sweet-talking them into believing that the fate that they were about to endure was not grim, when it was. 'I' was doing this despite my basic wish to be honest with them because I was scared stiff of the Authority that was ordering me to do this. Why this may have been significant to

me I do not know but the sense of fear was palpable. I understood in the moment of waking why people are corralled into doing that which is not to their taste by pressures of the world. How to enshrine that lesson into a more emotionally-felt, permanent sensation that stayed in my mind, giving better understanding of why people in some situations act as they do?

If people understood more of what life was like in London in the blitz or the Black Death, we would be better equipped to deal emotionally with Covid.

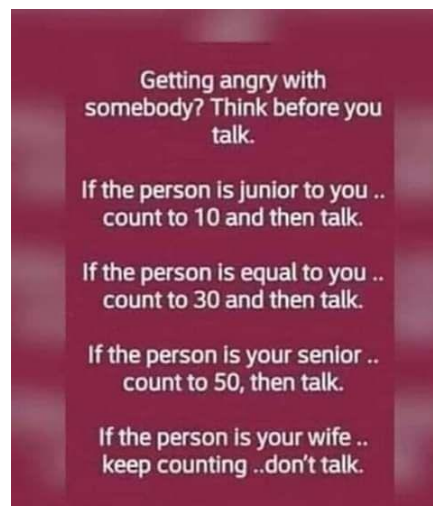
It would be helpful if people take on board the idea that there is a threshold point in systems of belief, a point at which what holds good up to that point, no longer holds good thereafter.

People do think up novel ways of training. By way of an *outré* example, Goldie Hawn, the actress, said that her husband's punishment for his son was to, "...shoot up his car and dent it up, and ride around in it for the rest of his existence." Also - this has bearings on reflection - a penalty for misbehaviour of her children was to be sent to a corner, and to sit there with the instruction to reflect there on what they had done wrong.

What could be done that is constructive apart from considering morality as a factor in education?

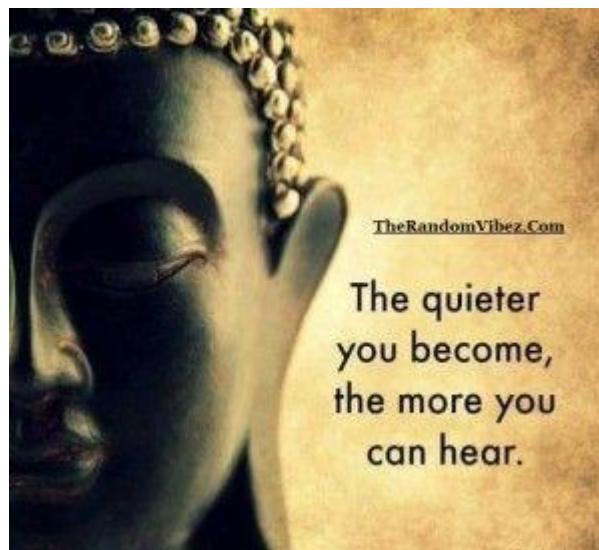
Much as nowadays we talk of emotional intelligence, a 'Filboid' drug (*see above*) is yet to be rolled out – though no doubt it exists if by another name and purpose – allowing a seeker after truth to absorb useful lessons in life by undergoing a form of self-improvement through a sensation of a harsh reality, one that as a result imprints itself in memory. How could it be done?

Why not make reflection more of a habit, even a discipline, in its own right?



Reflection is different from Brooding over hurts real or imagined. In the 'Sanctuary' on the Institute of Reflection website there are comments as below on this aspect of reflection.

There is no call to be thought in 'a brown study' or moody while reflecting but the ersatz sensation of doing something - being active is a norm for most of us - and simply sitting, as in a train and looking out of the window at passing scenery, can induce a meditative mood. The part of one's thinking process that is constantly 'telling' one to be active is stilled. When cogitating, insight is more liable to surface when in a calm and rational mood. Emotions and personal demons can be mastered - not necessarily suppressed - so that they can be viewed in a detached way and seen as far as possible for what they are.

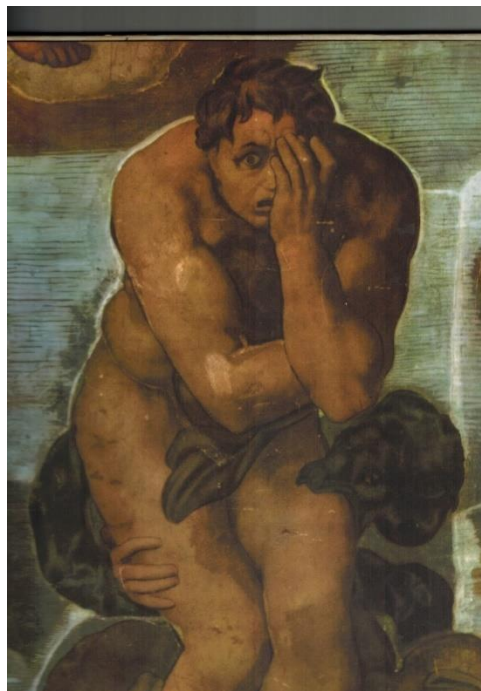


There are those who feel that Meditation is no laughing matter...



WHEN YOU MISSED YOUR MORNING MEDITATION

If the predominating note when wanting to reflect is of anger or fear one is more grounded in the things of this world, more the victim of emotion, less able to reach for the stars - more corralled into one line, one dimension. The last thing needed is to allow the worst thoughts full rein to prey on one's mind...



Detail of a painting by Michelangelo

Reflection in the sense discussed here has a framework - a time (regular times, only if it helps - the mood is more important than the timing) and sometimes a place; a respect accorded it as a worthwhile activity, and a cast of mind that is open to being more flexible and rounded. The seeds ideally are there at the start so that they can be watered. The idea is to encourage reflection so that it becomes second nature.

This attitude sometimes includes a willingness to try and see what may be going on in the mind of an adversary, an Authority or a pundit, so as to consider questions in their different aspects. There is no harm in being honest, at least with oneself. How far does one's understanding - as opposed to untested or differing views about any subject under the sun - withstand a critique that is unclouded as far as possible by prejudice and too much emotion.

The way of thinking that is fostered by this approach can percolate into almost any issue or challenge confronting us as individuals or as a society. It can prompt fresh consideration or some of the institutions that we take for granted and encourage reassessment of some of the ways of running our lives from which we instinctively shy away but which may have more to them than we are at first prepared to concede. No totem is too sacrosanct for re-evaluation.

All this is about probability; justified certainty about almost anything is liable to elude us.

CHANGES that may come about in

IDEAS UNDERPINNING OUR BELIEFS or vice versa

VALUE SYSTEMS....as opposed to BELIEF SYSTEMS

Imagine a world without the various religions or without the familiar overarching political systems such as Communism, Democracy, and the labels of 'Left', 'Right' and so on, or a world into which baddies like Marx and Hitler or, for the matter of that, the good guys, had not been born. Was the course in history resulting from their lives inevitable? How do we know what the world would have been without their having existed? What can we say for sure about an alternative past - and therefore present and future - that did not, has not, and will not happen? The most we opine is that, on balance of probability, it would be different.

There is a case study comprising all of world history of what works, and what does not work. A Thinker, untrammelled by boundaries in a particular field of study and surveying the whole panorama of world history is at more liberty to draw deductions, however controversial, from its lessons

Accurate recounting of events and motives is what should matter above all to historians, or so we like to think. The moment a historian sets himself up as judgemental it imports into the equation values which not everyone shares. Historians tend not to regard themselves as sociologists, out to learn such of history's lessons as possible. It is 'not in their period' to consider as a comment on historical or biblical truths for instance the pre-Christian society of the islands of Tonga, which naturalists such as David Attenborough say was co-operative, mutually affectionate, hard-working and productive. Does that society, therefore, have any prescriptions for behaviour that we might find of use?

People on an *ad hoc* basis tend to draw certain conclusions about what has gone on in the past but there is not a formalised corpus of learning devoted specifically to this question. If there was to be an Institute for the Study of Lessons of World History - a productive way, it may be supposed, if set up with vision of helping students think for themselves - here are some potential examination questions, a list which could of course be extended *ad infinitum*..:

- *Youths festooned with tattoos today might share more values with upstanding Assyrian citizenry of 8000 years ago than generally supposed. If so, does this trend have any pointers deducible as to current cultural trends?*
- *The godless dictators of the twentieth century are cited as exemplars of the perils of letting secularism run riot; the record of mullahs of Iran give pointers to what happens when religion rules the roost. Perhaps other forces or trends or causes were at work as a result of which these examples are merely symptoms not the cause of a deeper malaise?*

- *The Roman Empire before Constantine is a case study of advanced civilisation where Christianity is not an official religion. 700,000 gladiators expired in agony in the arena to entertain millions of sadists untrammelled by conscience, and crucifixion was an approved form of judicial execution, yet the Roman empire was a roaring success. Sophists alive at the time might debate ‘Those whom the gods would destroy, do they first make mad!’. They would think it axiomatic that the gods exemplified man’s dubious characteristics and not just, as today, his best qualities. Why would they be wrong to ask such questions?*
- *Is there is a parallel in relation to the dangers of over-egged veneration of holy writ as in Iran today with the USA constitution where its proper interpretation by jurists is advised, as far as possible, to be as if through the lens’ of its drafters.*
- *‘Is History a good friend but a bad mistress?’*

And then to the questions such as:

We endow our deities with qualities that we admire or that are thought to be useful for us on earth; but, in one sense, that of allegory - see *the ‘Petri Dish’ in the appendix* - it may be in essence a form of truth? What if our deities were emblematical of Nature and they had the qualities of Nature as well as the qualities of humans, much as in the way that the Greeks of old imagined of them? This would include an idea now coming full circle that the qualities that may be ‘on high’ are indeed our qualities: such attributes as found in love, sadism, irony *et al*, feelings that we may prefer not to envisage characterising or hailing from our ideal of the masters or the architects of the universe

Was is it about the endemic Belief Systems that justify their universal existence?

Exam Question:

‘What matters are Value Systems rather than Belief Systems: Discuss.’

Answer of examinee: ‘We hang values on our beliefs as on pegs in our mental frameworks. *Ipsa facto* a belief-system is a glorified form of window-dressing.

Marks: Beta minus.

In the margin of the exam paper is scrawled the expletive: *‘UGH!’*

Comment by the more conscientious type of examiner:

‘This is far too brief as an answer. Candidate failed to address such factors as the boost of Belief Systems to confidence of people in religions or political systems. He is silent on the point of whether it is our values and codes of morality that are *au fond* the pivot of our behaviour. He fails to float such riddles as ‘whether it might matter to a deity if history found as in scripture did not impress a man who likes to question what he reads’. The examinee does not talk about how man’s natural impulses, his need to identify with a tribe or cult, his need for Authority figures, his wish for certainty, and so forth, before going on to consider if these are factors to argue for Value-Systems, as opposed to Belief-systems. Are they, or

are they not, a bedrock of Belief-systems. However much man needs his beliefs, the candidate does not look at whether these needs might adulterate the accuracy of historical and political tenets. Taking religion as an example of a Belief-system, the candidate does not trail the idea: 'How do we know if any Deity of any religion might not prize a practitioner of its values more highly if he was not schooled in its tenets?'

Recommendation in the margin of the examination paper: The ghost of Lenin can think that he has one more recruit for his army of 'useful idiots' despite the fact that the candidate is fundamentally right.

In an Institute for the Study of Lessons of World History, it is to be hoped that examiners have more of a vestige of charity in their approach.

PROBABILITY *vis-a-vis* CERTAINTY

I may be wrong, and often am, but I am never doubt!

- Sir George Jessel to Lord Coleridge



Sir George Jessel 1824 – 1883

The use of a *bon mot*, and a citation of self-confident Authority, as so often, blindsides the listener to a basic problem in an attitude:

Man's Achilles Heel is his sense of certainty. That said, a heel is not a thing apart and it is just as well that men, on some showings, exemplify other attributes of Achilles.

If the word 'perhaps' is perhaps the most underrated word in the language, that is not so in this piece of writing.

The presumption of certainty goes deep. As said above, every sentence that we utter or think has an unvoiced corollary which is: '*I am right to say (or think) this!*'. If it were not so, we would not make the statement unless deliberately lying.'

The 'exception that proves the rule' is that 'It is only the tentative about which anyone can be certain' though there may be exceptions to exceptions. We have little justification to be certain about almost anything else - be it our place in the world, our ability to control our destinies, the behaviour of others, what event will turn out to be for the best, and so on. As things stand, the idea of 'speculation' has a connotation of riskiness. At best, we are entitled to talk only of probabilities. We cannot be 100% certain of our own motivations still less that which it is not given to us to know about any human let alone non-human plane.

Beguiling arguments in favour of what is undue confidence come in many guises: it may be that we are prompted to be as certain as we often are because of the influence of forces we do not understand, Guardian Angels even, or we may be predisposed to think this way from originally prehistoric imperatives, or because the world cannot go on as it does if we import into every decision we make an element of doubt. As the Bard put it in *Hamlet*, much necessary decisive action can be '*...sicklie'd o'er with the pale cast of thought!*'. The word 'sicklie'd' sometimes results from a sick lie.

A person certain of his ground can be right, in one sense, to be positive. We may like to follow such a one, or be him or her. That is beside the point as we may have good reasons for accepting a decision, fear or credulousness for instance being in play. The key issue at stake is not if there is an extraneous reason for believing a proposition, or following orders, but only if a given belief is justified on its own terms. It is not whether or not we like to think that we live our lives as the arbiters of our own destiny, comforting as that might be, but whether this is accurate.....?

The Unexpected, the Unfair, is a part of the world we are in. We may try to guard against it though we should have little realistic choice but to see things as they are. A Fool's Paradise is a lovely place to live but one must expect fools for company as well as an uncertain future. Perhaps in some ways we are all in one. Even where certainty seems most justified, accidents and surprises can throw the best laid plans of mice - a rodent not known generally for its strategic planning ability - and of men. We do not know of all repercussions, immediate let alone eventual, of our actions so 'should be careful of what we wish for' lest the wish be granted.

Example - the fable of 'the Zen Master'. In one version, a 14 year old boy in a village in China many years ago was given a bicycle. His parents were delighted for him but disconcerted at the Jeremiah-like reaction of a Zen Master on their telling him of the happy event. It was: "*We will see!*" Two years later the boy fell off the bicycle and shattered his leg so badly that it was unlikely he could walk again. On hearing of the parental upset, the Zen Master's gnomonic utterance was as previously: "*We will see!*" Two years later, war was declared. Amid enthusiastic patriotism all the boy's peers marched gladly off to do battle but this boy could not go, unfit for duty as he was. He was so upset and yet, once again, the view of the Zen Master who seems to have known only three words, trotted out in unvarying order, was: "*We will see!*" The next time he saw the parents they were on a high; all the other young men had been killed but their son was alive. We know what the Zen Master had to tell them! The story continues until its Delphic point is drilled home - or admirers stop visiting him, knowing in advance what he has to say.

It is a common enough notion without putting the idea into words that there are 'forces' beyond those of logic or planning that determine fate. Napoleon said, on being asked what qualities he most sought when appointing his Generals: "*I look for the lucky ones!*" The

illusion of control is all-powerful and has its practical purpose but, even so, there is the residual and understandable belief that, as 'King Lear' said: '*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport!*'. This is before questions that are fundamental such as: 'How much of 'oneself' did one, oneself, unaided, bring into being?' Genes? Physical appearance? Accident of birth; family; locale, etc? We know all this and then overlook or forget it. Edgar, in *King Lear*, swanking that "*I would have been that I am / had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardising!*" begs the question with a tautology. In his person speaks a familiar type of self-confident control freak. There is no real onus on anyone to accept his preening or that of his ilk other than that it often is convenient to do so.

People's personalities largely are perceived as of a piece in an assumption born of a belief in internal consistency neatly topped up with laziness of mind. People often can suppose that their being good at one thing or admired for it means that in another sphere their knowhow or capacity is much the same.

There can be relative certainty in actions to be undertaken but that very certainty may be enhanced if it is correctly evaluated before such action is taken, such that readiness is at a peak and with foreseeable precautions taken to rule out all but the unknown.

We can only do our best. As said above, we never know the alternative future that did not happen. Three cheers for the tentative! ...And may Achilles go with you! And with all respect to Margaret Thatcher who, asked by Sir Geoffrey Clifton Brown if there was anything different in office that in hindsight she might have done differently, replied: "*No; I think we got all of it right!*" History will be the judge of that... though by what godgiven right?

THE THRESHOLD POINT

Quentin Crisp records in '*The Naked Civil Servant*' that after four years of remaining untouched the dust in his apartment did not increase in level. Most of us, having got onto a track, do not know when to stop. One study shows that '*While money can buy happiness to an extent, after 49 lakhs (approx) per year, increased income does little to boost happiness*' yet on we strive on the Rat Race accumulating to the point when it makes little difference....

How often is the idea stated that there must be one law for everyone. As said above, perhaps there may be situations where the exception proves the rule? The means chosen are not the same as the ends in view, and ends sometimes can be justified?

It is clear what are the thorns that bestrew taking a path of uncertainty in the law but rulings of judges anyway are not known in advance. In a suggestion here for refreshed thinking is the principle itself unchallengeable? (*See piece on English law, below*). In our mental frameworks - and, pious thinking, in even legal thought - there could be a principle that states: '*At a certain point, this framework system may no longer apply.*'

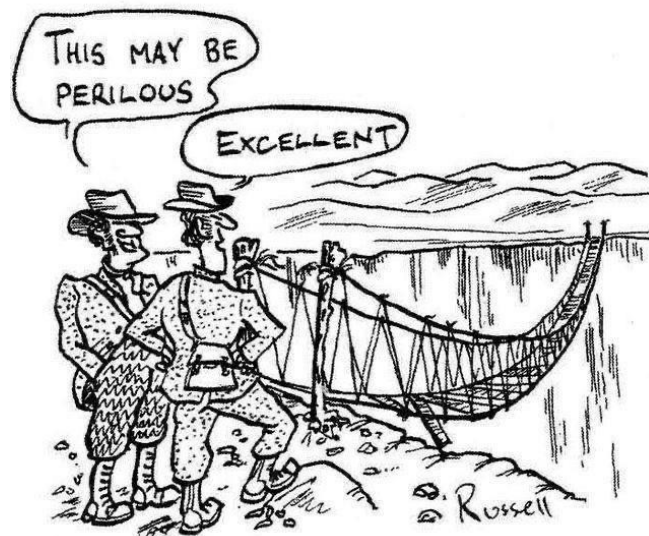
Many 'in-built' concepts derive from observation of how the world works as we see it, and from atavistic sources, and from Nature. The science of the workings of Nature increasingly surprises us - the forces of, say, gravity, do not apply after a certain point. Our remote ancestors would be as men amazed to see how we live. The predictability of events and the feeling of certainty in gauging them is a will-o'-the-wisp, detected by seers of antiquity when inspecting entrails to read the future and ...by us for much the same underlying reasons, different as are the forms of the runes in reading them.

What is at issue here can be seen as a slight variation in one aspect of a peripheral consideration. That said, this re-setting of a basic view about certainty can, where circumstances fit, generate controversy or reap unforeseen repercussions. In some cases, *pace* purists, it is as well to keep an open mind and not be hidebound by rules that were made to fit circumstances that do not apply in some given situations. Each case, arguably, has a claim to be considered at least partly on its own merits.

COULD THERE BE A 'TRAINING FOR WISDOM' ?

(NB This section builds on what was said above in 'Practical Wisdom')

Victorian risk assessment



Hard times create strong men, strong men create easy times. Easy times create weak men, weak men create difficult times.

- *Sheikh Rashid*

No gain without pain.

- *Saying*

If you want a rainbow you have to deal with the rain.

- *Emperor Augustus*

There is no labor from which most people shrink as they do from that of sustained and consecutive thought; it is the hardest work in the world. This is especially true when truth is contrary to appearances.

- *Bob Proctor*

When change is a vital need, sticking to the norms is an existential threat

There is no happiness in comfort, happiness is bought by suffering. This is the law of our planet, but this immediate realization, felt through the process of living, is such a great joy for which it's worth to pay with years of suffering. Man is not born for happiness. Man must deserve his happiness, always through suffering.

- Dostoyevsky

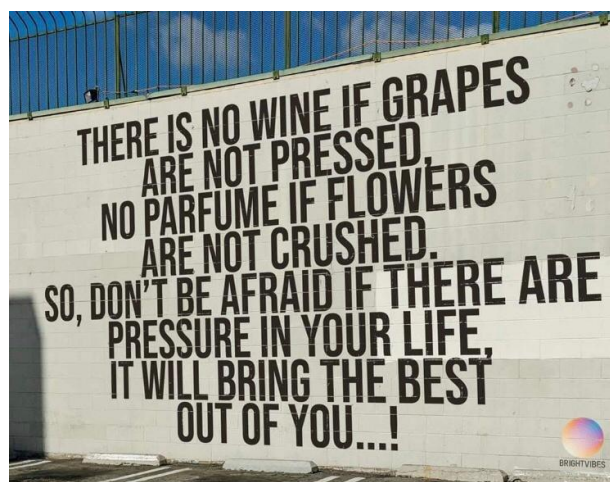
Aristotle, teaching students in early adulthood, told them that if their parents had not already raised them to be virtuous, his lectures would not be able to help them.

'Can wisdom or common sense be taught or enhanced?' Does the answer call for a 'Yes' or a 'No', a common enough 'all or nothing' way of thinking? Common sense may be innate, wisdom acquired by learning the lessons of experience, but they can be enriched by training, as can most qualities.

