

# **REFLECTION ON REFLECTION**

*A Handbook for the virtual Institute of Reflection*

*by*

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# CONTENTS

## OVERVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

What is Reflection about?

Who is this book for?

A novelist takes up the story

### REFLECTION AS WESTERN MEDITATION

*Is there a difference between the mindset of the East and that of the West?*

*What is involved in reflection*

*Some suggestions about ideas worth preserving through Reflection today*

*Ways to prepare for Reflection*

*Some basic concepts of Western Reflection thinking:*

### Further reflection on REFLECTION

*What celebrated people say about reflection*

*Finding yourself includes observing yourself.*

*Philosophy comes in many guises*

*Preferred priorities may come into clearer view*

*Reflection – Thinking for yourself*

### PRACTICAL WISDOM

*How should we live our lives*

*A Training for Practical Wisdom*

*An Unpopular approach*

*Some outré ideas*

*Have You Suffered a bereavement?*

*Are You Undergoing a Divorce?*

### DOUBTING THOMAS – the downside of Reflection

### A VIRTUAL AGORA FOR OCCIDENTAL MEDITATION

### CONTEMPLATION: ‘Ruminative’ reflection in action

*Reflection and Philosophers*

## ***Language***

***What can we learn about ourselves from the animal world?***

***Longevity and maturity***

***The Physical world***

***Individuals are communal beings as well as being individual***

***What, if anything, is unique about me?***

***What is it that conveys an 'essence'?***

***Our soul and the Afterlife***

***Celestial Justice***

***A Blur***

***Schrödinger's Cat...***

***Is there one truth or system that is sufficient to explain the Mystery?***

***More about 'Unseen Nature'***

***A few observations on this way of looking at the world***

***A all-too-brief gaze at the heavens***

**SOME CONCLUSIONS**

## **APPENDIX**

### **CONCEPTS**

***Patterns of thought about which we may not be fully aware***

***The Moving Goalpost***

***The Irony Principle***

***The Proximity Principle***

***The Threshold point***

***Binary Thinking***

***Concepts relating to international relations and society***

***Morality should be the same for leaders as for the led***

***Value Systems as opposed to Belief Systems***

### **FURTHER ASPECTS OF REFLECTION**

***Reflective Practice***

***Reflective practice encourages innovation***

***Reflective practice encourages engagement***

***Objective Thinking***

***Metacognition***

***Critical Reflection***

***Transformative Learning***

***The Art of Self-Scrutiny***

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## Introduction

Dear Reader,



We are inclined to devalue, even overlook the obvious. Everyone supposes they know how to reflect. It is all so simple that perhaps you don't need to read any more.

Reflection is not the same as ratiocination. The design of this book is on a reflective pattern. There is a charm in it, like taking a stroll in the woods. The mind can play free, traipsing up a byway here or there that looks intriguing even if a digression. Rumination and association of ideas replace the plot and plan of this story. Observations and ideas, like *fauna* in a field, crop up, some colourful, some thorny. A bloom or a tree may catch an eye and lodge in a memory. Cliches and flowers respectively are part of our mental and physical landscape. We can overlook them, not seeing what is front of our eyes, just as a crowd can be a good place in which to hide.

Compare the approach in this book to a ramble in a forest. *Chacun son gout!* (To each, his own taste.) People can play golf instead or, like Mark Twain, feel that: '*golf is a good walk spoiled.*' William Hazlitt<sup>1</sup> saw the transformative power on the mind: of a solitary walk in nature: '*Give me the clear blue sky over my head, and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before me, and a three hours' march to dinner — and then to thinking!*'

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<sup>1</sup> William Hazlitt (1778 -1830) was an English essayist, drama and literary critic, painter, social commentator, and philosopher.

Questions more than answers are par for the course in this book. It is not essential to accept anything herein lock, stock and barrel; the question is more about whether there is a nugget to be unearthed here or there. 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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## What is reflection about?