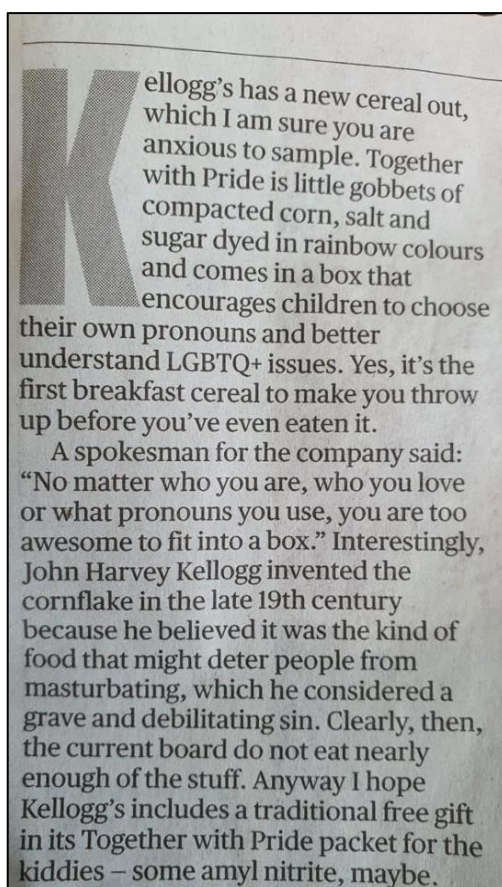
The Israelites, handed down the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments, moved on from Mount Sinai and no historically agreed spot marks the site. It is the only place in ancient Jewish history - it relates to a crux turning point in their fortunes - where no physical marker was put down. It was all too easy; it was just handed to them on a plate, so to speak. Easier by far to accept a verdict that is spoon-fed to one than struggle to acquire it for oneself.

Where is to be found the Boot Camp for Life designed to teach pupils to better adapt to face the snares and delusions of the world and more able to see things clearly, dispense practical wisdom, make wise and realistic decisions, understand where they may have been gulled?

It is easy see why people do not queue up to seek out unpleasantness even if they could learn valuable lessons from it. Featherbedding in a comfort zone has more charm. Feathers have a place within mattresses though not always in pillows.



Commandoes and he-men undergo rigorous training to toughen up and so forth but.... what comparable training do politicians, or opinion-shapers or you and I undergo so as to better survive the School of Hard Knocks that is life? There is a very short list of successful experiments in suchlike social engineering. In Sparta or the Prussian military command or the English public school system, all *passé* in our cossetted era, hard realities consciously were factored into training. In ancient Rome, no soldier could play a full part in *Vox Populi* or even marry until his thirties and his military service was done. Fidel Castro before the Cuban revolution encamped in basic conditions in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Mao Zedong jailed by the Taichi'uts or during his Long March, Elizabeth I - persecuted by Lady Jane Grey amongst others – all had their teeth and wits sharpened by hardship. They learnt from it. But it was a part of their private journey in this Vale of Tears. Mao's elite when he was in power had to spend a month a year in farms mucking out so as to instil in them such lessons. Mahatma Gandhi, on returning to his village in India, was tasked with cleaning latrines. It seemed to him that it was as important and difficult as diplomacy on the international stage. Some people are more aware of their debt owed to hardship. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had a drawer into which, on pieces of paper, he put the names of those who had tried to do him down. Those people gave him his most useful lessons in life, so he said. The principle is understood but not acted on as a point of training save in some rigorous specialist courses for professions. The title of UK TV's '*Boot Camp for Marriage*', not one to appeal to those who compare their betrothed to a Summer rose, is a nod in the direction of the principle.

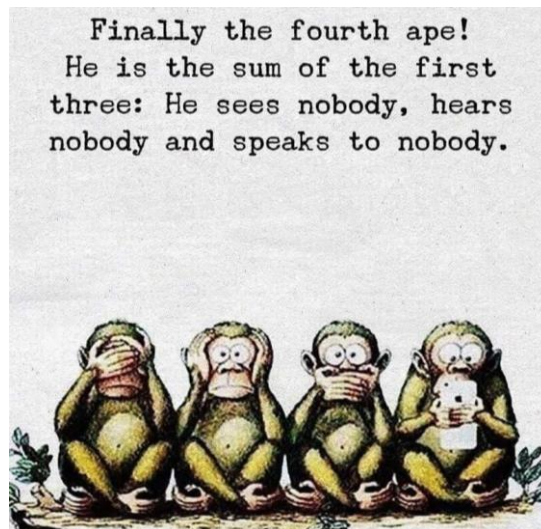


Kellogg's has a new cereal out, which I am sure you are anxious to sample. Together with Pride is little gobbets of compacted corn, salt and sugar dyed in rainbow colours and comes in a box that encourages children to choose their own pronouns and better understand LGBTQ+ issues. Yes, it's the first breakfast cereal to make you throw up before you've even eaten it.

A spokesman for the company said: "No matter who you are, who you love or what pronouns you use, you are too awesome to fit into a box." Interestingly, John Harvey Kellogg invented the cornflake in the late 19th century because he believed it was the kind of food that might deter people from masturbating, which he considered a grave and debilitating sin. Clearly, then, the current board do not eat nearly enough of the stuff. Anyway I hope Kellogg's includes a traditional free gift in its Together with Pride packet for the kiddies – some amyl nitrite, maybe.

The all-important advantages of suffering has been seen by the sections of the intelligentsia. The novelist, Saki, conjured up 'Filboid Studge', the tasty and nutritious foodstuff product at first not selling well despite its initial more enticing name. Sales took off when the Victorian British Public, taught sensibly to 'Grin and bear it', lapped up their opportunity to chew at the re-named horrid-sounding stuff between their Stiff Upper Lips. The unpleasantness was worth it; By Jove, it did them good. Flopsy bunnies, they were not! A ramrod back was the approved posture for an officer and a gentleman. The pill of Victorian education was soured, not sweetened by candy.

The concept of character-building seems outdated but there is purpose in building character that is not geared to outdated goals such as empire-building or martial adventure. What of the goal of monetary profit, etc? For all the business handbooks of instruction, a successful entrepreneur needs qualities of character including, often, nerves of steel. Are the tenets of religion fit for all contexts outside a church? Imagine a boss who did not want anyone upset. How often we hear about the three wise monkeys, who are said to 'see, hear and speak no evil'. Is it true that a wise person sees no evil? The idea is not abroad that this is a charter for a naïvety.



An Ostridge gets no brownie points for hiding its head in the sand but it is not a bird that is commonly pilloried. We should foster the habit of testing what we hear with care. The meek shall inherit the earth but the strong often seem to have got there first. A meek person is often the prey of a narcissist. They look for lonely people with low self esteem and who are also high on empathy. These people are often 'reverse narcissists', meaning, they grew up with the same pressures that tend to produce narcissism, but they chose the 'better' response, and became too empathetic, instead of not empathetic enough.

A rough ride has its uses as a training exercise, an experience attested globally and not just in the UK - an acid test of whether lessons are common to humanity, not just any one culture. 'Endurance' - *Za Gaman* in Japanese - is a TV gameshow where contestants have to endure humiliating and painful rituals. In Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, men jump off wooden towers around 20 to 30 meters high, with tree vines wrapped around their ankles.

There are practical reasons as well. Ancient Egyptian belles slept on pillows of stone to keep their hairdos standing tall. In some areas of the world the salutary principle is taken to the point of absurdity. Wilfred Thesiger, the explorer, recounted the story of a rite-of-passage ritual in North Africa where proof of manhood was killing a young man in an opposing tribe. Thesiger reported years later when revisiting the area that the tribes concerned had died out.

A toughening-up process can enhance appreciation of our lot in life. It can help graphically show how much worse off we might be than we are. The apple does not fall far from the tree. By maturity we may challenge their outgrowths but what of their roots? HOW can, or how CAN, we get our belief systems best adapted to our own times and our communities?

There are piecemeal experiments but at the moment of writing it is not a subject *per se* on which anyone with authority can act. No institute discusses it as a separate and worthwhile objective in itself. One can see why this is so; and yet good leaders are at a premium in societies, religions, schools and companies. No one is directing the process according to a system; it is left to chance.

Is the goal of an objective 'Practical Philosophy of Life' there to score? Could there be a prescription for a 'School for life' other than 'learning on the job'?

One problem is that we are content to learn the lessons in life honed for the exigencies we face, not generally for those we do not face. Another question is: 'what sort of character'? Much of what is said below will be common ground; it is known in general what are the best qualities to foster, from the time of schooling. It also helps to get our belief systems right.

Are we riding for a fall and, if so, can we do something about it? A 'fall' has happened over and over again in personal histories and world history, if with periods of respite. It is likely to go on happening till the tumbles that all but inexorably follow.

It is no good being spoon-fed. It is not easy in our non-reverential age to persuade people that they need 'a taste of cold steel'. No one would listen to a pulpit-thumper of old:

'O beautifully painted Humpty Dumpty in your hardened eggcup, O ye who think not of new paths, content to stroll in pastures of seeming green, the time is nigh to refresh thy ideas! O ye with thy licenses to wiseacre that ye sages and ye Gurus placard, enabling you are to coax or bully others with 'your' opinions - bullies who dance to the clarion of other Authorities and who, one fine day ...will be coming for you!'

...We do not have to adopt the style, be it cast in the pieties, homilies or platitudes of previous eras, or the old bugaboos starting with the fires of hell. There is plenty of scope on this earth to teach us how to live. Individuals all over the shop come forward with 'improving' ideas.

There have been attempts before to re-engineer education but a good starting point to fix problems might be to acknowledge what are the basic problems with more exactness, before trying to fix them piecemeal.

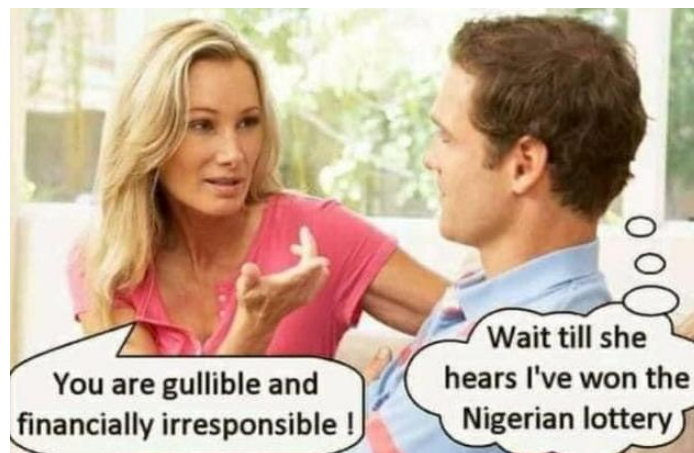
What of the lessons to be learned from history besides the facts of it? Lewis Namier almost single-handedly changed the take on England's history by concentrating on classes of people who had been almost air-brushed out of the reckoning; feminists now fillet history for hitherto under-acknowledged women of achievement. Our lens on the past changes with an eye to the future. Why leave it to axe-grinders to set the purposes when the idea is to get people

objectively thinking aright. If we did that, women of achievement and the people who kept systems of society going would be treated automatically with the respect that they deserve. If, however, feminists are to rule the roost of education, why not consider more concerning the ways in which societies that do NOT treat womenfolk correctly disadvantage all their citizenry?

Then again, why just study military manuals devoted to the outstanding generals when a record and analysis of where and how the poorer sort of generalship lost out would be as condign a lesson? Why study just the military tactics of a Caesar or Clausewitz if military dunderheads furnish examples of what types of generalship to avoid?

Another sort of question, for example, is to ask is why Frederick the Great or Peter the Great were ...not great. Why not study the lives of the known - and the relatively unknown - actors in history, not for their achievements so much as for their lifestyles?

Do whole countries fall prey to living in the mind-set of an earlier, preferred century? We should think about the sort of society, objectively, that will be in the interests of all of us, or as many as possible, in the future. What of the sort of character that is needed now?



Much of what follows will be common ground, but perhaps not all. It is well understood how history has a big part to play in fashioning a perspective on the world. With religious teaching on the wane, morality teaching could be more upfront in taking its place. The experience of evil in the world comes of its own but the awareness of it being something to avoid should be a lesson imbibed with mothers' milk. The morality lessons from history could be dinned more into impressionable heads. WW2, as remarked above, is an epic tale of revenge, with the 'baddies' gunned down in the finale. That idea could be cited more as a piece of human morality which goes to show - at a minimum - that crime does not pay. History abounds with examples of hubris come to grief. That conclusion could be spelled out in primary school textbooks. The 'propaganda value' of such books was understood by past generations. Our forebears promoted '*Our Island Story*' which vaunted the glories of the British Empire. The committed of today have a very different agenda and it could be looked at in the interests of objectivity. The didactic 'Single Issue' tendency is intent on airbrushing out of the reckoning

¹ Nigerian' scam offers on the internet are notorious

historical Greats like William Wilberforce. His campaign against slavery may not *stim* with political correctness. The Blame Game should apportion blame fairly; the reason that *Rule Britannia* has a line like '*Britons Never Shall Be Slaves*' is because of an outcry against African slavers raiding the Cornish Coast.

As with morality lessons, so with emotional lessons. 'Pride', said to 'go before a fall', should be taught as a life lesson, with the hubris of narcissism distinguished sharply from a justified self-belief in an innate talent. That is but one example.

There is talk of sending poets into outer space. It's not to get rid of them on a one-way ticket much as many a millennial might relish the prospect but so that people may better appreciate the significance of the enterprise and 'significance' of the right sort matters.

David Mercer, the playwright, once wrote that '*the discerning pensioner can walk on Mars*'. Empathy is human but it is regarded as confined to relations with living people in the present rather than having application to situations in general or with historical figures from the past. It is no wonder that TV, a medium treated as mainly for entertainment rather than education, is called the 'gogglebox.' The reality of what is seen on TV is not emotionally charged save to discerning people. A University professor was stuttering in shock on TV when telling of his research into the 'second holocaust', which had kept out of the history books by dint of secrecy cloaking Russian archives. The facts of how the Germans in a non-industrial way before the building of their gas ovens killed tens of thousands of innocents through shooting them down in cold blood struck him in force when he saw for himself the ravines of corpses, tangible evidence of what had gone on. There can hardly be anyone alive who has not seen the emaciated figures or corpses of the holocaust on 'the box'. Born at a time when '9/11' was treated by some as the epitome of human massacre, he seemed still not to have a full sense of the tragedy of WW2. Why not? The filmic evidence for instance on TV is clear.

An authorial voice is interposed: last night I had a nightmare. I woke at 5am convinced that I was in a room like a sort of gym where my role was to convince people by sweet-talking them into believing that the fate that they were about to endure was not grim, when it was. 'I' was doing this despite my basic wish to be honest with them because I was scared stiff of the Authority that was ordering me to do this. Why this may have been significant to me I do not know but the sense of fear was palpable. I understood in the moment of waking why people are corralled into doing that which is not to their taste by pressures of the world. How to enshrine that lesson into a more emotionally-felt, permanent sensation that stayed in my mind, giving better understanding of why people in some situations act as they do?

If people understood more of what life was like in London in the blitz or the Black Death, we would be better equipped to deal emotionally with Covid.

It would be helpful if people take on board the idea that there is a threshold point in systems of belief, a point at which what holds good up to that point, no longer holds good thereafter. Fontenelle was treated in many ways as a vapid dilettante devoid of ambition beyond shining with wit in French pre-revolutionary drawing rooms but why consider his philosophy largely to the exclusion his lifestyle; he fought hard to get himself into the *Académie Française* but when he achieved his primary ambitions, he saw the key point - he knew where to stop.

People do think up novel ways of training. By way of an *outré* example, Goldie Hawn, the actress, said that her husband's punishment for his son was to, "...shoot up his car and dent it up, and ride around in it for the rest of his existence." Also - this has bearings on reflection

- a penalty for misbehaviour of her children was to be sent to a corner, and to sit there with the instruction to reflect there on what they had done wrong.

What could be done constructive apart from considering morality as a factor in education?

Much as nowadays we talk of emotional intelligence, a 'Filboid' drug is yet to be rolled out - though no doubt it exists if by another name and purpose - allowing a seeker after truth to absorb useful lessons in life by undergoing a form of self-improvement through a sensation of a harsh reality, one that as a result imprints itself in memory. How could it be done? Here are suggestions and there could be countless others:

This could be in an induced trance under laboratory conditions allowing pupils get genuine experience at first hand of a wholesome shock at a gamut of filmed situations. This would be a dummy run at scenarios best avoided.²

If this idea is taken up there may be alternative ways to achieve the same purpose.

An inter-disciplinary course of hypnosis to implant in the mind suitable scare stories, for instance from dieticians, advising against indigestible foodstuff, so as to induce nightmares, topped up perhaps with a medical potion to bring added sensitivity to the body. This, after careful testing, might impart a realistic early-warning lesson?

An assumption thus far in this piece is that wisdom is freighted with an emotional charge and comes of experience but there is another sort of wisdom, that of sheer common sense, with a flavouring of realism.

How to study a situation and how to disentangle from often complex problems the cardinal aspects of them and then act without going by the book, which so often does not meet the exigencies of the case? The consideration of why people act as they do could be quite a study. In the example of Fontenelle (above) his motives could be examined. All was not as it appeared. King Boris of Bulgaria was considered by Churchill to be a 'weak and vacillating cypher' but Goebbels said he was a 'cunning fox'. Who was right? Was not the very fact that King Boris, whose actions saved the lives of countless thousands of Jews in WW2, left as little evidence of his true intention as possible an indication that evaluations of contemporaries who did not work out for themselves what was afoot are suspect?

Can lateral thinking be taught? It comes down to a state of mind which can be fostered

How to train people to think round corners; how to encourage them to think out of the box?

A key question to be posed in hypothetical situations is 'What are the critical parameters of a situation'? What lies beneath the paintwork and the cosmetics? How to distinguish between 'the use of a principle and the abuse of it'? Hypocritical prating being commonplace, how to train people to be on the watch for it? A normative question to ask may be 'where are the elephants in the room?' Attention to actualities, to motivations, and the stance of being flexed to detect cant goes to cultivating an attitude attuned to sensible goals. Brains' Trust debates as to means and ends more than a regurgitation of received wisdom and facts, might be a way forward. Reflection helps one think clearly for oneself.

² See below piece about life imitating drama

People should be encouraged to think for themselves not being coached. It can become a habit to ask the right question.

As mentioned, a corpus of received wisdom can get in the way of thinking out a solution that is not text book. Facts can clutter the impetus for fresh thinking. There exists an awareness that a collation of cold facts, put together in a presentable array, rarely enough furnishes all the best solutions.

The 'S' level paper, taken with 'A' levels, was designed to test the ability of a student to think for himself. The right result matters and sometimes the intelligent thing to do is an apparently unintelligent thing.

Example: A student does not wish to spend several afternoons of a summer term when he could be studying for 'A' levels playing compulsory school cricket...so he starts playing cricket years beforehand so badly that he is not selected for any team and is detailed off to some subsidiary but less well policed sport and then, come the time of his 'A' levels, he is freed up to study during the time that his compeers fritter away time with willow and leather. Or, a pupil is not good at a subject but needs to pass an 'O' level in it. As with as archer who uses several arrows in his quiver to hit a bullseye, he has several shots at the target, taking the exam not just on one examination board but on several boards.

It is not easy to thumb a nose at 'the wisdom of the ages' till one sees how often that wisdom is not a fixed point, and there are wise ways to accomplish unwise ends. Clear vision counts. Practice with experiment and reflection makes (almost) perfect. Much is revealed if one does so.

The quest of thinking completely afresh properly is far from easy and no one is likely to embark on it with a serious intent until it is seen why this might be a really useful thing to do.

When there is a will, there is usually a way. Therefore, cultivate the will.

FAITHS and RELIGIONS

The centrality of belief-systems and value-systems in our way of thinking prompts discussion about Faiths and Religions in almost any treatise on Reflection.

*Cautionary notes: All adherents of Religions, Faiths, and Cults, be they spiritual or temporal, are hereby assured that **the purpose hereunder is far from an intention to attack anyone's faith.***

People are cordially begged to take up the metaphoric telescope bequeathed by Galileo and look through it at the prevailing wisdom of the day and to see for themselves.

History began when men invented gods and will end when men become gods

- Yuval Noah Harari

'What is faith?' 'It is to believe firmly in what one does not understand.'

Madame du Deffand



The Yaohnanen tribe of Vanuatu believes that Prince Philip, pictured holding a traditional pig-killing club, to be the son of an ancient mountain spirit.

An atheist debunking the possibilities of Life after Death was asked:

'A deer, a horse and a cow and all eat the same stuff: grass so why do they respectively excrete pellets, clumps and flat pattys?'

On the surprised atheist saying that he'd no idea, he was met by the poser:

'Do you feel qualified to discuss Heaven and Hell when you don't know shit!'

Introduction

To give the devil his due, he doesn't have just the best tunes, he can probably afford the best lawyers. Religions may be an excellent thing, and probably are, and for many, many reasons, and it is not in these pages that issue is taken with immemorial truths of Mankind.



The uplifting homily in the illustration above an in-built problem. So too with religion. It is this: are they true or not? You can rest more confidence in your conclusions if the depths of a question have been fathomed to the best of your ability. It may be that all religions say much the same thing and their differing terminologies about matters spiritual and divine help us relate to only the same verities whose deeps we are unable to fathom in a direct way.

What do we really know?

- Most religions arose thousands of years too soon! Leastways their verification seems problematic to sceptics. Many presuppositions of the founders of religions are out of kilter with the needs of today. As a rallying cry 'Render unto President Biden his due and to God, His' may seem less than inspirational?
- Religions are for everyone but you and I might prefer a creed that is tailor-made for us personally? Some of us know that we are exceptional cases, don't we? A 'one

size fits all' system surely can let down the odd needy individual. Imperfection is a part of reality. It is hardly done to cherry-pick at just the parts that we like.

- Geography gets in the way of belief in religions. The Eskimo in his igloo has his work cut out to visualise revelations revealed under the shade of a Bo Tree in Sri Lanka - that is, assuming he ever heard about them.
- Time also gets in the way - you might have died hundreds of years before the Word of Enlightenment spread to your neck of the woods.
- History is a problem. There is for the most part no clear demarcation zone in religious teaching between history and Message. History invites scepticism. Did the Red Sea part for the Israelites by divine dispensation or is there a seasonal receding of those waters? Was Moses given the Tablets of Stone on the top of Mount Sanai or in kilns recently discovered at its foot?
- Why should a gentile unknowingly acting according to Christian tenets be less worthy of salvation than its true believer who has the added and perhaps unfair advantage of scriptural instruction? *'Going to a church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car'*?

Men are thought to be fallible yet men, not even women usually, are the authors of the major religious teachings: every prayer and interpretation of scripture is filtered through the medium of men - with apologies to those with faith in the extra-terrestrial origin of crop circles and similar phenomena. There are so many easy targets for the sceptics but the sacerdotal garb in which they are clothed disinclines people to take pot shots at them....

Mohamed could not write. The Disciples were fishers of fish who surely roped in literary co-editors. Their account was reinterpreted in 325AD in Nicaea by a council whose knowledge of the Gospels, notably of Judas, was coloured by prejudices. Again, neither in their native Vanuatu nor in Buckingham Palace does record attest to Yaohnanen tribesmen making a serious attempt to tackle Princess Alice about whether, by giving birth to Prince Philip - whose claims on deification such as the dedication to the Good of the Realm surely are not to sneezed at - she had mated with the ancient mountain spirit of legends.

Once outside the religious tent wherein such notions are sacred, the fact of the matter is that no Mountain with its spirit came to this Mahomet, squeezing into her bed. We may sigh with relief that her reputation as a woman if not a goddess-mother is relieved of all imputation that she was two-timing Prince Andrew of Greece and Denmark. Buddha made no bones about being a mortal man but he did make all sorts of other bones as his followers seem determined to prove. Each *stupa* is said to contain bones of Buddha and thousands of *stupas* exist.

A quizzical eyebrow can be raised that so much special pleading of such convenience to men in these tales seems to be so prominent.

- Then there are the claims of religion as the sole revealed truth? Jesus was not the brother of Buddha nor was the Prophet consanguineous with Shiva. There is no shilly-shallying. Compromise is barred. Are we to say 'My religion Right or Wrong'? We do not say it any longer of our countries.
- Why gloss over the fact of religious men hand mankind this recipe for one big, unhappy human family. In any case, science these days is familiarising us with the concept that a thing can itself and the opposite of itself at the same time.
- If there is an overarching deity, why is it so focussed on man's salvation? There is a cosmos out there in which most of the prescriptions for a Good Life on earth seem to have little bearing. Is it simply that we say, like Wittgenstein, '*Whereof one cannot know, thereof one must not speak?*' That way lies other problems. Furthermore, science through for instance the discovery of the Higgs particle is familiarising us with the concept that a thing can be invisible but interpermeate and affect everything in the cosmos as part of the natural order without need of its being riven solely to the requirements or wishes of humanity.
- Religions cater to man's inmost drives. (See section in Appendix on '*the Petril Dish*'). Do those promptings guarantee the accuracy of what is concluded as a result? This is to argue backwards from desired outcomes to causes. Man needs stories and moral pointers. Pleasure and ecstasy are incentives to humankind ergo Paradise is a land flowing with milk and honey or it is one of virgins awaiting trysts with martyrs.
- Some teachings constitute an ethical problem; indeed the Old Testament is hardly the last word on good behaviour.

Is there a hint of men arrogating to themselves a fiat to cast thunderbolts from on high, even if the height is only that of a pulpit?

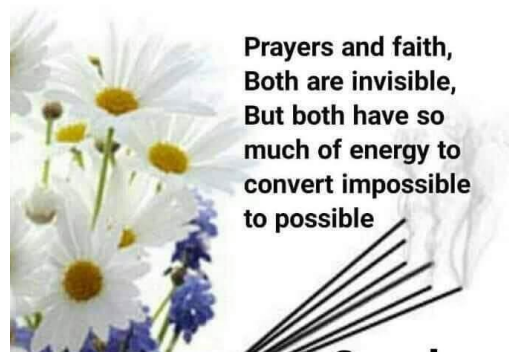
If the Afterlife is composed of an undifferentiated Universal Soul which we re-join after life on earth, who can blame prudish types evincing a distaste at being subsumed into an Entity that contains a soul of Adolf Hitler? The myths or tales of religion may be wonderful but how, for instance, do we know that light is superior to dark? Our beginnings are in a dark womb; the Dark Ages was a fertile mulch for ideas that went on to actuate our lives. Why is Heaven 'up' - some ancient religions saw it as 'down'. A Hindu can boast of a sacred animal, *to whit* a cow. A cat, *Mafdet*, symbolised justice to ancient Egyptians. Did a deity appreciate the sacrifice on alters of his creatures? Old Testament believers demonise the snake in Eden but Eve isn't exactly let off the hook either.

- Why shouldn't a deity be female? In Fiji, a religion's founding father is said to be reincarnated as a turtle which returns to the tribe at times of peril. Peril is probably inevitable as his wife is to be reincarnated as a great white Shark. The tale is not intended as a commentary on the institution of marriage.

- **Religion buttresses morality.** This argues from desired outcome to an initial premiss. Furthermore there is an additional problem. What happens if the culture of one country differs from another? Is there an objective standard? Take the idea of revenge: Christianity advocates 'turning the other cheek' whereas Hinduism in the person of Arjuna enjoins on the faithful fighting the good fight against forces of evil lest they proliferate. There are life-affirming cults and faiths and texts for how to live a good life without recourse to scriptural authority and no end of attempts to date at underpinning morality other than by religion prove that it cannot be done.

And yet, and yet ...

WHAT CAN WE HOPE FOR IN A MODERN RELIGION?



If you want to find the secrets of the universe, think in term of energy, frequency and vibration

- *Nikola Tesla*

There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy!

- *William Shakespeare (in Hamlet)*

The truth is more important than the facts

- *Frank Lloyd Wright*

The need for religions was and is there. They have arisen if with different story-lines all over the world with fundamental truths in common. What surely counts is the essential message? What survives the legitimate questions? What of value can we believe? The answer may be 'Everything that is of value.' Perhaps all our religions are true, and our justifications in

cleaving to them are that we cannot pierce through to a pure truth but they represent the closest to it that our physical bodies can comprehend at present.

The more historical baggage there is, the more at which there is for doubters to take pot shots. Why invite counter-productive controversy?

We can believe in our allegories and a communal or race history that binds us together and so forth but is it not better to aim at factual and intuitive realism in faith rather than in dubious man-made accounts of what may have happened. There is many a truer word spoken in novels that depict the wide canvas of life than in the best researched of history books. Does it matter if the stories in scripture are historically true if the Divine Inspiration behind them is true?

If the categorisation of a 'Religion' is changed to 'Religious history' and treated as though a hypothesis as opposed to holy writ it could help clear away much linguistic confusion.

Maybe it is *idees fixe* about religion that are at fault? Life in general offers probabilities rather certainties and this applies to religious dogmas as to everything else. If people cannot fully comprehend what a Deity is, why does it matter what labels they give to it?

Whatever evil done has been done in the name of religion no-one can say with certainty that the course of history would have been better with an absence of religion. No one knows the alternative future that did not happen. No one can compute how far religion has been used merely as a pretext to further evil or deluded ends of men. Why tie spiritual life to the record of historical figures? Religion's 'ambassadors' may be crusaders, terrorists, misguided if well-intentioned meddlers, perverts or simply people perceived as obnoxious. They tar a religion by association on the principle that *you can tell a man by the company he keeps*. Conversely, and for all we know, it may be that the founders of religions and their disciples and those who compose prayers and commentaries are impregnated by a Holy Spirit. It may have been a gigantic ruse on the part of an unimaginable deity using necessarily human instruments to accomplish its design?

There surely is something amiss with religion's conceptions of gods. Why should they be He She or It? We do not feel comfortable with considering a prospect like androgyny being a likely attribute of a god. It may be how we like to think in general. Any physical familiarity that we commonly attribute to a god-like figure surely is an irrelevant, superficial point.

What could a religion for today look like if it was flexible enough to take account of the experience and evidence of the last hundreds of years? 'What came first' can be different from 'What came first is right'? Philosophers and moralists have yet to get their teeth into some of the findings of scientists. Why should there not be an all-seeing and all-powerful God in way that we do not understand? It is not so difficult to envisage since the advent of the navigational GPS! In the GPS for cars, there is a practical illustration of how a myriad of questions may be answered about different journeys from different drivers, at the same time. If a simple enough mechanical contrivance can accomplish all this, a Deity no doubt could do much the same.

We may see the Hand of Providence in our destinies, the part played by fortune. If we can never be certain about anything, this seems as good a hypothesis as any.

Maybe the world in front of our eyes, and through our telescopes, is so utterly amazing that we just do not credit fully what we are seeing and as usual take for granted that which is the

'given'. Grace is often said before a meal but it is not customary after a meal to give thanks for what was eaten. Familiarity even with miracles stales them. We are shown the incredible world and cosmos and simply do not deify them because we know of them.

It is now accepted that 'primitive' peoples deeply know much that more advanced societies have forgotten - though it does not stop us debunking their theories as if it is the theory not the deeper truth that matters. Some people see what matters: David Attenborough says of aboriginal culture *'Although the Dreamtime was in the past, it is also coexistent with the present, and a man...can become one with his 'dreaming' and experience eternity.'*

Are we to say for sure that reports of truth-inducing jungle plants which give ideas of astral travel to those under its spell or the many reports for instance of phenomena like levitation, or recall of previous lives - accounts of which seem to crop up anew in each succeeding generation - must be just so much hooey because, true, we can isolate instances of 'fake news' about them?

Do animals have purer emotions than those of mankind because not filtered through a process of ratiocination and so can light us the way to seeing our essences?

Proof of divine revelation may yet be coming. What scientist may arise armed to the teeth with Facts to set us straight?

The fact is that in spiritual terms we do not know where we come from. That is not the case as regards our origin physically in the stars.

We wish to reach for the stars, and this could be a form of 'like gravitating to like'?

The random nature of the movement of matter in physics may be of relevance to the laws governing our innate natures and our purposes as much as to what lies behind the universe. Sub-particle physics goes far towards explaining physical occurrences. They are more random than formerly supposed. Building blocks are often not where one supposes them to be. Physical laws like gravity once taken as a gospel seem to have less relevance beyond our planet.

It may be that our spirit life is a component of ourselves continuing on after life. It may have an existence that is not physically based.

There is a belief nowadays that there is something Up There or 'surrounding' us. It can be in the form, it is increasingly said, of Mother Nature or related to the circularity of time or a space/time syndrome or identification with the cosmos in some form. The composition of metabolism may well be more susceptible than hitherto commonly believed to the power of thought. Spirituality may be a matter of the frequency and form of vibration. There is much talk of the Energy that informs our world, the Unseen World being the actuating groundwork of our lives. Vibrations arguably are the truth behind the world, or wave forms, with time and space being the true illusions.

What of the circularity of time that is increasingly respectable as a theory in physics? We can see what this may mean in personal terms even if it is not our familiar way of thinking about the world. It can seem as if, no sooner than something is thought of, it happens. We plan events and our consciousness or mental world - a *leitmotif* through our life - stays much the same. The planned event takes place and then it appears to happen at almost the same moment in time. It is as if time collapses in on itself. In a biblical turn of phrase, *In the end*

is the beginning. There are different continuums apart from the purely chronological. The thinking of a young boy on a given subject may be forgotten till, at some time later, the same subject crops up - and then the young boy and the middle-aged man are, so to speak, in the same time-frame. A mood, dimly-remembered, surfaces in the mind and connects the self with the same or similar past feelings. It is not the end or the beginning as in a story-book narrative. What counts is an ongoing tale. It is perhaps circular, with time coming round again - the story as a whole entity in itself.

We have an idea; it seems to strike one at a given moment that is identifiable. That idea did not pop up in a vacuum. It was linked with and based on another idea or set of ideas that occurred in the past. There are whole sets of ideas where past and present ideas came together in one instant in time. Each memory may have a grounding or tracery in a physical nano-cell. It seems odd if clearly demarcated ideas emerge from an undifferentiated 'cloud'; it seems more likely that a mental event kick-started the correlating physical event. Ideas surely are specified somewhere even if there is the coming together of different overlays over a period of time.

So much of what we hope for in a religion may be allowed into our belief-systems if the vernacular of our beliefs is revisited. For instance, it may be thought that, when we die, we will see our loved ones again, perhaps in a purer form and shorn of some of the myopic baggage picked up in their journeyings on earth. The implications of the circularity of time, a respectable scientific theory, allow in as a possibility that which many psychics testify as examples of prevision or seeing into the future. An Afterlife and also Pre-life becomes more possible

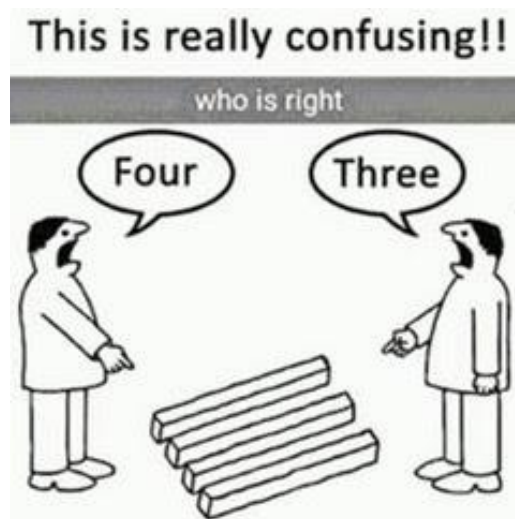
If Man or Woman is in the pattern of a Deity, why not the planets, stars, or the 'lower' animals of which we may be part? It is said that man is in the image of God and if true it also may be vice versa? If there is a Being like us in ways that we do not understand - a man-like being that is the deity - we do not anyway understand the essence of man.

Why assume that emotions are unique to our consciousness? Why assume that our consciousness is a thing unique because we cannot or do not yet understand enough of what actuates the rest of the Universe? Emotions like anger may be perceived by our conscious minds as unique but this may be only a medium - the filter that we see - rather than a true message. A human may in some ways be akin to a planet with a volcanic gaseous core moving through space in different dimensions. Anger, say, may not just be a trait of the animal kingdom in which we are included. A volcano may be said in a sense to be angry though we doubt - without knowing - that it can be conscious of itself as we have self-consciousness. It was scientifically established by Masaru Emoto that water reacts adversely to angry words. There is no suggestion that water is a sentient being.

We each play host to billions of inter-connected cells and each of these cells has its own existence, a life-form looking out on the world from inside ourselves. Apart from the New Age idea of treating our body as 'a temple', deliberately ingesting nutrients and so forth, we pay those lifeforms in us scant heed. They go their own sweet way inside us and are taken for granted. We think little of these dependents of ours. They played their part in setting us up and making our bodies what they are but we feel no call for gratitude for their assistance. Under immense magnification the nano building blocks inside our bodies do not look in any way human; they seem more like serried ranks of waving coral. Their being our springboard from which we take action plays no part in our decision-making. If we take risks with our

lives we do not remotely worry that we may jeopardise the existence of all these myriads of our dependents.

If a microscope comes before a telescope and if there is a way to understanding the cosmos that includes an understanding of microcosms, we are entitled to look at the internal basis in a human being in terms of his smallest components. Telescopes and microscopes are so powerful these days with some able to detect the light and heat of a candle twelve miles distant. Instruments probe untold light years into the what we can detect of the universe - it is estimated by some as but 4% of the total, assuming indeed there is a 'total'. Instruments trained into the deepest sub-strata of our bodies reveal nano-matter of which we are composed. Under this mega-magnification serried ranks of gently waving, coral-like 'building blocks' greet our eyes. There are billions of them apparently outnumbering the stars in the universe. To see them, they do not in the remotest degree seem 'human' and yet, there they are, inside of us making us tick. A fantastic story! It is a small leap to go from there to describing it as a miraculous one.



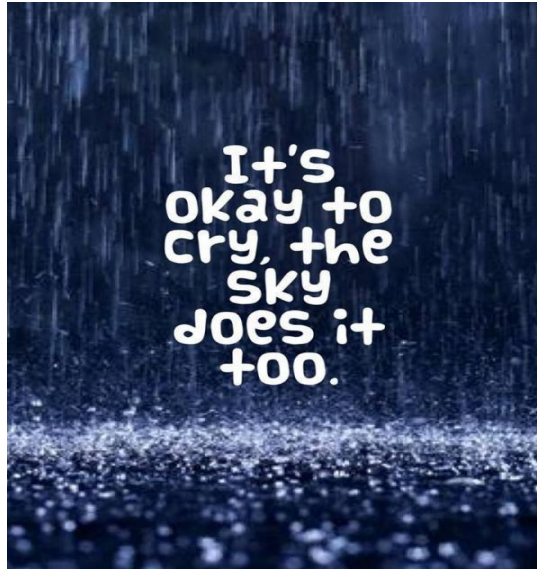
There may genuinely be more than one way of looking at ideas, and both be correct.

A sense of how little we truly know should be at the core of our beliefs. How does Man know if an apparently inanimate planet may not have a life of its own that is veiled from our understanding? There may be more in common in a planetary life form with emotions of a man or animal in the cosmos or several cosmos-es than we care to think. All matter of which we are composed derives from Outer Space. We hail from the stars and the matter in us is from outer space. You and I did not exist a few decades ago. To say the obvious - which is often overlooked - generations happened from the womb onwards. Where *au fond* did any of this come from?

If we are to pick and choose the laws of nature for where they apply to religion, perhaps we could make a different selection. Neptune, Jove and the host of deities to who we have genuflected may for instance be too large-scale for the pattern we could be seeking? Is there a mirror in Nature to the myths and Legends which form and explain our collective consciousness? The Pitcher Plant might be likened to the Beautiful Sirens who would lure

sailors to their Doom...the plant lays a beautiful trail for insects to follow tight up into the delicious pool into which the insect topples and are drowned and are then in-gorged, etc.

We do not know where our own ideas come from, let alone the cosmos. An unlocking of secrets of the universe may come from looking within ourselves?



Ask poets wherein lies the explanation for their inspiration? Often as not, they will say it is inspiration or divine inspiration and they do not understand from where comes the prompting that they then chisel into shape with their partly conscious minds. What is behind our every thought? We do not know even what is going on at the centre of each and every one of us! If it is so within us, mankind, why may it not be the same thing throughout the Cosmos?

Compare hypothetically the Essence of Man with the Almighty Cosmos. Why should there not be the gravitation of 'like' being attracted to 'like', the small to the great, the infinitely small to the infinitely great? Perhaps we can be conceived as a piece of the Almighty Hologram. Men and women, individually, may have their assigned place as infinitely tiny cogs in the wheel. There are infinitesimally small cogs of nano-matter in each of us, a similarity with the cosmos that comes down to a central feature of man that is shared with the cosmos. 'Deep can call unto Deep' and we accept that this is a case of 'chemistry', of intangible understandings. This may link in with the question of origins. Perhaps the Deity ruling our lives, our worlds, is a mega-gigantic version of ourselves. It happens in holograms as much in Brighton Rock. Any part of fragment is a mirror image of the whole. Maybe the entire cosmos is one tiny cell in a mega-'Man' (presumably not an exact replica writ large) walking around asking these very questions in some comparable form?

There may well be a level behind all this speculation that is not given us to know and which we may not be supposed to know at the present levels of our understanding. It can be compared with an Afterlife which, if it exists, cannot be explained to us in factual terms that we are geared to understand; for one thing, the moment we know for sure, absolutely one hundred per cent certainty and no room at all of any doubt whatsoever, that any one of the gamut of explanations about the Afterlife are true, then all of human society is altered. We would know only too well what ultimate fate would befall us on our putting a foot out of place.

This may all be conjecture but nonetheless it opens up a window into what might be a Divine Nature of a sort that was not conceived in biblical times. If the truth were 'out there' how else could we revisit our pasts than as in the form of a spirit or ghost, unable to tamper with what was already to happen. The truth must be out there. It may be much as we may conceive it but in a form that we are unable to reduce to our form of communication, language.

What to do?

What in practical terms might be the direction in which to go as regards a freshening up of the way we look at religion?



The idea that the Abrahamic Faiths should co-exist peacefully as do the Hindu and Buddhist faiths where the respective temples can be placed side by side has recently received a fillip from the plans for an Abrahamic Family House, a centre comprising a synagogue, a church and a mosque, that are being unveiled in New York, and being discussed in Abu Dhabi.³

There is a new religion today that seems to take more account of most of the above issues than most others, and it is the Baha'i faith.

If we are to have a religion, why not one that attempts to reconcile the different ideas of all religions, one that does not upset deeply-held beliefs? Jews, Christians, Muslims can also be Bahai's. Bahai's say prayers like those of the other religions but shorn of controversial historical baggage. The Baha'i Faith enjoins justice as being supreme. It forbids criticism of anyone else on the grounds of their religion. It advocates a world government to deal with problems arising in the human family, which should be united. Its founder has a biography from recent times that withstands scrutiny and his visions were witnessed. Baha'u'llah is said to be in the line of descent from all major prophets. He is a candidate for being a man adapted to the requirement of our modern era, with a set of moral precepts for the good of all. It is the world's fastest growing religion, persecuted as it might be in Iran. If the power of religious faith can be harnessed to a belief in and loyalty to a system by which society is

³ See: <https://youtu.be/6mWCNVFPTeg>

run, then the cause of International Order might be served by a conversion to the Bah'ai Faith, which *inter alia* posits the need for World Government.

Then again...

It might be an idea to act according to the principles of a gambler and hedge our bets? Who wishes to take on a little-known, invisible and possibly omnipotent opponent just because we cannot see him? Voltaire, asked on his deathbed to renounce the Devil, burst out '*At a time like this, to be making Enemies!*' We may no longer need to '*keep hold of nurse for fear of something worse!*' As with girls and boys, so with adult society; as with history so with post-history: we are entitled to grow up, to be independent after being looked after in our vulnerable years.

How can morality can be justified if there is no religion to underpin them? How to ensure co-operation and good behaviour within society assuming this to be justified? Nietzsche in '*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*' said that the world was turning away from an objective foundation for morality; if people no longer believe in God they can no longer recognize absolutes with respect to morality. He failed to get the recipe right with his *Superman* and his view and the twentieth century experience of secular dictatorships has been seen as anchoring morality more firmly in religion. Figures like the Oxford philosopher, Philippa Foot, do not have a sufficiently widespread reputation as to gain more acceptance for her view that: '*There is one idea of rationality and one idea of morality and somehow you have to reconcile them. They're not separate. From the beginning, if you like, morality leads rationality and not the other way round.*'

We may like to think there is a Judge over all our Actions and nowadays, with beliefs in a circularity of time and a space-time continuum as well as other dimensions, who knows if 'there is not an Almighty Book wherein all our actions are logged'? It seems unlikely of course that it will be a 'book' with pages and writing but maybe the truth can be allowed into our thinking via a back door, that of allegory?