Reflection is an Activity that too often does not own up to the name. It is aligned with 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 in our speeded-up world that it has a more recognised niche in our communal psyche. A brake should be applied to an autopilot journey that may prevent us haring off into darker or unnecessarily circuitous passageways of thinking and codes of behaviour. A winnowing, clarifying process is best for the construction of theories built on solid foundations. To a large extent, our personas are what we have thought, as well as what we feel and have felt. We should think again.

Why not have a dig at Sir Malcolm Bradbury as alas he's now under the sod? Which is NOT a weak pun; well, it is, but it didn't start off with that intention. OOPS! Second thoughts should have prompted a re-devising of that curtain-raiser. For third thoughts, read on.

Sir Malcolm was brilliant for a lot of reasons but particularly - for you of uncharacteristically long attention span for Generation Z who have persevered with this book thus far; ...OOPS! Apologies for recycling undigested pap! The author should have twice before writing that sentence! On reflection, your generation has had a most unfair press! You are experts at the art of concentration; you have patience in abundance.

Sir Malcolm set up a 'Creative Writing' course. A ridiculous idea, it may sound? If you want to write, just **DO IT**. Great writers in history have not needed tips from Sir Malcolm Bradbury! Well, maybe Immanuel Kant could have tried to be a tad less opaque but did Shakespeare go to a 'writing school'? Kazuo Ishiguro, one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary fiction authors having been awarded several major literary prizes including a Nobel Prize in Literature, was on Bradbury's course. It taught him valuable stuff. You can't Pooh! Pooh! it saying he didn't need to be potty trained in his craft. He doesn't say it. He acknowledges a big debt to the course.

Reflection, too, is not as easy as it seems. You might think you know how to do it, and do it in the best way. But, do you?

Close attention to what is going on in your life, like close attention to what you hear and read can pay substantial dividends. Ideas can well up in your mind that no doubt were there, unnoticed. 'Second thoughts' need not mean, as is implied, that first thoughts were wrong; Second Thoughts can mean that you understand better the thinking that went into your first thoughts. You can plan better the road ahead.

Peace of mind, better decision making, a constructive attitude and widening of horizons are all dividends paid by proper reflection. Our lives - in spiritual and in daily terms - can be improved by reflection.

Reflection can be about anything, a process that leads to better thinking because done with care.

In this book there is reflection about why we are on this earth, what it means to be conscious of oneself, some fundamental concepts that actuate us which often are not fully considered, ideas about life and possible afterlife, and, chiefly, on reflection itself. All in all, this reflection on possible avenues of reflection, can only aim at touching the tip of the tip of the tip of this peak.

Common sense rather than what the Great have said is a watchword.

Some ways in which we think - individually and as a society - are not scrutinised as a matter of course. Evaluating them usually goes by default. It is attempted here. It is less a blueprint for specific action than, ideally, a re-jig of the thinking that makes us, and society, tick in something other than a *'tik-tok'* sense.

There are many ways to consider Reflection; in certain quarters of academia it is considered as a subject in its own right. There are mentions of just a few theories in the appendix and a section in the website of *The Institute of Reflection* looks at alternative approaches.

Reflection about Reflection may prompt further delving into subjects of fascination, a step along the path of a lifetime journey.

Here is a quick check-list about some key aspects of Reflection:

- Reflection is 'Meditation' shorn of the capital initial letter 'M'. Reflection and Meditation used to be much the same thing but particularly since the 'sixties and a flow into Western thought of ideas of the East, Meditation has been hived off almost into being a separate type of cult.
- Reflection can be so much more than a sweetie to suck at whim. Sometimes one even may not like what it reveals.
- There are different ways to reflect, whether intellectual or ruminative.
- There is so much to reflect on, whether Practical or Theoretical.
- Reflection for instance encourages us to dwell on fascinating subjects we often tend to take for granted: the world.... who we are...why we are here....what we believe.
- The mentality required for Reflection can enhance practical wisdom.
- You can actively rather than lethargically relax; you can do the same with reflection.
- 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.