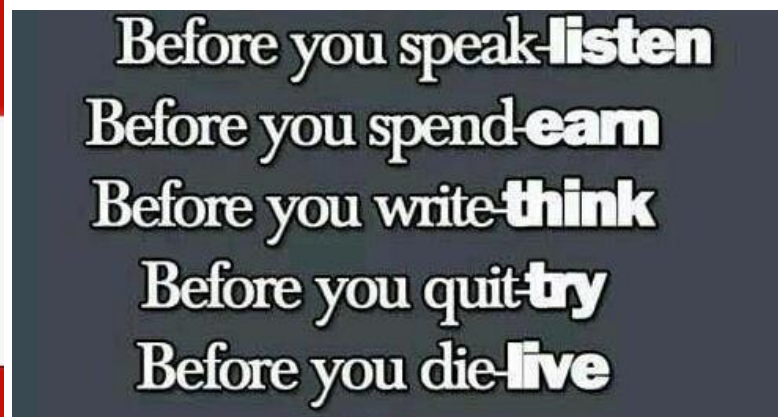
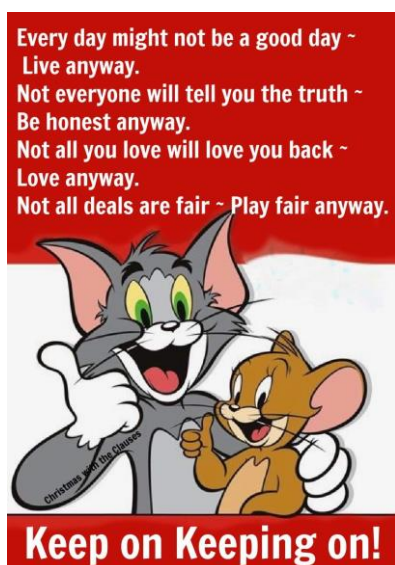
Some people may not care overmuch about these questions; they go their own sweet way irrespective of how they came by their beliefs. There are people who have their own credo in which commonly accepted religions have little appeal in the light of the claims of the morality of their *esprit de corps*.



That however is not the only legitimate way of thinking about how to conduct the affairs or fashion the beliefs of man. The truths of religion are not to be junked if some claims are deemed surplus to requirement; traditional ideas of morality can be used to point up some of the immoralities in the scriptures. Right-thinking about cardinal virtues such reliability, integrity, efficiency can replace the Big Words with their whiff of brimstone and their promises of harps and heavenly coronets.

Education as always should be part of the long-term process to instil in impressionable minds an idea that conscience is a bedrock of integrity. Science can be harnessed to demonstrate the all-importance of cooperation, for the good of the species if nothing else. Such sayings as that of Wilkes - '*We should all hang together or assuredly we will all hang separately.*' – or, for example, the *pensée* '*Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn!*', make memorable common sense. They can be derived from a law of Nature: 'a house - no less than a wolf pack or a planet - divided among itself must fall'. We are all under the same immutable laws. Atheists can go along with the law of karma and think 'what goes around comes around'. Work could be done in honing all of this into a tool of persuasion. Examples are legion. Consider (*as above*) the modern tyrants who, heedless of empathy or compassion on their way up, were kicked like dogs into gutters on their way down. Psychology can show how and why ill doings affect adversely their doer more than the hard-done-by. Several cults, faiths or ways of life advocate ways of being in touch with higher centres that are beneficent, for instance *the seventh chakra*. The more these are buttressed by reasoning or science that appeals to the practical mind, the more effective surely will be their recommendations.

Who will be the seer who writes for '*Why We Need right-thinking Morality in an age of Scepticism and How we can Believe in it?*' The hope surely must be that he can have a go at the pernicious ideas popularised by Nicolo Machiavelli that cloak tyrants in an attractive mantle of *realpolitik*. It may be that there is scientific or statistical justification for the workings out of the law of karma. As matters stand, there are prescriptions for how to lead a morally worthwhile life and life coaches who can tell us the best way to live without having to deliver sermons from an accredited place of worship:



There is much to which we can cleave if the goal is to buttress morality of the type that traditionally has been the province of religion. We await science to further light the way. It no doubt will go beyond what once was treated as the 'supernatural' and which now is rendered more manageable as being 'natural.' The process of trying to winnow the beneficial effects of right-thinking morality - leaving aside the question of what this is - in terms of measurable effect on our bodies is one promising field for debate. There is no need to worship the sun, or fire now as deities, or see the bolts of Thor in thunder. Natural explanations are there to see in their superpowers.

Religion affords us hope; there is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

He who drinks oblivion of a day, so shortens he the value of his soul. It is a hard saying and a hard man wrote it but it lies at the root of all character.

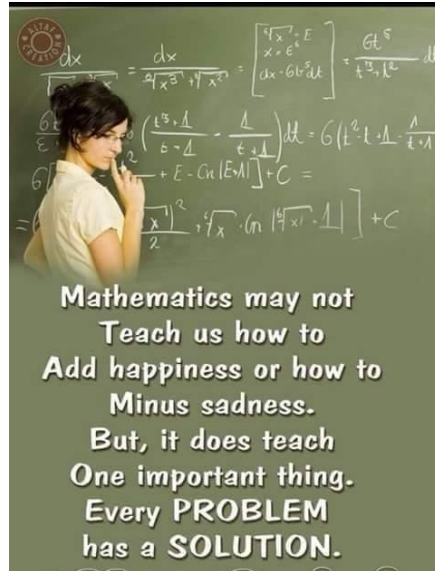
- E. M. Forster

There is an awful lot of dross on which we put an awful lot of gloss.

The concluding check-list below, obvious in places, takes an *Occam's Razor* approach - the principle that 'entities should not be multiplied without necessity'. The simplest explanation is often the right one. In general, questions throughout are posed, rather than answers given. The ingredients in the Petri Dish (*see above*), how they play through into unnecessary intolerance, lack of receptivity to worthwhile ideas, a tendency to throw the baby out with the bathwater, uncalled-for certainty, overweening ambition and an undue reliance on traditional belief systems that do not stack up on examination, etc, may bear reflecting on rather than dismissed as that which we for the most part know. If people grow more aware of what might be underlying issues and sift more evidence, decisions as to what part to play in the world at large are more likely to accord with utility and common sense. Perhaps at a pivotal juncture or crossroads, and in many contexts, the ebb and flow of opinion can be diverted into the most viable channels. If it is so that 'man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn' then it follows that man's humanity to man can give cause to countless thousands to celebrate.

- We can go wrong in fundamental beliefs is because of tendencies innate in us.
- We should have courage in our convictions only when they are fully tested.
- Great ideologies often do not work out in practice.
- People often do not see what is in front of their noses.
- The 'Given' may be miraculous.
- Inner human chemistry, a key, is often not reducible to words.
- Identical language can be used to mean different things to different people.
- Our mental framework adapted in the past for survival may need reviewing.

- What holds good in one context more often than not need not be so in another.
- That which is not to our taste may yield up lessons.
- We tend without realising to think in terms of polarities.
- There is a threshold point after which what was correct no longer holds good.
- We can and should delve only as far as we legitimately can
- We should accept a 'bottom line'; a quest need not be unending.
- Ideas, symbols, beliefs are invested with importance by man, not 'out there'.
- We cannot know what we cannot know.
- Reach for any star within reach.
- Cultivate a healthy disrespect for the internet word.
- Before taking articles of Faith on trust we should be satisfied as to their origin.
- Nano-matter, man and cosmos may have more in common than now thought.
- Intelligence should be used in the service of objectivity, not prejudice.
- If our goal is to leave our mark, what is the best form that mark should take?
- Common sense is underrated by those citing a corpus of Authority.
- We should from time to time remember what we have all but forgotten.
- In the slip-ups between 'cup and lip' is often found the true path.
- The Moving Goalpost is a common rule of the game of life.
- Tedious detail can lead to true adventure.
- Sense of self can lead to false narrative.
- Humility! Tolerance! Perfection does not exist.
- Render unto society its due and spirituality its due and ourselves our due.
- You are your own guru.
- We are not necessarily what we want.
- Knowledge about ourselves is power over ourselves.
- Awareness of ironies helps give a balanced perspective.
- Cultivate a tendency to think carefully.
- Accept that unfairness is built into the system even if justice is the ideal.
- Assign blame where it is due.
- Principles are general guides; circumstances are unique.
- Long-held Truths may hold true for different reasons than we think.
- Self-brainwashing: that way lies 'anal-retentiveness' then anal-diahorrea
- Practice reflecting, taking time for it, even when apparently not needed.



A thing ain't over until it's over

- Yogi Berra

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APPENDIX

THE 'PETRI DISH' as defined in this piece is an *ad hoc* list of drives and urges in each of us. It contains no surprises, a throwaway observation or two possibly excepted. Some modern artwork which puts an ordinary, everyday object stage centre so that it is considered afresh is a parallel sort of exercise. This 'plateful' of different strands in our make-up is rarely considered in one go and long familiarity with it disinclines people to take a second look.

What chance has objectivity against ego? Most drives in the Petri Dish do not seem 'objective' but tapered to what is required by the facts of humanity. 'If these are the drives of men, their nature...', one can ask, '...it is hardly surprising that all over the globe there arise religions of a comparable sort. Are religions true to all their facts or are they basically the result of what man needs to service his drives?' (The awkward squad might counter '...Or both?') There would seem to be a good reason for our holding fast to our beliefs that may have little to do with the beliefs themselves and much to do with our inmost needs to hang on tight to them. What applies to religion applies to almost everything else, politics included. This list of innate drives taken singly or especially when taken together can result in skewed judgments and, so, decisions that may be called into question.

In addition to our drives, there is our biology. Physically, defecation and expectoration gives a feeling of satisfaction to a clearing out. We are programmed to bring order out of chaos.

We think with a communal mind as well as our own. It reinforces the conception of individuality. Some societies or social groups play the individual's role down, some play it up. Much of what we think is our personal way of thinking is a borrowing from this communal mind; if we ask ourselves if what we are thinking or feeling is 'normal' the answer is largely to do with what we think other people think about the norm. You and I are separate from others and, above that, familiarity with perceived reality puts others at a discount while we 'big up' the self. See yourself in a crowd, and you are but a titch, a moving dot. What do you see when you are in that crowd? Answer: 'A crowd.' The idea may occur to you that each of the other 'dots' is a world unto itself like you but it is an abstract idea for the most part, not an odd departure from the fact of the matter.

A perspective on the world wells out of the Petri Dish. If we perceive the world slightly differently than the way that we do at the moment - it can hardly be asked that we depart too radically from much of the 'given' - might we set about doing things in a slightly different way? Marginal shifts in some aspects of basic thinking if and when fed through into the communal mind after due gestation and cross-fertilisation can make a difference to the outgrowths that form systems of belief. A slight shift in the current of thinking at its inception can have far-reaching consequences.

The final section of the Appendix relates to advantages for TRAITS AND CHARACTER that follow from practising OCCIDENTAL MEDITATION.

Here is one principle as a curtain-raiser to the Petri Dish: irony. It operates throughout our lives but is not commonly seen as of especial importance. If it was treated as one keystone of our thinking, might a different way of doing some things in some contexts result?

THE IRONY PRINCIPLE

including

THE 'DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD' principle *and* THE 'MOVING GOALPOST' principle
and 'THE PROXIMITY PRINCIPLE':



Momus Criticizes the Gods' Creations, by [Maarten van Heemskerck](#), 1561

Irony had its own Deity in the Ancient World pantheon, Momus. Long on fault-finding and, by daring to critique the other gods, given importance, Momus himself does not fully grasp why he might have had so high a standing. His place in the pecking order of principles underpinning human morality comes partly of his commendable penchant for speaking unpalatable truths to power.

The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones

- *Shakespeare*

That is ironical.

Yin and Yang from ancient Chinese philosophy but the words are not in common parlance and give only a generalised concept of dualism, in which '*seemingly opposite or contrary forces may actually be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world, and how they may give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another.*'

That is ironical.

So often one is snookered! One simply can't win hands down! Differing imperatives within one's own nature or a given situation are at odds. The no-doubt admirable sensitivity that calls into being Political Correctness so as not to offend against sensibilities can hamstring free expression and leave one too open to treading on eggshells when dealing innocently enough with other people. The thick skin necessary to politicians in order to ride over insulting imputations from across the spectrum is at odds with the need for humane decision-making. Prayers and Moral tenets can go contrary to the need to succeed. Etc, etc...

That is ironical.

He who laughs last usually laughs longest.

That is ironical.

The law of Karma - 'What goes around comes around'

That is ironical.

An indication that a putative All-Seeing and All-Knowing architect of the Universe could be an ironist is death. To personify it, it surely is having a good old chuckle at man's posturing.

THE MOVING GOALPOST: What is right today may not be right judged by the standards of yesterday or tomorrow, or somewhere else. We do not know the future vantage point and so never know for sure what act or plan will make what difference to any given situation.

Examples of irony abound

- The age at which one feels impelled to enquire into metaphysical matters is the same age at which one has not the experience to see the fullest picture. 'If youth but knew; if age but could'.
- Inclusiveness occasions exclusiveness.
- Daughters in general tend to take after their fathers, sons after mothers. In the 'war of the sexes' a by-product is that men and women are more likely to have it in for the gender that is closest in character to them.
- Thinking about a thing means that we are not fully experiencing it. Thinking about the essence of self can mean being less conscious of it.

- Hinduism has not been responsible for much warfare - The religion that causes little trouble is the one that approximates most to a code to idolatry.
- The trappings of power foster counterproductive, egotistical leadership.
- The weaker one is, the harder people tend to hit on one.
- Independence is more likely to be achieved when not being independent, *ie* acting with other people.
- Love can give rise to jealousy.

Examples of sayings that can be seen as ironies:

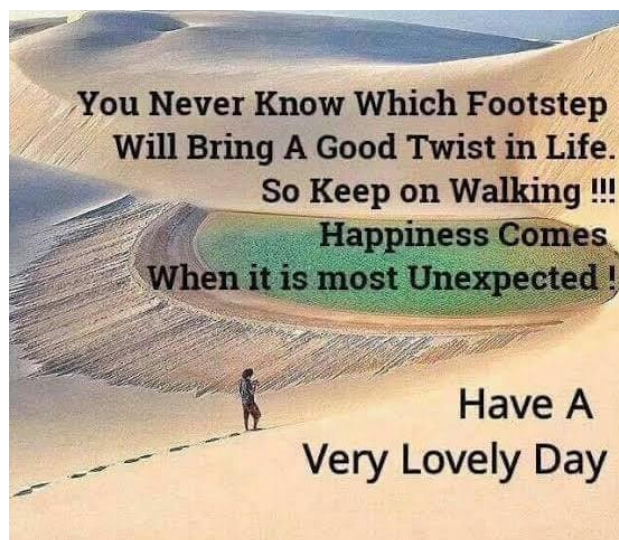
'It never rains but it pours';

'Troubles never come singly';

'The tail that wags the dog';

'Be careful what you wish for, else you might get it!'

The Moving Goalpost and the ***Double-edged Sword*** upends the 'best laid plans of mice and men'.



- People are more likely to remember a slight than a favour. Politicians who fall from grace are often remembered for a calamity that befell them rather than the positive work they might have achieved.

- Hitler tried to wipe out the Jews but after 2000 long years they have their homeland back, largely as a result.
- The flower of British manhood, nearly a million men, died in the first world war and, by doing so, were unable to powerfully add to the voices of those who would be around to uphold traditional British culture.
- Brutus and his confederates killed Julius Caesar because they believed in the Republic and by doing so played a major role in ushering in the era of the Roman Emperors. Would Augustus have been keen in further dynastic aims of his family if he could have foreseen Nero or Caligula?

It is ironic that it is the Jester of the Court in medieval times and Shakespeare's plays who points out that the emperor is wearing no clothes - another irony.



'The Fool' (Momus), on an 18th-century playing card

'Many a true word in a jest.'; humour is among the qualities said to differentiate man from the other animals - though a cat playing with a mouse or a whale chucking a baby porpoise in the air may disagree. Laughter has a part to play in a sense of proportion, in seeing us as we are. In the most serious affairs, it pays to have a sense of balance.



"Laughing at your own mistakes can lengthen your life."
- Shakespeare

"Laughing at your wife's mistakes can shorten your life."
- Shakespeare's Wife



It is arguably an irony how disproportionately few words there are to describe love or most relationships. A friend is seen as a friend rather than it being assumed that he might be a friend only in some contexts but not others; nor do we consciously import as an ordinary rule of thumb into our considerations a '**PROXIMITY PRINCIPLE**: every relationship can be assessed on a 'quotient of proximity'. There are no-go areas, spaces between individuals, depending on the degree and the time etc. up to which we are comfortable with spending time with them, taking them into our confidence, and so forth. True, other principles tending to much the same effect do come into play *viz* 'familiarity breeds contempt' or a threshold of *ennui*, or interposing too far into private stuff. 'What sort of a friend or lover and how close should he or she be?' is a question we could pose up front, a variant of 'Horses for courses' though applied to a proposed direction of relationships.



The irony principle if taken as a central consideration in our moral compass can affect marginally our general attitude. A fuller sense of the irony with which our world is shot through can give us a better-balanced perspective; in our perspective is our balance. It can help us see the overarching scheme that assigns our best efforts and intentions their appropriate place and, by so doing, redirect travel towards that lodestar. We can take on board why not to take ourselves too seriously or perhaps where we need to be more deeply serious. Goals may change or be strengthened by harnessing brain with heart in a more conjoined track. A clearer perspective on life in all its sometimes-crazy

dimensions rather than a static or binary way of looking at the world will help make us become more rounded and realistic. We may be more disposed to take the long - and the wise - view. We can be less disposed to see relationships in terms of 'black and white'. We can fight shy of seeing a label more clearly than the reality to which it refers. As we know, the mere fact of studying a subject in depth means that one is prone to imbibe the well-argued biases of authors just as, if we work in an institution we align our thinking loyally alongside its standards - this approach we can bring to bear on our truer selves and ideas if we enjoy life's underlying ironies by becoming more aware of them. It will enable us to allow more rein to our authentic biases. Disposition-wise, we may become more tolerant. The rules of good behaviour and morality that men ideally hold in common such as 'Do unto others as you would be done by' and 'Don't kick a man when he is down; he might get up!' conjure up the ironical *leitmotif*. There is always satisfaction in seeing a self-assured person of malign intent hoist by his own petard and consciousness of life's ironies encourages one to absorb that *shadenfreude* into a meaningful code by which to live our lives. If irony is sensed all around us it becomes a more of a pivot in our overall thinking. This may impact for the better all those causes that we espouse.

THE PETRI DISH

TENDENCIES IN MANKIND THAT CAN SKEW OBJECTIVITY

A non-exhaustive Guide

Notes:

- *The tendencies listed below are a non-exhaustive check-list with observations thrown in for good measure. It will be clear that only a passing mention is given to each category and there is much more that can be said about each of them and points of relevance will have been touched on elsewhere in this piece.*
- *Several categories overlap and many ideas are interlinked.*
- *Deliberate tendencies toward evil are not listed. Many 'better' tendencies in our nature are not itemised.*
- *Many tendencies are almost too obvious to mention, often underpinning our main drives as enumerated below, For instance, trust plays a vital role in our lives, the expectation that certain repercussions will follow on certain actions.*

The way we feel about ourselvesis a journey with different stages...Sometimes we need to unpack these individual components and question them, to strip back all of those ideas that we have accepted as 'normal'...

- Holly Willoughby in 'REFLECTIONS'

MENTAL FRAMEWORK: Action proceeds from Thought

Modelling does not exactly mirror life in all its messiness. Nature usually abhors straight lines save perhaps bamboo - and even that is gnarled....or spider's webs which, magnified, seem to have nearly linear strands.

A Nobel prize-winner in the field of physics, friend of a Mr Chris Parkin, asked a bicyclist to describe exactly his recent crash. The bicyclist ended by saying how he had gone headfirst over the handlebars to which the physicist, on his analysing all the factors, trajectory and so forth, reacted by saying: 'That is impossible!' The bicyclist retorted warmly "It bloody well isn't!" ...The appeal of a manicured lawn rarely gives rise to qualms despite what should be the appeal of nature's higgledy-piggeldy growths to the truly rustic sensibility....Louis

XIV, the Sun-King, was such a stickler for his schedules that they became almost an end in themselves irrespective of activity concerned; his insistence on a scheduled trip to a pond endangered the pregnancy of the Duchesse de Bourgogne but rather she mis-carry - which in the event she did - than that he miss out on seeing a shoal of carp at the appointed hour. As if some languid twist of a fishy tail would never precisely recur but just at that time! We do not think of living life according to a mental map as being manic even if it sometimes can be taken too far. Neat lines of framework count for much in our minds. A physical way of perceiving the world is unconsciously and incorrectly perhaps influencing ways of making many decisions. None of these drives is 'objective' save in a sense of convenience to us.

We perceive the world in a framework in our minds which has 'pegs' partly shaped by our likes and dislikes, etc. This framework is to the fore of our consciousness and thinking. Much of what we see in life - on the basis of which judgements are made and decisions taken - are fitted by us onto these pegs which we instantly recognise.

Frameworks are static whereas life as it is lived through time is fluid. They are a lens through which we see reality. How to get behind them to catch your one and only self rather than a succession of thoughts or emotions distracting you from 'you' and producing even for a moment a stilled, authentic whole self-in-totality? We may want to pin down the present at least in a framework of writing, to create that encapsulating moment of truth, but it is a *will-o'-the-wisp* ever eluding us unless we stand back on a generality of truth rather than a precise instant of it. We identify with our framework.

There is no clear demarcation zone in our minds for each of our drives. They lie latent till different contexts bring them to the fore. Our way of picturing our traits is material rather than, for instance, as energies.

Seeds send up shoots to flower above ground; some like topsy to assume monstrous shape, others with a potential awaiting the chance to soar. What is seen in the world results from what took shape beneath where formative action took place. The flower waving at us above the soil is clearly seen, not all the subterranean activity that drives the process.

How much of our own thinking is masked from us? In Jung's words: '*Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate*'. We think of the 'sub-conscious' and the 'conscious' with ideas welling up from one to the other - a presumed direction from down to up. Heaven is perceived as being 'above'. Is the sub-conscious 'sub' or 'supra'? Ideas come - we know not how - from all directions. Different 'levels' in our consciousness interact all the time. 'Buried' ideas or feelings interact with moods and circumstances in the present to produce a read-out that is said to be from 'us' but 'us' also is in a state flux. Information or data we process is almost immediately 'swamped' by fresh data, the subtleties of mood-changes and so forth. A 'complete account' of deals or dramas of everyday life is virtually impossible to make. The processes of selectivity, also, when describing events, act as distorting mirrors.

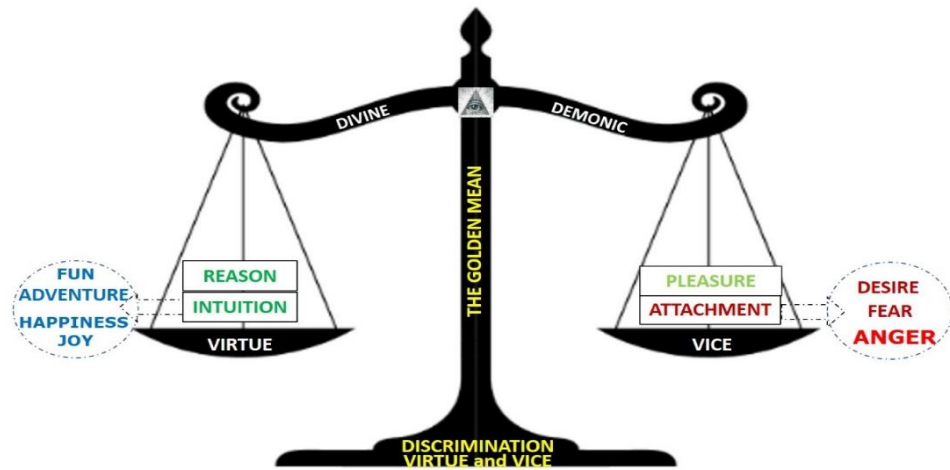


Diagram by Roy Maunder

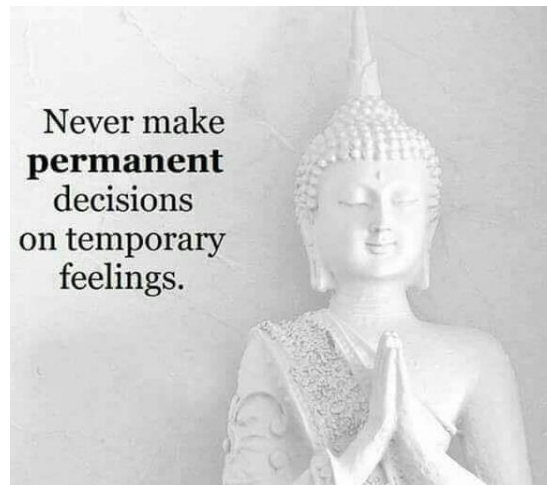
Our frameworks, legal frameworks for example, need a degree of certainty, but it is often the exception that proves the rule.

Ideas usually are complex, often confusing, and interwoven. The 'simplest' ideas can be hugely complicated if sufficiently probed. Ruling ideas may be in a firm anchorage while contradictions sit side by side, as in personalities. The code for business success is not on all fours with the tenets of religion. How many people have the difference between the different types of acceptable ethics at the forefront of their mind when making decisions on business or religious teachings? Moral codes and the imperatives of business are not easy bedfellows.

It may be that the characteristics of a sociopath are better adapted to success in business than the ideals of a saint; there may be a pay-off to deciding that one is going to claw oneself up the ladder of material success in order that, come the end of the day, one is in a better position to do good. King Boris of Bulgaria was of the most upright character, doubtless not given temperamentally to dissimulation, but he no doubt made a decision that in order to ensure he stood well with Hitler and his gang he paid lip-service to the perverted Nazi credo. Can one legitimately deceive deceivers? Can ends justify means? Germans in WW2 might have been Christian but their disciplined sense of nationhood brushed aside their principles of Christianity. The different impulses and motives within us are often at odds. We may hold opposite ideas in our minds at the same time: we want freedom...and chains; experience and open-mindedness are not always complimentary. Much thinking with which we normally have little truck can enter into behaviour. Ideas can have a purpose and how we implement them may hit that particular mark of our intention rather than being aligned with the norms of our personality. Our ideas and thought patterns are not on all fours with the needs and urges of our physical bodies. A dominant motive usually can stifle a small demurral. A pang of conscience perhaps plays second fiddle to whatever is seen as 'the greater good'. One result may be best in the short term but a long-term result can be more important.

To simplify, however advantageous or normal, can be to mislead. The end result of several tributaries to explaining thought to ourselves and to others can be simplification. We could hardly make a single point let alone effectively if we dress it up with all the explanations. The mere fact of defining a proposition tends to cut out life's

shades of grey. One result is that we cannot but help be relatively superficial. Life gets too complicated if we plunge into every relevant detail. Our eyes tend to see what is on the surface especially at first glance. Such a pity videos were not made in past ages; fashions in clothes loom larger to us than facial expressions and body language! It is not practical to rigorously examine all motives in all their ramifications in each case and what we do not fully understand, we tend to slide off considering.



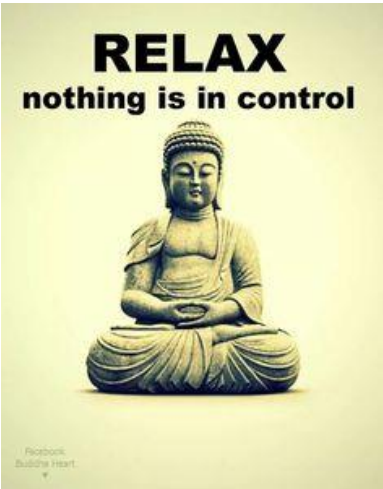
We tend to think in a binary way. Polarity - 'right' or 'wrong', a good politician; a bad actress, etc -. tars people, situations or ideas in a simplistic way. One side being right does not make another wrong. Once labelled or pigeon-holed, a label or pigeon assumes disproportionate importance, a dis-balancing factor in making judgement. It does not usually occasion even a moment of reflection.

A 'duality' way of looking at the world means for instance, when it comes to thinking about a deity, that it is 'out there', so separate from 'us.' In point of fact, there is not just 'one' truth about ourselves or about almost anything. Men are microspecs of crawling carbon-based flesh that may seem pretty irrelevant in the cosmos and also whole worlds unto themselves. Dr Johnson, told that a table was not solid but *au fond* had a vacuum in which atoms swam, kicked it saying: 'I refute it thus!' But both versions are right.

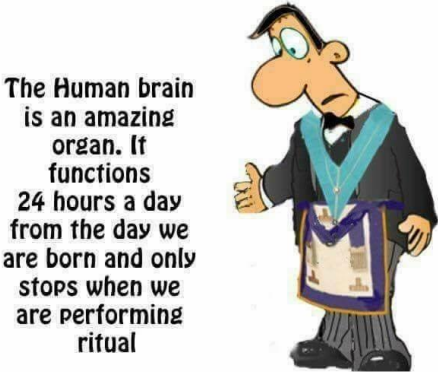
Eyes are drawn to a black spot on a white board. We tend to judge people by inappropriate standards of sainthood. Easy for the powerless in their armchairs to fling their brickbats! To err is human. Which of us has only pure motives? Society from before the Covenant is riddled with the notion of bargain. One 'gives in order to receive'. People also are judged on their past record. This may not be a good a guide to present or future. People advance by overcoming error. Those who never did anything wrong may not have been exposed to temptation or sufficiently understand all the issues involved.

A Truth may not be the whole Truth, and it rarely is. There are few rules on where to draw the line about rules. At a certain point in nature and sub-particle physics 'normal' rules no longer apply. We do not build into our everyday systems of thinking and mental frameworks such a 'glass ceiling'. (See 'The Threshold Point' above).

An innate need for **Authority Figures** segues into self-conceptions. We borrow Authority to shine in its reflected glory. The prelate who speaks in the name of the Almighty may not see the part in which his own ego is being fuelled by his thundering in the name of Jove; the democrat citizen, empowered to speak as *Vox Populi*, feels an equal to personalities at the apex of society much as if they are cut down to size in his own surroundings. From an early age we want protection, a figure who will look after us, which no doubt explains much of our attitude to for instance religion.



People can be impressionable and credulous however world-weary or wary. Some part of a mind-set formed in vulnerable years when looking up to their authority figures survives into adulthood. This can take the form of many guises, even that of following ritual practises that allow one to feel that 'one has done what one was told'. Genuflecting to a totem encourages people in their pet beliefs, lulls one into looking away from its metaphoric feet of clay.



The 'given' is taken for granted

The human mind has the unfortunate but natural tendency little by little to relax and to become less aware of dangers that have been threatening for a long time without

materializing. If NATO is to remain strong and effective it cannot afford the luxury to draw, as it were, a cheque on the alluring era of peace and prosperity which our technical achievements seem to make possible.

- J.M. Luns

Vigilance wanes on perceived absence of threat. Experience tells one to build shields, then one forgets the emotional charge of the experience. People like to feel '*t'was ever thus*' and go on to take the next easy step of thinking '*As it was and is so it must forever be so*'. Core weakness eventuates.

Past events wear a monumental and unalterable aspect, of which only the latter quality is justified. Details and accuracy blur over time, assuming they were ever objectively known. It is all too easily overlooked how history was in a flux when in the making, how events hung in the balance, how outcomes could have gone either way. This same goes for most 'myths' by which we live our lives. We do not question how we have got to where we are. If we ever started with a *tabula rasa* it was before we were so much as a dream. Most human activity and achievement from almost any imagined non-human perspective no doubt would have utter strangeness about it but peculiarities of the human organism pass unnoticed. Bodily features familiar forever might seem strange to beings not constituted like us. If our species had transparent skin, we would take that for granted and no doubt go on to think a bladder or spleen '*a thing of beauty and a joy forever*'.



Picture the gasps of wonderment if a caveman beheld modern technology; how happily he would chuck out his cudgel and laser-zap every dinosaur within radius. Appreciation stales

on familiarity unless we remind ourselves that the 'given' would leave us agog if we did not see what we are and what 'is' as normal. It is a rule of thumb applying even to this sentence. If the alphabet is devised afresh, would there be an 'l' looking so like a '1', an 'n' that looks like a double-'r'; a double-'n' with 'm'; a double-'r' with 'an' and an 'O' & '0' and 'D' so close in shape? Why do the Chinese whose staple food is rice have chopsticks as cutlery? Why do women have handbags and not men though why in the Scottish highland do only men sport a sporran? Oddness is all around us had we but had 2020-vision to see it.



Comfort Zones

A range of life-lessons surrounds us from pulpit to internet each with a crafted max appeal. Churchillian exhortations like "*I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat, toil and tears!*" are not much in evidence on Mission Statements of business. Mottos like '*No gain without pain!*' by enlarge stay out of sight save in the gym. Then again, a danger zone can be a comfort zone to an adventurous person. It is in our nature to gravitate to our comfort zone.

Men march to a regular drumbeat and follow a clear clarion. The settled opinion, a familiarity with what is around us shorn of shocks, the comfort of a routine that, once mastered, allows us to smoothly move in our worlds.

A **wish for certainties** is part of the gravitation towards comfort zones. Hand in hand with it goes a **wish to conform**. We don't want to stand out in a crowd, exhibitionists excepted. There is assurance in being one of a society of the like-minded, subverting our individuality to the swarm; rebels can be arch-conformists.

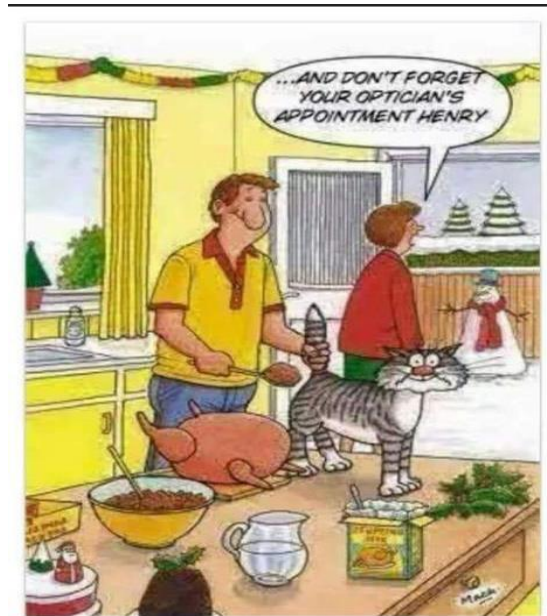
The syndrome includes **Like speaks unto like, peer pressure, the approbation of others,** and **ideas accepted in our circles**, all of which corral people into marching in step.

Miscalculation

All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs

'Que sera sera, whatever will be will be. The future's not ours to see...'

- sung by Doris Day



We assume more than we can know. What looks good in one context may assume a different aspect at a later time. We cannot know of the alternative futures that will not happen. **An unconsidered ingredient can have huge consequences.** Dr Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide* is a figure of fun when he says that '*All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds!*' - it is not so and only a portion of what goes wrong can be laid at the door of inexorable forces of the natural world. Augustus or Julius Caesar did not foresee that undermining the Roman Republic eventually led to control of the state falling into the hands of a Nero or a Caligula, those oddballs being future scions of their family. Or, would Israel exist without the Nazi attempt to eradicate Jewry? Miscalculations are endemic and built into the way human social groups function. There is no 'one size fits all' bespoke prescription, for instance for law or moral codes or political systems.

Decision-making. A decided view is thought better than dithering, as Arthur Balfour when Prime Minister knew when confronting the alternatives of descending a grand staircase that ran identically down two walls: '*Shall I go down on the left side, or the right side; it is so difficult to know what to do!*'. He might be forgiven his *bon mot* as he was playing to the gallery but consider the following example:

Sir Philip Goodhart was a journalist then politician who knew the leading protagonists in the Suez Crisis of 1956, Eisenhower, Eden, Nasser. Each of them failed to fully understand the motivations of the others and had insufficient intel on which to fully base their decisions. As it happens however, as usual, a winner emerges, in this case Nasser. Sir Philip's thesis

dissects both the miscalculations and the explanations of them that, taken in the round, is a paradigm for what goes wrong in the affairs of man time and again.

Zita, the Empress of Austria, was against early marriage on the grounds that far-reaching vows are made before a betrothed couple are mature enough to understand the full consequences. Elma Dangerfield CBE was of the view that marriage ought to be a five-year renewable contract.

We are prey to **Prejudices, stereotypes and hard-to-eradicate value judgements**. Society as we know it cannot function without prejudices, often inculcated in children from before they learn to reason - hence the baton of what is of importance to parents is handed down over the generations establishing continuity in a culture.

**"If you collect 100 black ants and 100 fire ants and put them in a glass jar, nothing will happen. But if you take the jar, shake it violently and leave it on the table, the ants will start killing each other. Red believes that black is the enemy, while black believes that red is the enemy, when the real enemy is the person who shook the jar. The same is true in society. Men vs Women
Black vs White
Faith vs Science
Young vs Old
Etc ...
Before we fight each other, we must ask ourselves:
Who shook the jar?"**

We are apt to dismiss out of hand something said that seems arrant rubbish but it will seem sensible to the person who is saying it. Whatever we think or say has the corollary: 'It is right to think - or say - this'. It is easy enough to spot one's own prejudices. The moment for instance that we hear someone spout what we regard as twaddle we think: 'Oh! That's WRONG!'. If we have already thought deeply enough about the proposition in question or why someone may legitimately hold such a view, that mental response may be fine but our rejection may be symptomatic of the closed mind that we did not see we have. The idea that 'We are not alone' is not necessarily comforting.

THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE
BELIEVE THE MOST
FREQUENTLY WASHED
BODY PART IN 2021
WAS THE HANDS.

BUT IN FACT,
IT WAS THE BRAIN.

Many a true word in jest! We understand the power of brainwashing but do not see that we are constantly **self-brainwashing**. Each person is almost all in all to himself for all the talk of 'No man is an island'. We see and have seen own self every day that we live. Personal ideas interlock and are reinforced often unconsciously and have to us a familiarity that is not *in toto* duplicated in anyone else. So much of our thinking follows along preadjusted grooves and we anticipate our own reactions and factor them into assessments of what to do. **Facile judgmentalism is bound up with this tendency.**



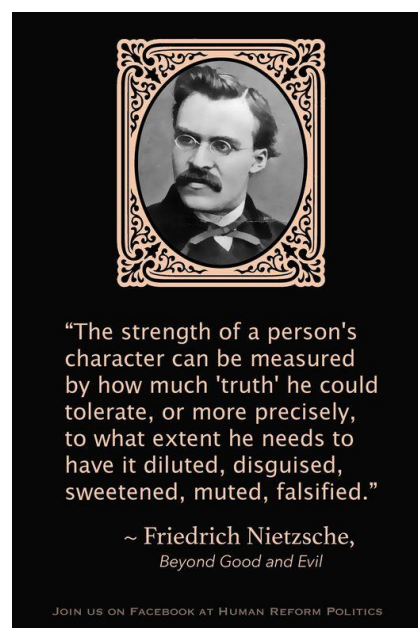
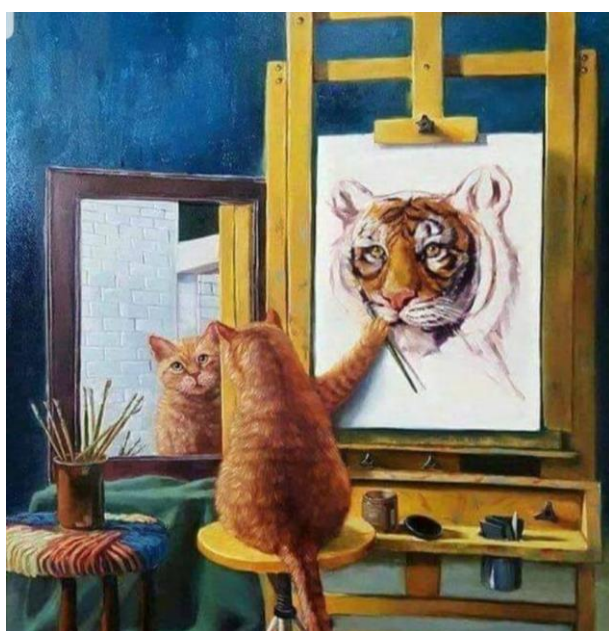
Truth Coming Out Of The Well by Jean- Léon Gérôme The Lie said to the Truth, "Let's take a bath together, the well water is very nice. The Truth, still suspicious, tested the water and found out it really was nice. So they got naked and bathed. But suddenly, the Lie leapt out of the water and fled, wearing the clothes of the Truth. The Truth, furious, climbed out of the well to get her clothes back. But the World, upon seeing the naked Truth, looked away, with anger and contempt. Poor Truth returned to the well and disappeared forever, hiding her shame. Since then, the Lie runs around the

world, dressed as the Truth, and society is very happy... Because the world has no desire to know the naked Truth.

We tend to admire a lion more than a gazelle. The gazelle may be more alive because it is not so complacent. Mere bulk may induce an unjustifiably inflated image or self-image. The quivering alert prey whose sensitivity is enhanced by ever-present danger may be more acutely alive than a lion, for all we know. It seems more significant to us if a large animal dies than an insect; but ask the insect what it feels!

Wishful thinking is at the core of much what we do or think. Undue optimism probably is more widespread - even among pessimists - than is commonly thought. A soldier may think that none of the bullets whistling around him have 'his name on them' or a skier think that he is unlikely to break a leg. Wishful thinking, like rose-tinted recollection, is often proof against actual experience.

Mankind lives by illusions. We are our own sophists and our own spin-doctors, creating narratives, usually self-serving. The died-in-the-wool liar is shielded from his self-knowledge by his self-belief. People are prone to exaggerate the extent to which others are interested in them. They dress up to impress disinterested strangers. Everyone in their own eyes is the most important person - self-sacrifice in a mother, be it noted, is one of many exceptions. People cannot help but be subjective because of perceiving the world only through their own eyes. Those who come to judge them cannot know all the hinterland of their lives. What seems to be courage may be cowardice, as when we stand tall and brave but in fact are cowering behind the herd. The grandest of ambitions may mask the pettiness of mind needed to attain the goal. Aligning our will with our presentation of ourselves is a question we all resolve with varying degrees of hypocrisy partly because of not thinking much about it. We 'believe our own publicity' or swallow the evaluations that we think society in general admires?



Self-conviction is a hallmark of admirable exemplars of an '**Overweening self-confidence**' syndrome though self-belief is a tool of a pathological liar as well. "*I know that I can save this country and that no-one else can!*", said William Pitt the Younger, and, true, he did have a major hand in scuppering the French. Religious leaders are fired by total conviction. It may be gently queried if, when Jesus Christ said on the Cross '*Why Lord hath thou forsaken me?*', it may give rise to an idea that his belief came *au fond* from within himself - though of course it might also be part of the Divine Plan. Was King David the instrument of the Lord when he slew Goliath but, later in his life in some of his more questionable actions did his ego overwhelm his purer spirit? Voltaire, as a thinker, thought he was an equal of *Ancien Regime* aristocrats like the Chevalier de Rohan and he was thrashed for it.



We wish to leave our mark on the world but living memory is what gives to a man much of the meaning of his name and living memory does not live for long. Succeeding generations are not noted for accepting on trust all the conclusions about life let alone the relationships which their predecessors hold dear.



'Vanity' by Frank Cowper

We set great store by our names. We want them perpetuated in epitaphs writ on tombstones, and so forth. A name is but a sound which - to a speaker of another language at another time in the future - may be at most to a sort of label around which to gather such conclusions as survive the depredations of Father Time. It can mean many things that point up the moral tales which we use as a compass to guide our morality and may illustrate these points to others. All this is a far cry from preserving, as some of us might wish, our own individuality and our ego-centre for posterity.



Italians are said not to be the world's fiercest fighters. If this is true, it may incidentally be attributable to the fact that they like being alive more than other races? They nevertheless, it can be argued, can be said to glorify in their own minds the martial qualities characterising soldiers, leastways to go by composers like Ennio Moricone who wrote the signature score of *The Magnificent Seven* or, for the matter of that, Rossini. His *William Tell* overture is a stirring accompaniment to *The Lone Ranger*...

Do we ever really grow out of a **penchant for allegories and stories**? A recital of facts which cannot be proved let alone known in detail can be dry and so unlikely to gain attention. That which cannot be known can only be semi-understood at best; as in the story of *Plato's Cave*. Men are thought to be fallible yet men, not even women, are the authors of the major religious teachings. The stories can persuade where recital of dry facts can open up doubts.

Our reality is largely comprised of perceived realities. It is said by theorists in NATO, Mark Laity for example, that the recent wars in Afghanistan and Libya faltered from the standpoint of the West by lack of a coherent overall 'storyline' to which allies, including senior and junior personnel, could subscribe; their theme was patchy, unconvincing. By contrast the Russians, better at this form of PR. Stories they broadcast contributed significantly to their success. In a broader sense, we all fight many of yesterdays' battles, imprisoned in our thinking by issues of yesteryear, justifying what we do and say, sometime unconsciously, by an idea of how glad forebears - in fact past caring - would be to see us fighting their corner. The words of Lord Hurd, '*History is a good friend but a bad mistress*', should be engraved

on the foreheads of the power-hungry, the empire-builders of today, and all those who seek redress of the sufferings of the Glorious Dead.