People devote time and energy to things that, in the scheme of things, are not so important.

The idea of 'Reflection' being important in itself can help ameliorate a too-fast pace of life. Something at times may be awry in our lifestyles as we rush from hither to yon. People increasingly plead that 'I want time for myself'. The passing of a leisured lifestyle can be seen in countless ways; in, say, the lapse in writing of letters with time for delivery and pause for reflection on how to react. It is one of the ways that has made for a shift in how people see and live life. Time spent in reflection should be encouraged especially today.

The 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.*'



*Health warning: Reflection is only for those who have the time for it. For those dealing with overwhelming pressure on their time, life and death matters say, Reflection can be seen as a luxury. No one is asked to lay down a sword in a deadly combat and tell the guy about to spear you: 'Do hold on a mo! I've gotta get out my reflection mat; it's 'that' time of day!' But it is to be embraced where possible as a flower of the civilised life as is music or literature, apart from advantages as may appear in these pages. If nothing else, it may well be of profit to let the saying '**Look Before your Leap**' take root in the mind and forestall thoughts sliding away from the importance of that and similar saws just because they are well known.*

### **Who is this book for?**

This book is a lucky dip for anyone, whether well versed or unlettered, prepared to look into the value of a way of thinking - reflection - that tends to be taken for granted but which can repay tenfold a concentration on it: Whatever may be your interest or approach, it can be a fun ride, a useful intellectual exercise or a life-enhancing adventure.

It is a journey of common sense open to one and all. Maybe, in disagreement with some of the ideas found in this book, you will clarify your own thinking.

If you are an academic given to scooping up recondite references, this book may not be for you. It may be that you have pored over learned tracts that touch on the subject matter of this book and may sniff at what to you is elementary thinking or controversial passages. Are you Mr Everyman or Miss or Mrs Everywoman? Perhaps you should listen more to Mr Everyman or Miss or Mrs Everywoman? Many are the self-appointed Guides telling us what and how to think, or wiseacres, or the Greats of philosophy. This text makes no great claims of itself yet emphasises that there is a reservoir of wisdom in us all if we care to tap into it.

Some passages will be *Déjà vu* to some readers and not others. Some readers may demur at what they see as abstruse chunter, some may like to consider ordinary thinking on some extraordinary subjects. Whether you skim-read or prefer to 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.' one never knows what surprises there may be in store as each day starts, or as you turn each page of this book.



# ***A novelist takes up the story***

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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! 🙄!"*

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

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 conclusions below for themselves. The suggestion here is that we **should** do it, both for ourselves and for society. If in the lines below recapitulates what some readers have worked 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 fundamental ideas emerge unscathed, their foundation is more solid than solidified. 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 (encompassing feelings and sensations) of a mental landscape replete with monoliths in our minds of the Teachings with which we were made familiar since 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 sure that the Tablets were celestial in origin? Our generation surely is spared need of boiling down gold to make dubious images for purposes of undue reverence. A few precepts 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, 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.*' 🤪

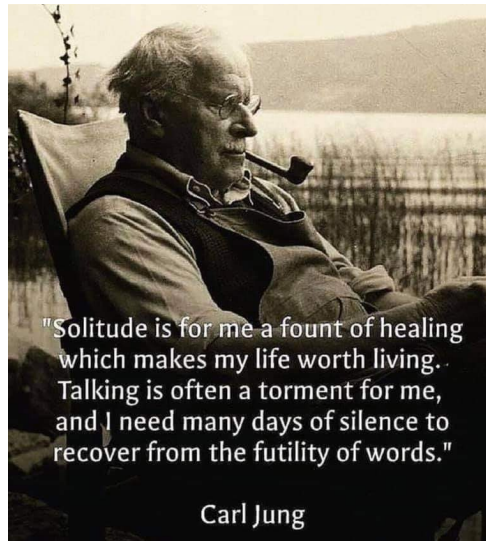
Thinking out of the tin is not easy - if wallowing inside it. When it comes to the ideas in this paper, gripe about any idea in particular, shoot it down; that is par for the course of most theorising adventures. This theory is not a sum of its parts. An arguable point here and there may not knock out 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..