We tell ourselves and others narratives of our lives, and see the narratives of others about their lives. A narrative generally has a start, a middle, and an end. The last word or 'bottom line' in our minds thereby assumes an importance that is perhaps not justified especially if we are of the view that '*the journey is more important than the arrival*'. We also may come to believe that time is circular. A biography hinges often on the timeline at the end of the story. A dramatic result, not the slow process leading to it, makes the story. This emphasis may be arguable. '*Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it!*', said of King Charles I, is an example of how a life's *finis* can be a memorable benchmark. A focus on the present encourages premature verdicts on a more rounded picture of all that a man has accomplished in his lifetime. The words of the cartoon character, Yogi bear, may sound absurd - '*A thing ain't over until its' over!*' - but appear more cogent if one thinks, for instance, that a timeline seemingly set in concrete can only too easily get over-washed by events that come afterwards.

Language can skew thinking. This again is a subject on which there has been much written. Interpersonal communication can be below the level of language. Music can speak to deep yearnings that are hard to 'specify'. There is a power in words and we speak words to ourselves. We act on them: 'Do unto others as you would be done by' is a saying that no doubt has stopped many a potential wrongdoer in his tracks. Value-judgements are interwoven into the words that we use. 'Optimism' and 'Pessimism' for instance are weasel words. There is a built-in evaluation to these concepts according to the stance of those who use them. They may imply, for instance, a sense of the unrealistic, or the downbeat. In talking of 'Old Wives Tales', for instance, the pejorative term begs the question of their possible validity. Had they been called 'Conan-isms' after the respectable figure of Conan Doyle who took extra-dimensional ideas seriously, we might be more prone to take them seriously.

The language in which thoughts are clothed may be the same but the weight to which we give the words used may not be the same. We assume a common point of reference when we talk especially of concepts common to everyone, such as uncle, father, mother. But the reality may be very different in terms of your and my perspective even though the same word is used. We talk of love but that too can be different according to perspective. As Heine remarked: 'What lies there can be in kisses!' An inclination to see moneybags by a gold-digger can be translated into a declaration of true love, taken at face value by the giver or receiver of the declaration.

A tragedy can seem of less weight in a newspaper by-line than when shouted in a headline. It may be subliminally less weighty if shown in a medium like television that is primarily for entertainment. We may agree on so much with each other, but it is the weight that we give to individual thoughts, and which is not weighed, that drives wedges between different conclusions.

There are the '*faux amis*', the 'false friends' and weasel words that may lead us astray. The choice of a word is instructive. Why is a rat-race race typical of that much-maligned rodent, blamed for carrying bubonic plague? Poor things, why blame them!

This whistle-stop *tour d'horizon* suffices to show that ordinary ways of living or thinking can land an individual and, by extension, man in hot water; the examples can be multiplied many

times over. This goes for tendencies, harmless enough in themselves, like **Curiosity**. Speculation even when idle comes naturally to us even when they cannot expect answers. Is there some Being that has all answers or is there some way of revisiting our past? 'I drew this painting; what became of it?' *Etc etc*. Curiosity impels man onto new discoveries. The implications of the adage 'Curiosity killed the cat' are not about felines but *homo sapiens*.

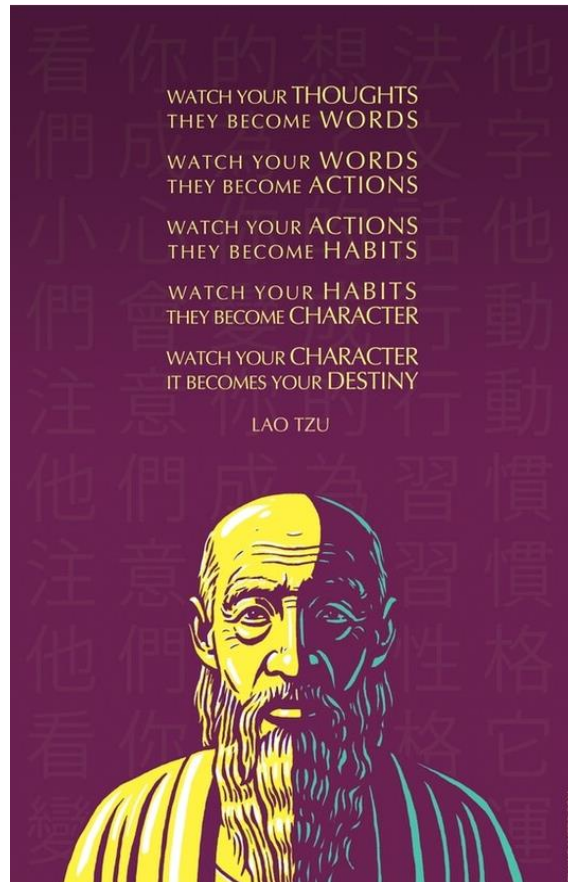
Another deep-seated wish is **to be free**. Freedom may go hand-in-hand with independence but people by enlarge think of themselves as free spirits when they are acting in concert with like-minded people, part of a gang or group rather than striking out on their own. We chafe at restriction even if enmeshed in it for much of our lives. A life on the open range, a wish be free as a bird, has an attraction. In fact, many if not most situations begun in blithe spirits have a tendency to bog people down into a glue that sets hard.

The surface of the Petri Dish up to this point has hardly been scratched. What of the deadly sins, like **jealousy**? How much do we want to bring other people up rather than pull them down? Are we to factor in this tendency as part of the human condition despite all our pieties to want the best for our neighbour? Evelyn Waugh, the author, was educated in a school where, despite its adherence to the ethos of helping the underdog, the weakest went to the wall. To the end of his days, he expected of his circle that a certain *schadenfreude* would greet any announcement that he was in trouble. The possibility of jealousy rearing its head is so taken for granted and factored into the calculations of so many different situations that its power over some people is often overlooked.

What, then, it may be asked, of primal emotions like **fear**? Fear lurks in the guts, sensitivity, imagination and the influence of others on our thinking. It is too obvious to merit unpacking here. As usual, there is an obverse of the coin, a baby worth preserving in the bathwater. It for instance can breed positive perspectives like caution.



Appendix - A Conclusion



Unskilled farmers throw away their rubbish and buy manure from other farmers but those who are skilled go on collecting their own rubbish in spite of the bad smell and the unclean work, and when it is ready to be used they spread it on their land, and out of this they grow their crops.

- *Lankavarara Sutra*

A faith without doubts cannot advance

- *Pope Francis*

Two men looked out of prison bars: one saw mud, the other stars

- *Robert Louis Stephenson*

We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us - the labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall

come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.

- Joseph Campbell

What lessons can be drawn from this so-called Petri Dish of innate drives? That depends on the reader or - if providence smiles on this endeavour - readers. If he or they are discovered in the act of reading the text, it is to be hoped that a smack on the forehead accompanied by joyous shrieks of '*Eureka!*' is witnessed. Please forgive a presumption on the part of the author...that the text needs a superglue to stick in the mind. Performance of a physical gesture coinciding with an idea helps solder a lesson into the memory bank. The technique is known to practitioners of 'mindfulness'. An emotional charge is placed so that ideas take root and, ideally in this case, detonated...or exploded.

In the madness of going over old ground is the method advocated in the Petri Dish. There is little of surprise in it but in reflecting on what is already known and forming a habit to do this regularly and, each time, a little more attentively... you shine a light into yourself. Any climb to a peak starts with a few steps. Here, the example of Wittgenstein is prayed in aid. He did not treat his philosophy as a synthetic intellectual exercise. He lived his life according to his precepts - as no doubt we all ought to do. He shoo-ed off casual visitors to his lectures with a brusque '*My lectures are not for tourists!*' Worry not! This appendix is a crutch to conclusions that can be drawn without it.

IT IS NOT SO EASY TO DISENTANGLE BELIEFS FROM THE TRUE REASONS FOR BELIEVING THEM. WE THINK THAT WE IDENTIFY THE CAUSE OF OUR BELIEFS AS OPPOSED TO REASONS FOR WANTING TO BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE DONE SO.

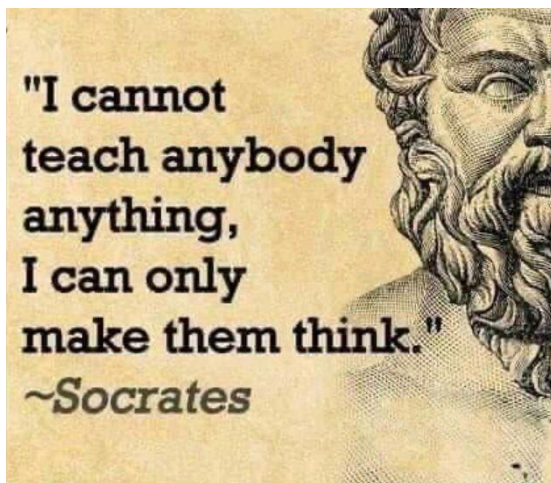
A random thought struck the author then a second thought followed the first, which is 'What a weasel word is 'random'?' Does it imply that there is 'no cause' and that the concept of 'synchronicity' is as irrelevant as a supposition that 'everything happens for a purpose'? Should we reconsider the idea of a random thought in the light of the latest scientific findings or the views of behaviourists and psychiatrists? Should we reconsider the meaning of our being 'special' - as some of us like to think we are - in the light of the fact that we might all be 'special'?

The first 'random' thought, as above referred to, related to an apparent unfairness of racial discrimination. Racial discrimination is unfair, like much of what goes on in the world. Why is fairness - however right - thought to be the norm? Where to draw battlelines so as to decide which particular piece of unfairness to attack? How does one attack; what should be the attitude in so doing; how to make it effective? Are the answers '*my friend, a-blowin' in the wind*' or do they lurk in the Petri Dish?

What happens if the problem is looked at in a fresh way? The conclusions suggested in below are only food for thought. One looks first at the petri dish and sees how many innate urges in mankind are simply not objective and then it is seen how many guiding ideas

including from scriptures are - not to dress it up - utter twaddle and then it seen how practical things go wrong as a result of the duff ideas, and how many attitudes could be changed with results that are positive.

Why are black or Irish people pilloried by the ignorant? Is it that people do not like to feel guiltiness about having perpetrated wrongs in the past and a way out of the self-reproach is to claim to themselves that they were right all along? If so, it is the obverse of the coin 'To give is to forgive', as Madame Geoffrin said. There is a satisfaction in taking rather than giving, pleasure to be derived from destruction rather than construction? Is there advantage to Jewry in anti-Semitism? Is there a providential purpose in it? Without criticism there is a tendency to rest on laurels and grow complacent. Only a minority of Islamic people cause adverse reactions to Moslems among other communities? A minority is responsible often for leading the majority by the nose. Should communities consider more self-policing? They may be too tolerant of their adherents? Cells are at war within our own bodies in a physical sense so why assume there must be no internecine combat in our communities? Are the Africans who blame colonial empires for their problems being unduly selective about the facts they choose to underpin their theories? Do they think the way they do because...they are African? Perhaps, as in Somaliland, there may be an indigenous school of thought that considers that colonial rulers were better than home-grown dictators? Unpopular to say so of course but does the fact that people can be easily led mean that they must be right to be swayed? Why is any majority always right? Why have an emotional or knee-jerk response? Is a subjective rationale more likely to lead to a solution than an objective one?



"No one is more hated than he who speaks the truth."

— Plato

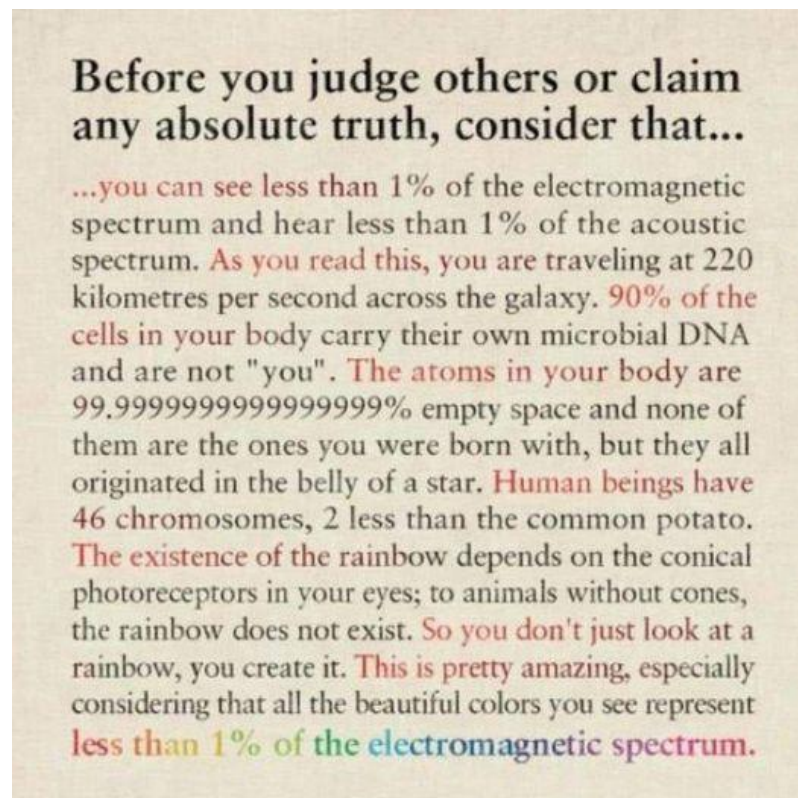


So, who is right in the above quotations? Socrates or Plato? Has it to be either or can it be both? A tendency to come to straightforward conclusions in each of us can mis-incline one or another direction. So, should we pause for thought before making assumptions that we do not challenge? Every tendency in the Petri Dish - to take random examples: the wish for authority figures, or a propensity for self-delusion - on inspection can pull one up short when we explore the way that we think. Therefore, what could we do about it? And thus, with all of the aromas arising from the dish...

If we take on board the idea that we could not help our genetic inheritance, perhaps it might lead to a greater tolerance of people or animals who are not like us? Why should we cleave to the standards handed down to us by those who may not have thought hard about them?

We may become more compassionate as people, and as a society, if we think about it. We can become more tolerant of the failings of others, politicians even. This may enable us to temper our reactions so as to attack real failings rather than the labels hung round the necks of the 'Aunt Sallys' that we set up. Europe faced financial meltdown in 2009. It seemed that Dominique Strauss-Khan had a key to stopping the rot. He was found cavorting in way that contravened moral sensibilities. The financial wellbeing of millions of people may well have suffered as a result of his being hounded out of office. The reader can judge whether there is something odd in this.

We think of ourselves as masters of our destiny and in control of our actions? Do we think that after considering the piece below?



When we seek to refashion the future, we may be compared to the wartime bomber pilot who felt that what was called 'jinking' - slightly tilting a wing hugely affected the destiny of those below. It was true, maybe, but not given to him to know how it would do so. We can be entombed in marble with our names emblazoned thereon but living memory is short and the names that mean so much to us lose context soon. Language anyway, names included, is prone to be a substitute for thinking. We like to think that we have 'left a line behind us' as part of our purpose on earth. The generations pass away and effect on descendants and others may not be that is anticipated. In all this, are lessons of humility and respect for others to be learnt?

We can reevaluate or reconsider the myths and legends of our own societies. The Kraken, a monstrous creature in the briny deep that rises to the surface and then, in Tennyson's poem, dies, has never been part of our mythology save in Norse legend. It never caught

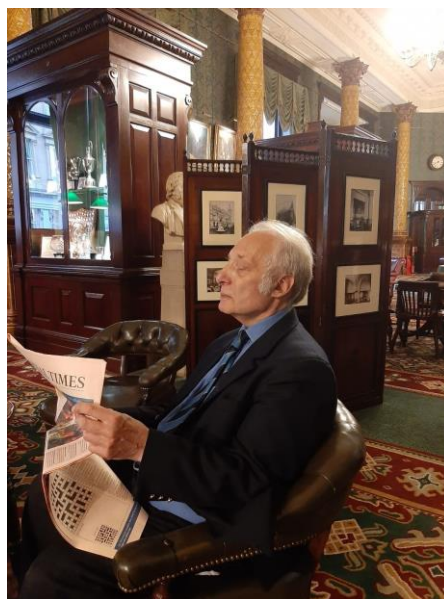
on as a template in Western imagination. We may have seen the world slightly differently through its lens: Westerners might have been more prone to see in the rise of Evil its automatic downfall. It could have been seen as guiding principle and acted as a brake on evildoers.

Will it be possible to eradicate terrorism or should we accept the limit that we can just drive it down, as can be said of almost every worthwhile goal? We should as a matter of course work out the threshold point of usefulness of any theory.

New stories are much of a muchness, with just names changing in various countries. The news may have an interest-value but hardly is intellectually challenging or liable to wake up our ideas. That is surely what we need to do to give ourselves the best chance?

We can look askance at the 'gloopathons' of the past - the idiocies like Divine Right of Kings and the rest - but while the issues in our era may be different, and science and its discoveries greater, the thinking process by which people arrive at their conclusions has parallels with yesteryear and our childhood. Imagined realms like *Wonderland* fascinate children. If one thinks of humanity as maturing in a manner comparable to an individual, *Wonderland* itself in time may cease to fascinate but an underlying urge to explore it may remain when most of the passion to do so is spent. To inspect the ideas of leaders or opinion-formers is revealing of how much they have in common with the thinking of the playground. *Viz* 'I wanna be gang leader!', 'I don't want trouble!', 'My team must win' shades into 'My country, right or wrong', 'You beat me up! So, I'll give you a good pasting!'. So it goes on....'my empire is bigger than yours' no matter if not a single person in it is the happier as a direct result. What can we do about all this?

The Petri Dish is about perspective. How many of our innate drives or urges are fit for purpose in the modern world? There were good ideas in the past that withstand the test of time. It is a winnowing process to work out in each case what is worth preserving. Englishmen fought long and hard for the right of someone to say something with which he totally disagreed. Ecstasy to you may be boredom to me.

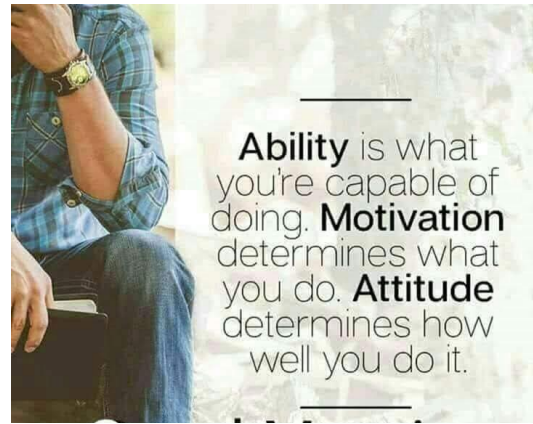
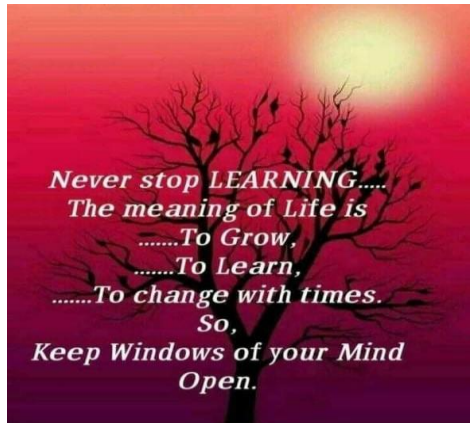


Ecstatic scenes as English gentlemen's clubs reopen post Covid

ATTITUDES OF MIND and FEELING

THAT CAN BE ENHANCED BY OCCIDENTAL MEDITATION

TRAITS, ACTUATING PRINCIPLES, PERSPECTIVES AND ATTITUDES



The check list below ticks a few boxes about slight changes of thinking that with effort and placing emphasis on the advantages of reflection we may induce in ourselves, and which can be of value in any number of situations.

Many truths are not in their nature complex, and common sense can pierce through reams of recondite research. The intelligent course can be via an 'unintelligent' line.

The beauty, the genius is not to write a 5 cent idea in a ten dollar sentence. It's to put a ten dollar idea in a 5 cent sentence.

- Clarence Thomas

**Strong minds
discuss ideas,
average minds
discuss events,
weak minds
discuss people.**

~ Socrates

Note on above saying: The earliest strong match according to 'Quote Investigator' appeared in a 1901 autobiography by Charles Stewart. As a child in London, Stewart listened to the conversation of dinner guests such as history scholar Henry Thomas Buckle who would sometimes discourse engagingly for twenty minutes on a topic. His thoughts and conversation were always on a high level, and I recollect a saying of his, which not only greatly impressed me at the time, but which I have ever since cherished as a test of the mental calibre of friends and acquaintances. Buckle said, in his dogmatic way: "Men and women range themselves into three classes or orders of intelligence; you can tell the lowest class by their habit of always talking about persons; the next by the fact that their habit is always to converse about things; the highest by their preference for the discussion of ideas.

(a) FINDING YOURSELF: Being truer to ourselves



Fools rush in where angels fear to tread

- Proverb

To refuse to recognise any part of reality is to confuse our vision of the whole, and to make ourselves incapable of the redemptory action which the world requires

- Dame Rebecca West

If a person faces his motives of why he does what he does it may change some of his decision-making.

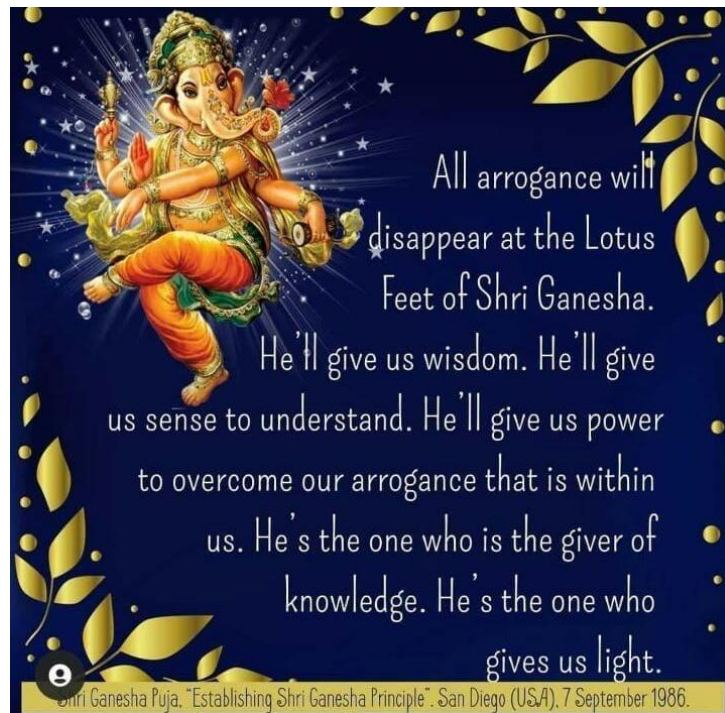
'Know Thyself': This process of reflecting could be about being **comfortable in your own skin** and with your life rather than trying to get out of the earthly plane into some ethereal realm, as with some forms of Meditation.

As with much science, the sheer amount of observing then cataloguing that goes on tends to be understated. We discover what is there, including in ourselves, rather than create it, even if detective work is painstaking. We look-see for ourselves. The basic stuff might just be lying around, visible to the naked eye, true, but taking a microscope to it might just tell you something that hadn't occurred to you.

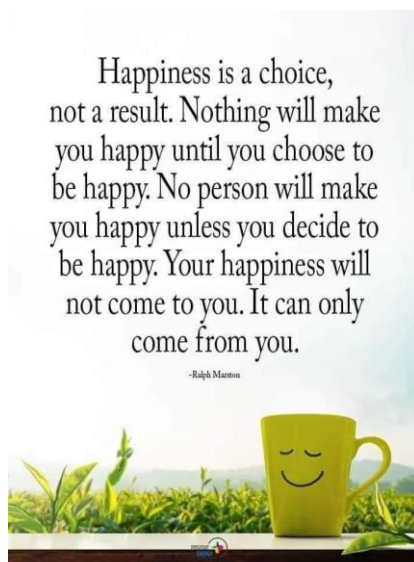
When standing back from one's life with a perspective other than that of the everyday, our lives can seem more remarkable. Finding a personal True North, re-aligning the personal gyroscope, and involving going back to First Principles is partly a voyage of discovery, partly a voyage of re-discovery. It is often the case in later life that one re-identifies with the feelings and goals that one had when very young. They were there all along, but buried. Natural sympathies came of raw rather than over-sophisticated feelings and relationships. We forget too much too easily if we do not remind ourselves of what we are about. It can be that one tries to forget one's past, or identify completely with a carefully crafted *persona* - it seems that according to a friend or biographer that Marion Robert Morrison 'became' in his mind 'the Duke', John Wayne - but being true to oneself is different from living up to our public image even to the degree with which we identify with it.

Is there a distinction to be made between how we generally shape our lives, and how we live day by day? A bird can perch on a ledge then fly up to a chimney pot; is its every flutter according to its basic rives – to find food, to find a mate, to nest, to follow the flock, or is there some half-way house such that certain hoppings or whatever are random, generally only needed to keep the bird's 'apparatus', its wings and so forth, in good nick, while other movements dictated by need? *'There is a destiny that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will?'*

Many of us do not ask ourselves, not really QUEST, who and why we are; but some of us think that is what we do. Authorities and convictions of others are a-plenty. Each of us, almost all the time, dances our days away to precepts from our very own *Vade Mecum*, that in fact can be a *pot purri* of often contradictory codes by which we live our lives in a sort of unconscious plagiarism and arrogance. We fling ourselves into what we have been flung into, flag-bearers for our totems.



Today there is a vogue for 'finding oneself'. It is one further indication that it is accepted that there is a type of mind that naturally tends towards reflection. It is a thing we may want to do more, were it not downplayed in our culture; not to be so much admired as, say, the man of action. In almost the next breath we are told what we should find in meditation. This is not necessarily an easy thing to discover but why assume it is not worth the candle to put in the effort to getting to see what one really is happiest in doing and thinking? Reflection can be a path to self-tailored Nirvana in terms of the *minutiae* of our lives or in life generally.



These illustrations are not the whole story but it contains an element of truth

Buddhists enjoin thinking about each mouthful of food we eat, where it comes from, the labour that brought it to your plate, the taste, considerations can be overlooked in the heat of conversation or from habit.

During the recent period of Covid, and the increased time for taking stock of our lives, there has been a spate of thinking that looks askance at much of what had been taken for granted before, for instance with regard to the spiral towards consumerism. People sometimes have been wooed from placing too much stress on material accumulation. It heavily depends on circumstances but many now have opened their eyes to many of life's 'little' pleasures that they previously took for granted and see as more to be valued.

Do we really know better what is right for oneself and therefore, us? Challenging the presumptions behind people's thinking is an adventure one knows not whither it will lead.

There are plenty of new ways of looking at life that take a modern approach, it being often overlooked how there are trends surrounding us that are not on tablets of stone. The norm for a Victorian might have been the stiff upper lip, or the imperative of duty, whereas today it may be doing well in of the rat race, or whatever.

'Outdated' ideas need not be junked, lock stock and barrel. Fashions can come round again - Buddha enjoined on followers that they must determine for themselves their own path. The challenge is to honestly tax ourselves with finding our own truth, free of pressure from pulpits, political platforms or wiseacres. It is made easier these days through a greater buffet of life styles from which to choose. In reflection, we are more open to consider carefully this range. There is no dictating Voice for one and all, but several voices clamouring to persuade. It amounts almost to a civic duty that is not recognised or encouraged to switch off these siren megaphones.

Each of our accomplishments on earth do not signify to others as they do to oneself. They are in the mind of a player, not an onlooker, narrating to himself. An Authority figure to whom a metaphoric forelock is tugged has human drives from the same 'Petri Dish' as ours. That does not mean that any individual is as good as any other but there is the sheer fact of our own autonomy that is at the fore. The ideas of sects, society *et al* can come to seem like a proof of the persuasiveness of a way of life. We are liable to follow the thoughts of others, taking them on board as our own without full introspection or guarantees.

If you are already prepared to think hard about your beliefs, this process should start from the bottom and grow. It could be a life-changer. People may be surprised by what they discover if they listen to themselves.

The idea of 'finding oneself' presents a difficulty that is not usually considered in depth no matter how worthy the chosen guides or gurus. We wish to feel that what we think is consistent with our own goals. By doing so, we may pull wool over our eyes and, making a virtue of what we think we are doing, compound an illusion by which we live. It can be the saddest thing discovering this too late in life. Finding ourselves can be a process like 'finding' other people - there is so much that we simply do not know about ourselves or others; we like to make things manageable, simplify our verdicts. We want to get at 'the' truth when even finding 'a' truth is filtered through our own thoughts.

A focus of meditation can be concentrated on others as well as ourselves, as a way to find out about ourselves. Always care is needed. This is a practical question about personality

and behaviour, not one that requires making assumptions, sometimes held, about how there is a universal soul in which we are all an indivisible part and to which we ultimately will return. 'Horses for courses': that sort of metaphysical speculation has its place, which is different from considering the practical questions of the world in which we find ourselves.

We should be sure as we can be of what we are about if we are to get it right. There can be a predominating trait in oneself or others that permeates a whole persona but that is all the more reason for a careful observation of oneself, and others. Not only can there usually be a predominating trait that is seen as of critical importance - unless one is a chameleon - there is a signature refrain in the mind; ask someone to talk about their philosophy, say, of life and there is often a centralised theme, or a small number of related themes, on which they elaborate.

(b) Observing yourself

Part of an attraction in reflection, as with Meditation, is a wish deep down to rise, free, and be observers, including being observers of ourselves.

On this reading, it is distinct from any focussed interest in the esoteric, for instance our 'essence'. There is a pleasure in 'floating above' daily concerns, an interest-value akin to levitation, in seeing ourselves 'down there' without going all the way, and with all of the spiritual or philosophic ramifications, enjoined on us with some types of Meditation. There is no need to over-dignify what we are doing. By observing ourselves, we are better enabled to rise above the concerns that transfix us, the better to see the wood from the trees. We can uplift from the here and now and see ourselves from a higher perspective.

At another end of the scale, the way that we create our own life stories and narratives for our, and other people's, reactions is part of what makes self-observation of interest to most people. We can better fine-tune our stories if we think about them.



Self-observation is the beginning of progress, says Buddha

Is there an explanation of why the pronoun 'I' and the word 'eye' are the same? A tendency to like being observers of ourselves is partly due to temperament. People always on the go, always in company, throwing themselves into life - often without heed of consequence - action coming foremost, are perhaps not as inclined to question themselves. It may be that they think there is no need to think about what they already know. Religions can try to counteract this notion, as in a Confessional. It presumes that we have 'better selves' to which we instinctively gravitate given half a chance.

A *caveat*. This may signify a drift towards undue optimism. There is evidence that sociopaths, hypocrites, the delusional, sadists, are not bothered by conscience, and so may not be so susceptible to being in tune with their better selves.

We can train ourselves to reach a higher level by dint of practice. A 'higher' level need not be reaching for the stars but a reach deeper into ourselves. Perhaps, indeed, it is much the same thing? Why deny one's origins as opposed to tapering them in the right direction or, as a start, getting rid of the clutter in our minds?

(c) Our animalistic and natural nature *vis-a-vis* our cerebral side

It is only by grounding our awareness in the living sensation of our bodies that the "I AM" our real presence can awaken.

- Gurdjieff

Blame it or praise it, there is no denying the wild horse in us.

- Virginia Woolf

If you are losing your leisure, look out!... it may be that you are losing your soul.

- Virginia Woolf

Mrs Woolf did not follow that up that remark by saying, in the way of her class in her day: 'Anyone for tennis?' Her *pensée* has a more far-reaching sense. It was approval at just doing, so being, what we like to be. A tendency in much Meditation in general, and spirituality, is that our so-called lower nature, physical fulfilment, is seen as rather beneath us and somehow wrong. The notion in places is at odds with that of 'a healthy mind in a healthy body'.

Nature is 'red in tooth and claw'; we are beings of a higher order than the animals; we use our minds as well as our instincts; 'to attain spirituality we should free ourselves of our brutish drives'; Princess Anne's comment "*Human nature? Aren't we on this earth to rise above it!*" - all these ideas, in this context, are unacknowledged, weasel-worded scorn at a part of ...what we are! Maybe the guts and courage of beasts and their sensitivities might be of a tougher order than that of human beings but our nature is of the animal world and the attempt to find out who we are should take account of it.

It is 'special pleading' no doubt of an arrogant order for mankind to say of his emotions that they are superior to those of the animal kingdom. That said, in the Hindu Pantheon animals are sacred. Humanity can clothe emotions in fine sentiment, true, top up its conception of them, and about feelings generally, with an imaginative dimension - partly because we are able to project their course in the future whereas it seems that animals are glued much more to the present. But that aspect of their thinking might make their emotions even more real to them than they are to us. Hardly a charming thought for man to feel that the receptors for pain, or the nerve endings or fear, are more developed in man than in beasts - it is surprising that vegetarians have not made more of an effort to establish this? As to the emotions themselves in general, it could well be that some or all animals are in thrall to a greater, more powerful charge, of emotion than man. A creature living fully in the moment, its emotions unfiltered through the medium of man-like brain, may experience an emotion in a more raw, pure, form than a man. It certainly seems that they may have the same emotions as humanity. See for instance how developed and unselfish is the maternal instinct in animals.

Example: a lady by name of Rosemary Cockayne astonished strangers when knocking at their front door asking for water for a thirsty rat. On the request being met, a knot of bystanders gathered to gape at the spectacle on the pavement of a gasping rodent gurgling down ambrosial liquid from the bemusedly provided saucer. True the rat then expired but the emotions it experienced, happily replete in its final moments, were obvious to all witnessing its last throes on that paving stone bier.

Turning more to the 'natural' side of our nature:

The idea of Ecstasy, or 'Ex-tasy', comes in part from an idea of the ancient world, for instance in the cult of Dionisius, affording a license to stand outside of one's 'normal' self in cathartic release. It was a tacit admission that there can be something antipathetic in the shackling of society, by letting rip in an orgiastic free-for-all, swigging wine and whatever else an imagination conjures up in the way of debauchery. It frees one up to find 'the animal' within, without the filter of stern consciousness. This is an essential part of that which we truly are. Why deny it? Why seek to try and tie it into the more steady emotions? Why not, at least from time to time and within reason, detach from the rational, the steady, the 'Apollo' as the Greeks put it, to tune into the so-called 'lower nature'. It may be higher or all-permeating - how do we know which 'direction' heaven might lie? - but it happens that we are made that way. The case needs to be made out. One anticipates a diverting set-piece debate with a whey-faced advocate stating that 'the approved linear shape for hair is vertical thus one should not let hair down' against some Rabelasian free-thinker demanding the right to 'let it all hang out'. It would be a matter that largely comes down to that of presentation that human society cannot or can survive suchlike high jinks without crumbling; it is not proposed to argue that toss here. If there is a case for a Dionesian Disneyland, one place to consider it carefully would be in a place devoted to an objective study of the *mores* of society. It would be inter-disciplinary presumably, with history, sociology and the like featuring as compost, but where common sense is acknowledged as the decision-taking factor. It could take into account man's nature, how societies in general best flourish, not just that of the presently conceived order of society: an institute for thinkers. Let a jury decide whether we should raise a glass to raising a glass?

A cathartic *YIPPEE* moment does not have to be one in which we plan our life or render under the lord that which is His due, but a moment in which we render to 'the Caesar' within

us that which is his due. It is about an arguably justified balance of mind. The fact that we need to know when to stop does not mean that we must not start. It may be that very pleasure that provides us with the belief that life is worth while, keeps us going, for higher purposes. A joy, an inner release of some of the springs of our nature, tunes our engine no matter that it be of a physical order; it can free up a contentment of soul from which 'higher' thinking is better placed to take flight.

In another way as well, an 'orgiastic' tendency is like Reflection. Attainment of a blissful state may come unawares, or by doing that which seems to us personally as likely to produce this effect, or through a spur that is in line with our deep personal wishes; but opening up one's mind to the possibilities of a joy, as opposed to killjoy, is more likely to usher in such experiences precisely at times when one is not indulging deliberately in the activity. We become more receptive to it. We bring it on.

This all may be essentially an unstructured - 'messy' if one will – way of acting but it is according to the dictates of nature and we are not designed in a geometric shape. no matter how convenient our modelling tools are to explain it.

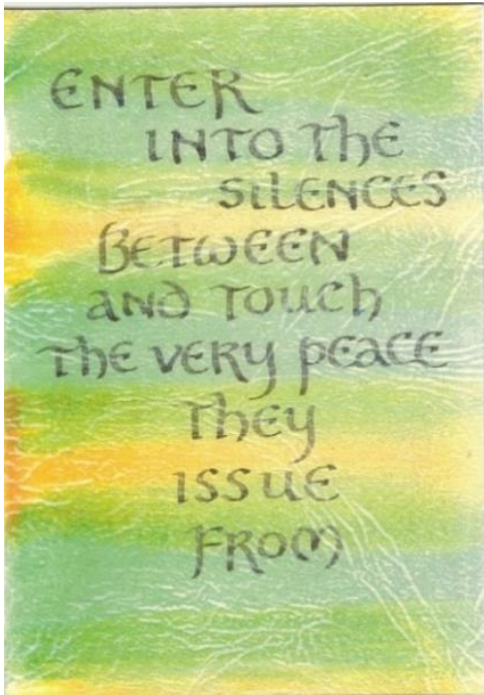
A man is not a disembodied creature, a physical machine to house the 'eternal' for a short span - ('Case yet to be proven, *M'lud*') we may be that as well - but we are not, as a matter of fact, those things alone, and nothing but those things. The fact that we may be able to stand outside ourselves and calmly consider our urges does not mean that they are not there; it is quite the reverse. If we are interested in such questions that do concern all of us, we should cultivate the habit of mind, and give ourselves the opportunity, to consider and reflect on them.

This all brings us to a recommended state of mind in which we can do the reflection.

Most of us know our own 'non-stop gramophone record' of mind-chatter only too well, the feelings of deep love or hate, or of preoccupation, the faces that rise up out of our thoughts when alone, the ideas that will keep on at us. Why should we try and junk it all as being just so much circumstantial baggage in the way of knowing ourselves, as gurus tell us? The gurus can be right but in another way our sensations and emotions and memories are part of who we are and how we have gotten to where we are. They are a part of us even if not the whole part. Why must it be given to us to play The Deity to ourselves and look down - in both senses - on who we are? Moderation in all things usually is the best policy. There would seem no absolute demand from some Higher Authority to denude oneself of arguably essential aspects of our unique personality. It is only a hypothesis that our individual souls are all but undifferentiated. Why debunk an accumulation of one's experience on this earth? We base many of our conclusions on our experience of life and people. Some of it can drag us down but any inner negativity can be embraced by trying to find a unique path to our sense of balance. This is individually arrived at in the way that is right personally for each of us. It is down to us to make the best of it, as with anything else. People can do whatever turns them on through a personal choice; why be deprived of our entitlement to choose for ourselves? It is likely that turning a blind eye to it all paves the way to an independent, individual self-realisation? That does not mean that some urges cannot be checked in some situations but the idea surely from which to resile is that they are only too likely to be wrong *per se*.

Note: This itemisation of outcomes of Reflection is necessarily general in nature

(d) Calmness and De-stressing



(Left) Card by John Moffat for Rosemary Cockayne and (Right) Isabelle and the pot of Basil - Waterhouse

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives might be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

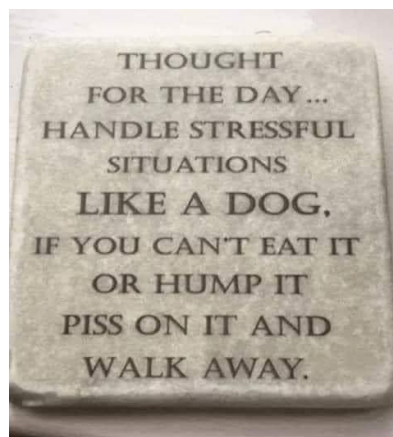
- Wendell Berry

'Getting away from it all' takes many forms and has a purpose in common. Meditation or reflection is a way of de-stressing and, by doing so, getting things that concern one into a more manageable perspective. The habit of calmness turns down the heat and allow in

more light and to arise from the arena mentally positioned in calmer airs above zones of scrabble, and see from that vantage point what the actors, yourself included, are doing.

Thinking out the motives of others may not be so customary or automatic a way for us to consider the game of life any more than it is than, when playing chess, to walk round the board and see it from the standpoint of the other person. It can be a surprise to come at it from a different perspective, and habituate oneself to see oneself from a side of our nature that is not intimately engaged in a situation, or as others see one; a way of thinking anew about almost anything. The small buds of thinking that can lead the unwary astray can be lopped off before they reach straggle growth. Calmness of mind is often the best way rather than acting on impulse, at speed, repenting at leisure.

Hippies - using the gesture of a 'V' sign with two forefingers - used to say '*Relax, man! ...be cool, take it easy!*' It was partly a comment on the uptight world from which they were trying to escape. It has been observed that one can think loftier thoughts when in a cathedral. A wish to 'go back to nature' speaks to much the same urge for uplifting serenity. Thinking, quietly, calmly and undisturbed, with the aid sometimes of whatever 'props' are to hand is the thing, yet this can be dismissed if it is proposed to do so from an armchair, say, as being in 'a brown study' - it is the thinking process in itself that may well be the helpful mindset, a study of life, one coloured from a wider palette than that of the 'everyday', that is to the fore in the useful, intrinsic purposes of this attitude. There is no harm in using whatever is helpful along this path.



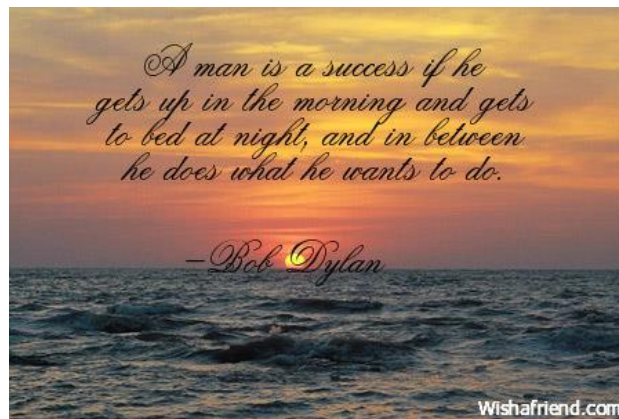
Mental reserves that can reach upward to this advantageous state are usually the stronger if more available readily at any time from within oneself, without a need of turning to props in whatever form or however pleasurable. In this, a de-stressing is a component, a form of 'getting rid of the clutter before one can rebuild'.

A comparison or overlap of Reflection with Meditation need not be over-categorical. Breathing exercises and posture can put one in the mood for reflection as much as Meditation. But perhaps gentle music or a joss stick can help acknowledging the start of reflection heightening subliminally its importance? Such a ruse does not have to be of an order that implies an elevation of the soul, sometimes with a hint of the exotic or adventurous thrown in, an idea permeating some guru-approved Meditation but a mere acknowledgement that in a daily timetable time can be legitimately set aside for calm

reflection. TV programmes do not morph into one another without some border thrown up, an advertising jingle or other kind of lead-in, the better to prepare our brains for a slightly different form of exercise than that in which they have just been engaged.

The kernel of our inner calm is also a part of our nature from which, for so much of the time, we are in flight, an antidote to which is going back to the peace of nature. We have that nature within us.

(e) Freedom and outfacing challenges



The most unhappy man is he who is ambitious beyond the scope of his abilities and better judgement.

- Count Metternich

Why do we need an excuse for doing what we wish, and thinking what we want?

People like to feel that they are independent and in charge of their own destinies and that they are free agents. Who opts to be boxed in? The more towards 'autonomous' we get, the free-er we are likely to feel; the less hidebound by thinking being done by others for us. Again, it is a matter of degree. A hankering, like that of the proverbial cowboy for the wide open range, may not be for everyone, speculate as one may about secret fears, or jealousy; others might prefer to huddle indoors, snug as a bug in a rug. There may be 'none so deaf as those who do not want to hear' but how far does inner man 'not want to hear' as opposed to telling himself and others that he does not want to hear?