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## **'Reflection' as 'Western' 'Meditation'**

*Differences in emphasis between Western style Reflection and Meditation as inspired by Eastern traditions*



It is rare to find a compilation of quotations devoted to the category of Reflection. That does not mean that people have not thought about Reflection but that it has not featured so much as a category of thought or activity that should be compartmentalised in a separate category. There is no category on a bookshelf entitled 'What people think about reflection'.

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

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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

A true philosopher is like an elephant; he never puts the second foot down until the first one is solidly in place.

- *Bernard de Fontenelle*

You have power over your mind - not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.

- *Marcus Aurelius*

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 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*

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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 mind 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*

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- *Peter Koestenbaum*

Act in haste, repent at leisure.

- *William Congreve, English playwright, poet and Whig politician*

The above quotations could feature in an Anthology of Western Thinkers on Reflection but, as said above, the subject, crux as it is to all of us, has not been thought fit for attention as a separate category to date, if with exceptions such as Rodin's sculpture, '*The Thinker*',.. Even this piece, as conceived, was only a small part of a much larger work<sup>2</sup> till it was realised that it had something of particular interest to impart.

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<sup>2</sup> The Thinker was made to sit over the lintel of Rodin's monumental bronze doorway, The Gates of Hell, contemplating the fate of the damned.

In eras past, Reflection implied that a 'thinking cap' had been donned whereas 'Meditation' was slightly more formal, more deliberate somehow than rumination or reverie, almost at a stage where - to milk the image of head gear - a Top Hat or Skull Cap was more suitable for it. Here is an extract from a Jewish prayer of the Victorian era:

*'...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....'*

The word 'meditation' since transcendental trips of the Beatles in the 'sixties to the Ashram of the Maharshi has developed an orientation towards the oriental. It has acquired a capital 'M' in keeping with its new-found status of a respected lifestyle associated with wellbeing topped up with a *soupçon* of hint that a practitioner exudes a fashionable odour of spirituality.

A capital 'R' is now the due of 'Reflection'.

Excellent and varied as are Eastern traditions it behoves us in the First World to tread warily on some of its wilder shores. It is not claimed here that alluring spots are marked on maps *'Here be dragons!'*, just that a bit of caution might go a long way. Occidental Meditation - aka Reflection - should come out of the closet. The cults and beliefs emanating largely from the East may have elevated aims and much to commend them and are in vogue but Western traditions of reflection deserve a place in the sun. To Reflect is distinct from some goals of 'Meditation'. They are another path to self-realisation and should be fully signposted.

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, namely reflection.

As the author James Clear says: *"If you want to master a habit, the key is to start with repetition, not perfection."*

The habit of challenging habits of thought - one's own and those of others - lateral thinking, rumination, care in coming to conclusions, and peace of mind, and more, are part of a mix that makes of reflection an activity of value. A clear-minded, rational, serene, detached look at what we suppose that we truly know and at what individuals and society can do can go hand-in-hand with spirituality. Finding one's self can build on the above mental processes. Reflecting on scientific breakthroughs can help shed light on variegated intangible realms. These arguably actuate us and can supplement our Faiths or core Beliefs. Thinking critically with rational thought has a long and proud history in the West, with repercussions in society for instance in producing inspiration for manifestos that have toppled oppressive systems of government. Reflection is the enemy of impulsiveness and rashness; the friend of care and aforethought. Knee-jerk snap decisions - a tendency of our modern times - gullability, and immaturity can come at heavy price. Too late we may wake up, collectively and individually. Better decisions mean better actions.