It is not just about an illusion that we may wish to cherish. There are practical, positive results that come of being master of oneself. A personal view about this permeates one's world. In business, say, colleagues can be difficult. The encouragement of the habit of reflection, in which a strategy or tacts are well planned, may have the practical purpose of helping induce a more reasonable approach in those we who we have to deal and, as a result, less at their mercy. It may give the added inner strength needed to outface them

Digression: Freedom is one of the 'Petri Dish' urges. (see above). To those who argue that there is no 'free will', it can be countered - with such hesitation as may be called for in case those that argue this point have studied the subject in orthodox philosophy - that it may be the case in one context that 'no free will' is posited, but that does not preclude free will in another. A thing can be more than one thing at the same time. The same proton, it appears from science, can be in two places at the same time. As said above, Dr Johnson can kick his table to see its solidity while the analyst of sub-particles physics can point out the random nature of its sub-atomic elements - both can be right.

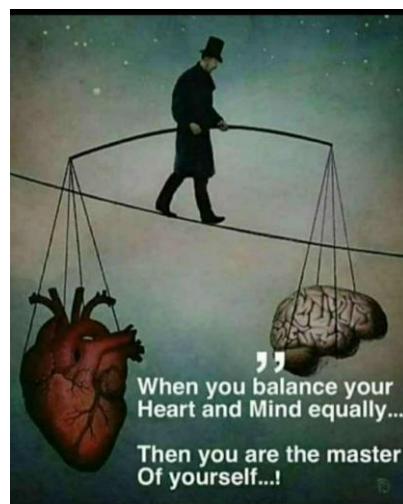
Thinking carefully about **how to overcome obstacles** for instance to making money or anything related: a careful form of counteracting the current tendency that comes in part from the new high-speed forms of communication to react too quickly to questions, and get things done with a greater efficiency.

Reflecting quietly for half an hour every morning is a recipe for success of a business woman who attributes her success to it.

It is arguable that we can be likened to an elephant lumbering along a straight and narrow path with a mahout astride its neck twitching it slightly this way and that. Room for manoeuvre may be more constricted than we care to admit but that does not mean that there is no room for manoeuvre.

We are likely to be more free if we reflect on how to loosen cords around us.

(f) Patience



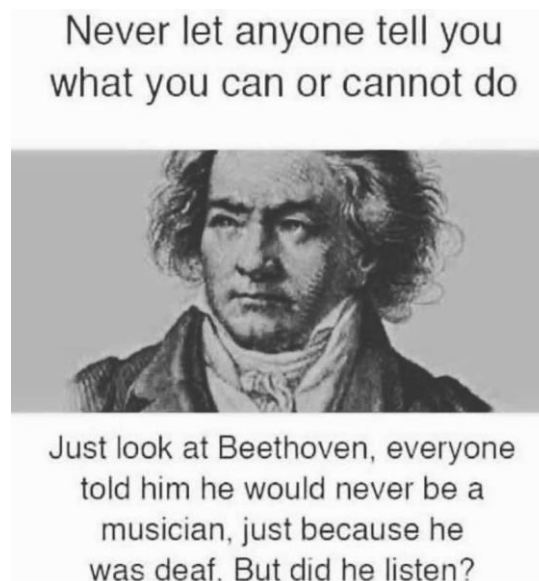
We are told to **hold our temper** so treat this as a prescription for conduct. Is it right in every context? Often it is the right approach to ease off the throttle. Each situation can be considered on its own merits. What of the situation in battle where one army is outnumbered ten to one and 'a madman has the strength of ten'; a soldier may consciously decide that anger is the best policy? The cathartic moment of the charge may meet the need of that crossroads not intellectual rumination.

A cardinal principle in Christianity is to 'turn the other cheek.' 'Revenge is mine saith the Lord.' We thereby are fortified in our effort to be meek and mild rather than lash out when we perhaps feel this to be our natural reaction. According to the Hindu way, however, the advice given by Krishna to Arjuna was that evil should be fought to stop it proliferating.

A habit of mind that is slightly at odds with our incessant plunge into activity, our busy lives and the pressure that is summed up, in Yorkshire-speak, as that is best to be 'up and doing', is the difference only of a small space. It is the difference, one might say, of having 'A musing time' rather than 'an amusing time'. A tiny, unnoticed difference is a little like someone who is hiding in a crowd; the sheer amount of choice masks the chance of finding him. It is an intent; It is a brake against knee-jerk reaction to a technically-enhanced, inter-connected society that has ideas pouring in from all sides. It is looking before a-leaping.

Knowledge and thought can be brought to bear on each situation. A careful way of considering any particular issue before deciding what to do may not be such a bad thing. There is hardly an end of situations to which this approach cannot be applied. Professor Bronowski in his TV series, *Civilisation*, said that 'the happiest man is the one who can speak with a full heart and a full mind at the same time.'

(g) Self-reliance



The question here is for each of us is to find our own unique voice.

You are your own guru.

A Guru from whose teaching you have drunk your fill is no longer necessary for you.

A common approach these days is to go to someone else for help in times of difficulty. The self-reliance enjoined of previous times, especially in Great Britain (as it was) and Japan, nowadays frequently gives way to tea-leaf reading of various stripes, shrinks, and so forth; it is another reason why reflection is not seen so much as a path to self-healing. Why not try to face ourselves, fair and square? If we fail in the attempt, so be it, but is it not a worthwhile exercise? Something may come out of it even if it is not exactly what is intended.

The exercise may allow in a more independent approach to life, a variant of 'The medium is the message'. If you can honestly face yourself you are bound to know a great deal more wherein lies your exact problem; if you can deal with it yourself, thinking about how to do so, it is likely to foster in you the tendency of self-reliance..

(h) Compassion, and empathy

One secret of winning at chess is to walk round the table to see the board from the standpoint of the opponent.

Enhanced sensitivity can come of reflection: every creature looks out on the world from its own viewpoint, using 'apparatus' that was not of its own creating and with emotions as real to it as to ...YOU. The inner life and sensitivities of a gazelle may be more real to it than that of the lion that eats it, even if the way of the world, currently, may be to admire the latter more than the former. Greater sensitivity may be born of fear than aggressivity. Tolerance is to be felt, not just as a concept to which we pay lip-service.

No creature on earth from the humblest insect, could help being born, as we all know: the question is of how deeply we realise it. The more deeply we take such an idea on board, think about it, the more compassionate towards a perspective of others we are likely to have. This can be a boon both for ourselves and for society, empathy being a quality increasingly praised in today's touchy-feely world.

It is often too easy to let compassion go by the board; in France it is seen as the duty of the government to look after its citizenry with each person having equal rights. This may be commendable but reflection should tell people that there is an individual onus to help one's fellows that cannot easily be sloughed off onto a system to absolve one's conscience from failing to give direct aid.

(i) Open-mindedness

This is a cornerstone of the whole process. Borrow from that which is of use to you no matter if it comes from a belief-system different from yours, or think out your own way. Rigidity of mind, in the sense of being single-minded, has its advantages but it has its limits and those who do not bend with the wind are more likely to be blown down. In ju-jitsu, the weight of an opponent can be used to trip him up; charging headlong with thought into the fray is not usually the best policy; weighing up options before becoming single-minded is no doubt better, while retaining an open mind in case fresh evidence may justify rethinking. It is a mark of both common sense and intelligence.

The specialist subject in a forum to promote practical wisdom is that of deriving the right lessons from life experience including the experience of others and the past. It helps towards a balanced attitude.

The results of societies less tolerant than ours, the blood feuds over generations, the oppressive governments, should do much to persuade people of being open to ideas that

are not theirs. In England it used to be said that a man '*should fight to the death for the right of someone to have opinions that were the opposite of his*', a lesson from the past that Brits are in danger of forgetting and to which we could be more open, with advantages to one and all.

We rework narratives about the past in the light of a new generation's ideas, journalists sometimes admitting that they wish to implant their ideas into the hearts and minds of readers. Few allowances are made for the different imperatives of other eras. 'Ends' could trump 'means'. Gladstone might thunder with 'muscular Christianity' that '*the Turks should clear bag and baggages from the provinces they have desecrated and profaned*' but the rougher sorts like Jamieson came into their own to get things done while the good guys on the Home Front like Wilberforce tempered some jagged edges of imperialism. The ideas of the current school of journalism take root, become part of the furniture of communal thinking. But we should not take their ideas as our own unless we reflect on them, question them. The Chinese venerate the elderly; perhaps that attitude could be among the next of our cultural borrowings? Tap the sager folk, the older generation, for their accumulated wisdom. Where is the harm in being open to ideas of the past, while acknowledging the mistakes. When younger, there has been less of an opportunity to accumulate evidence about alternatives in life; as with a man, so with a nation.

There are no end of metaphysical questions and it is folly to pretend that our responses to them have no bearing on how we live our lives. Are we to go through life as representatives of 'the swarm'? Are we the all but unconscious playthings of ideas swirling around our birthplaces or society? '*Flies to wanton boys are we to the gods!*'?

There may be much to learn from the more distant past that modern fashion tends to discount. There are no end of examples of how things were done differently in the past and equally no doubt that society of today has advanced in many ways but it does not mean that we do everything better and in particular some of the old prescriptions for conduct may be taken more seriously than we do; reject them by all means but at least first consider them on their own merits, not as mere totems now discarded by the general trend..

Our perspective, the way we live our lives, what people accomplish for good or ill tends to be what matters in the future. We may be representatives of a community owing loyalty to our own race and creed but much of our legacy is for strangers, even if they are our descendants. It is best to let us do our bit towards getting it right in '*a compact*', in Burke's words, '*..between the dead, the present generation, and those yet unborn.*' The moving goalpost of history and of our short careers may cast a backward glow on what we do that we did not anticipate. Our king-term judges are as yet unseen and if there is erring thinking going on, the truth eventually will out.

The right ideas, principles and mantras, often repeated, as opposed to the canards that too often go the rounds unquestioned, may help create the right environment for dispassionate evaluation of issues.

Below are a few examples where an open-minded attitude towards the past could induce advantageous rethinking about some of our ways of doing things - though any of the ideas in this list may not find acceptance in terms of appropriateness for our methods of today:

- In the days of the Chinese emperors, learned people were those in line for promotion and today it might be said, as an example, that the Chinese approach is less liable to the pitfalls of short-term policy-making that are arguably endemic in the West.
- It is no longer fashionable to believe in Thomas Carlyle's 'Great Man theory of history' but an ideal for which to strive is to have in power a right-minded, disinterested man of action, as in days of Ancient Rome, and with experience from which to draw on a repository of practical wisdom. Leadership qualities are not generally writ large on CVs and it is this factor, allied to good judgement, that can make the critical difference to the way an institution is headed.
- Applicants for high-pressure commercial jobs often are expected to have psychological testing but such a principle, useful in commerce, is not a thing that we see is applied to our leaders.
- Not all politicians are venal as elements in the media might have some readers believe. All are human beings liable as any of us to err and some are in politics to do their best. And what applies to politics applies in general.
- Can the man in the street make any difference to what goes on in high places? Much hot air is expended, many roses are destined to flower unseen in the desert, any chance word or deed may result in any disproportionate outcome but in general it helps to have the ear of someone who can make a difference. Churchill put it well in saying *'We are all worms but I do believe that I am a glow-worm!'*
- As ever, it is drawing the right lessons from the past as opposed to accepting a received version of events and grafting it straight on to different circumstances. Joseph Goebbels said *'tell a lie often enough and it will be believed!'*; the same *pensée* could apply to right thinking.
- Sir Freddie Ayer founded the philosophical school of 'logical positivism' in Oxford in the 1930s. Sir Freddie had the corpus of his work to draw upon. He once was asked what was to be the advised attitude of a logical positivist in daily life. His response was to *'await someone saying something and then say what is wrong with it.'*
- An author like Evelyn Waugh downgraded his emotion or his ideas and say how the language in which they were clothed was all-important, and he produced in the process memorable prose.
- Voice projection is taught in drama school though elocution seems of lessening popular appeal given the old British class system is in decline, it not being understood that the 'upper class' accent evolved partly so as to convey the snap of authority. 'Oratory', a subject for aspirant politicians in the ancient world, has dropped off the curriculum for ever and a day. It does not figure in the proliferating handbooks on how to influence people or how to project a case well even if marketing wiles are in the ascendant.

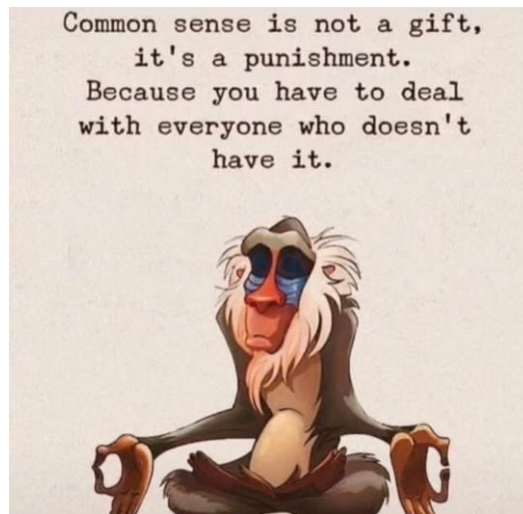
The impoverishment of a rich language, a priceless gift, passes all but unnoticed. The evidence of how far this has gone is to be seen in literature as well as in speeches. In France, today, authors still talk about the language they use but in England words are used now to get to the point, convey an idea. True, a contra argument is that substance counts above a chosen impression. Stark, clear English is no doubt often the best way to make a point and even Latin changed over the centuries of the Roman Empire but how many barbs that today's politicians fling at one another will be remembered a century from now?

It incidentally could go to extremes, as for instance Disraeli castigating Gladstone as: *'A sophisticated rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity, and gifted with an egotistical imagination that can at all times command an interminable and inconsistent series of arguments to malign an opponent and to glorify himself.'*

Above are instances of CHARACTER TRAINING for oneself, below are some:

CEREBRAL ADVANTAGES THAT CAN COME FROM REFLECTION

(a) COMMON SENSE



From now on a breach of common sense will be regarded as a breach of rules

- *Miss Gibbins – Headmistress, St Mary's Calne school*



People can say that they have understood the sense in what you are telling them but if they have not the basic understandings of what you are saying but only the apparent agreement in shared concepts that can appear through the imprecision of language, then they are telling the truth as far as they see it, but they are wrong.

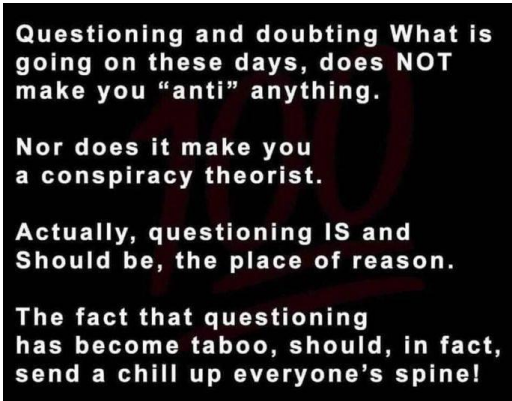
Common Sense and the right way of thinking lies at the root of so much problem solving. Often enough it is the degree of learning - of acquiring a too many facts in situation that are not exactly on all fours with that being confronted - that gets in the way of going directly to a common sense solution.

It is common sense that tells us that we are better off having a happy positive attitude to life even if this sometimes involves making a choice as to our basic attitude. We may set against a basic general dread of what we think may be a dystopian world, one invariably overlaid by a specific dread of precise happenings coming to pass, as against the wonder of for instance atmosphere we can sensitise ourselves to experiencing and the fascinating strangeness of the world.

(b) Rationalisation and Scepticism

You are never too old to learn something stupid

- *A paraprosookian*



Questioning and doubting What is going on these days, does NOT make you "anti" anything.

Nor does it make you a conspiracy theorist.

Actually, questioning IS and Should be, the place of reason.

The fact that questioning has become taboo, should, in fact, send a chill up everyone's spine!

George Orwell coined the term 'quackspeak' for those who parrot ideas without any real engagement of their minds (*'short clipped words of unmistakable meaning which could be uttered rapidly and which roused the minimum of echoes in the speaker's mind'*) If he had a point, there is also 'duckthink'.

Action starts in thought; a good precept, for instance, for those facing challenges is to adopt the formula: *'One thing at a time / Consideration / Decision / Action'*. It can help to handle exigencies whether with big challenges of trying to put right as far as possible things deficient in ourselves and our society or in matters of daily life in which we get bogged down.

Rationalisation of emotion and consideration of all the issues goes towards what used to be termed 'a cool head', much prized in military thinking. Englishmen had a bias against what was downgraded as 'intellectuality'. They tended to pride themselves on what was dignified as 'unconscious cerebration'. It was said to take place whilst horse riding. Some attenuated resonance of this idea, however *passé*, permeates the basic thinking of many of us; a shadowy background of a cultural attitude.

Stupidities are more evident if one is flexed to challenge 'received wisdom' which is more 'received' than wise.

Sometimes intelligence or good arguments are harnessed to stupid ideas so that the language of their defence is convincing or high-flown. People deceive themselves and therefore others. Sometimes people stand tall on a stance of being even-handed and objective; but it is a presumption in both senses of the world: the 'magisterial' fall-back position that it must be 'six of one and half a dozen of the other' and the phrase, to 'see both sides', implies this in advance. But one side can be right and another wrong; one side right about the things that deeply matter. It is as well to be on guard against decoys in thinking and believing and, so, acting in error. A 'horse led to water might drink' and 'some of what glisters may be gold'.

We condemn or applaud on a basis often to be questioned. It is understandable to want to avoid a wild goose chase. Thought may be needed to see if the wild goose got it right. It could be you, floating in a sea of prejudice of which you are unconscious and contrary to your ideas of your better self, who is the Goosey-goosey gander.

Wild Geese are well organised, show commendable community spirit and are not stick-in-the-muds. Their flight paths cover enormous distances and are in an aerodynamic V-shaped formation to a destination known in advance, wings beating in a way to uplift all the flock; they allow for a tired lead goose to fall back with a fresher one at the spearhead. If a goose drops out exhausted, two stay alongside it down to ground level staying with it for as long as it takes to be of help to the stricken bird.

Some games or studies like chess or philosophy are promoted for training in ability to rationalise - and a closely related activity, hard to categorise, of 'Thinking about...' a discipline is, if successful, a way of navigating successfully the pitfalls of life. It is not just a byproduct of schoolroom study of many subjects, but the target, whether or not it is seen as such, and more could be made of this primary purpose.

If people could stop to re-evaluate what they are doing, how much *angst* might be spared! How to console a man who spent his life working for a cause like Communism only to find at the end of his days that Stalin might have been a monster! To take a controversial example closer to home, Brexit. This is not to take sides in the debate but only, here, to observe that if a politician has spent years working in the European Parliament it is only to be expected that he is unlikely to want to think that he has been wasting his life. Will he have the objective perspective that is ideal to evaluate Brexit? No one wishes to waste time and energy in some cause or course in life that too late we discover is not in our best interests. If we wish to avoid the manifold snares and delusions in life and go after things truly worthwhile for us or our societies, we would hardly opt knowingly to go on a Wild Goose Chase. Yet too often that is what we do.

Moral of the tale: 'Give a goose a bad name but don't be too quick to hang him – save at Christmas!'

(c) Synthesis in thinking

A thought welling up in the mind is part of a continuum of thoughts, each thought having struck one before, and can appear as fresh-minted as largely new thoughts. Thought or thoughts invariably are a synthesis, with only a part, if that, being original. We can consciously try and slough off the ballast of the past, not be steeped in it, up to a given moment, and that can impart a degree, maybe a small degree, of freshness, allowing oneself to be not so dependent on one's past. But reflection, allowing the passage of time to go by, new contexts can impart new slants to solving problems. The synthesis of different thoughts from different contexts is something to which a habit of reflection is prone, those ideas which, pursuing our own subject, we may overlook. *'What ye of England know ye if only England ye know?'*

Examples:

- Historians can speculate on causes of the success of the Roman Empire, their comfort zone being historiography and history, sometimes archaeology. What thesis enters on the subject by reference to pre-history?
- The intermarriage of neanderthal man with homo sapiens was most marked on the globe - some 5% of genes in common - in the Italian peninsular. From this fact it tendentiously could be argued that the enhanced muscularity and aggressiveness of the fighting men in the Roman legions came from primordial origins.
- Natural forces that explain the course of history now go towards explaining the fall of Cleopatra and her long dynasty. True she backed the wrong Roman, Mark Anthony, but of more vital impact, explaining her dilemma over distribution of grain to the Romans rather than to her hungry people, recently has been laid at the door of the 300 preceding years of devastating volcanic activity in Egypt.

This is an idea whose time may have come and today the increasing inter-disciplinary trend in universities is a corollary of seeing in synthesis a tool of thinking.

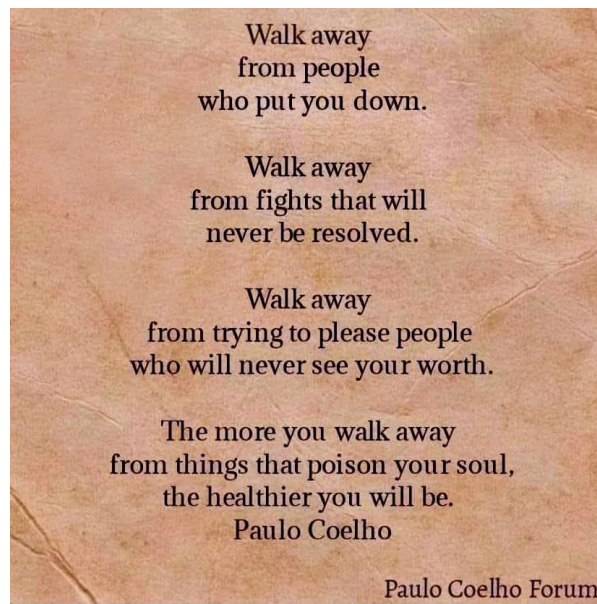
(d) Inspiration

Inspiration does not start out of 'nowhere'. Its start can be slow, as illustrated by the joke: *'I worked 40 years to be an overnight success!'*

Give inspiration the maximum chance to surface, with brain and powers of cogitation harnessed to cozsing it even during sleep.

(e) Strategy and Tactics

Of that which one cannot speak, thereof one should be silent.



If we know that we are absent-minded, we can consciously train ourselves to watch our step. A mire into which people can flounder usually is not clearly signposted; it behoves us all to watch our steps. Advice to those who wish to sidestep life's snares is to 'study the situation'. All situations being different, there is no handbook for the specifics of what confronts one, only guidelines which can lose some of their efficacy by being treated as rulesas in the valuable precepts above attributed to Paulo Forum.

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