The point is to be aware of a problem, even an intangible one, so as to better repair it. We 'know' much of what needs to be done but we often don't do it. We do not take it seriously enough. Because it seems deceptively easy. We slide away from the obvious.

John Updike wrote: *'We skate upon an intense radiance we do not see because we see nothing else'.*

It is a further reminder of the things and the ideas that we do not see and so do not consider. This myopia can relate to obvious questions about our lives as well our place in the scheme of things.

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!"*

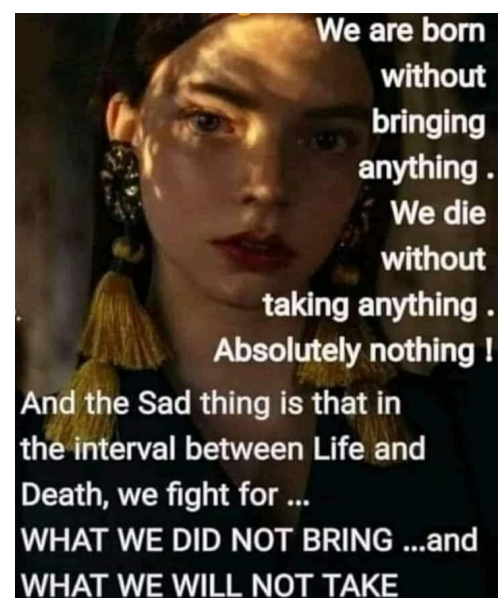
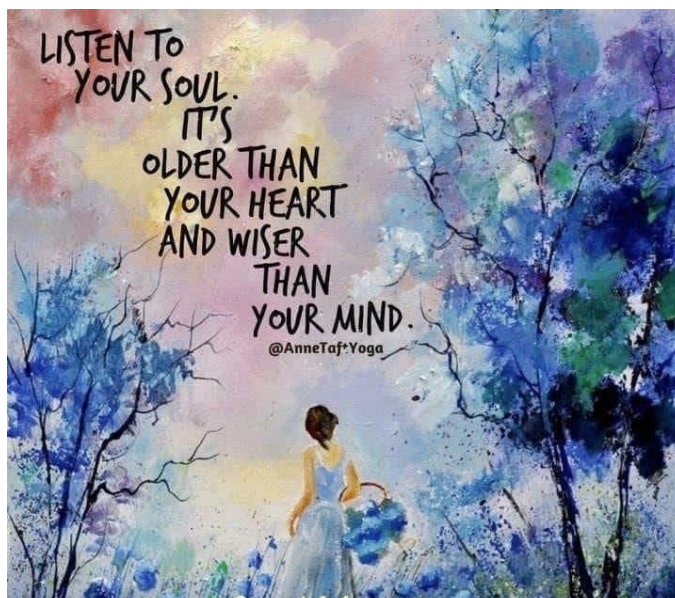
*"I find that, on that evening, I will be watching television!"*

Imagine someone saying:

*"Thank you for the lovely invitation but I've checked my diary and, so sorry, I have a prior arrangement. 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.

It is not as if Western Reflection and Eastern Meditation are in opposition to each another. We can borrow from the best of both traditions. Gurus and profound thinkers have much to offer in terms of guidance and inspiration. The emphasis in the West, to speak in general terms, is different. The two illustrations below could have come out of either way of thinking.



Nothing in these pages should run counter to nostrums which give fulfilment to those seeking Enlightenment or seriously militate against techniques designed to help devotees on that path.



'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet', Rudyard Kipling<sup>3</sup> wrote in 'The Ballad of East and West'.

It is often overlooked that the poem continues:

*'...But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!'*

There is an appetite shared by many irrespective of their geographic origin to wonder about the Big Questions of Why We Are Here and other issues, sometimes fascinating, sometimes taxing, in life.

Eastern-style Meditation, in the sense now generally understood, has techniques that range from breathing exercises and mantras to help muffle the ebb and flow of thoughts and they often transport votaries to a far-reaching destination, aiming towards Essence and a reach to the Stars, Finding Yourself, discarding petty concerns, excising individual personality, all come into it. It ideally leads to a peak of joy. Who would say 'No!' to that! Pity the man who wallows a lifetime in the shallows without dipping a toe into suchlike happiness. Some forms of Meditation may bring about all that is claimed of them but ...on occasion might this Wish List be a bridge too far?

Much to be said, of course, for infusing ourselves into the cosmos-lit uplands that owe much to faiths originating in the East. Its a doubtless tip-top type experience, there for the asking, but some people, less ambitious perhaps, might pause a moment. Will the experience follow to order from a belief in this goal? Truly enlightened people know their own exalted minds but many ordinary folk may like to think with care before becoming over-ambitious against what might be better judgement, once wheeled into action.

But the target! A form of supra-consciousness! Ecstasy? Nirvana! Bliss! Yes, I'll go for it! Unless - perish the heretical thought! - a *soupçon* of self-delusion is involved. Splendid as it is to travel 'there', some people without their realising it may not wise up to the fact that, for them, in Alice B. Toklas<sup>4</sup> phrase, 'When one gets there, there is no there there!'

Sir Harold Nicolson<sup>5</sup>, 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'.*

One need not be in quite so sceptical a turn of mind but...

Is it *de rigeur* to undergo all the rituals - however pragmatic their basis - of the approved preparation for 'Meditation'?

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

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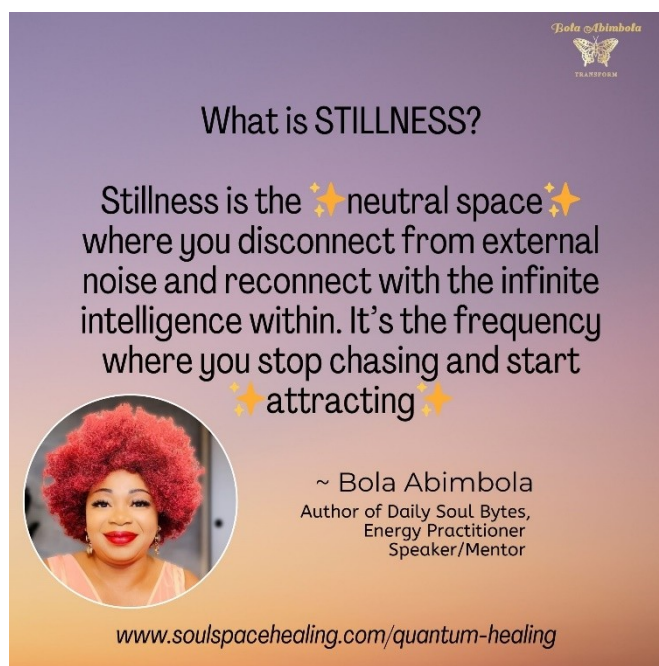
<sup>3</sup> Rudyard Kipling was a journalist, novelist, poet, and short-story writer. He was born in British India, which inspired much of his work. His works of fiction include the *Jungle Book* duology, *Kim*, the *Just So Stories* and many short stories, including 'The Man Who Would Be King'.

<sup>4</sup> Alice B. Toklas was an American-born member of the Parisian avant-garde of the early 20th century, and the life partner of American writer Gertrude Stein

<sup>5</sup> Sir Harold Nicolson KCVO CMG was a British politician, writer, broadcaster and gardener. His wife was Vita Sackville-West



rather than to actually stop our thinking. This deluge of ideas and emotions is what we are often told takes us away from our essence. It may be the case; but why throw the baby out with the bathwater?



Why are our own thoughts such an enemy that we should strive to get rid of them altogether even for a short while? Our stream of consciousness is one of the things that make us human. Feelings are a large part of us. Heart, brain and guts all are in our unique consciousness. It might come from an animating spirit that lies behind physical organs that laboratories identify as a locus. A slowing down of the mind as per much of prescribed Meditation is controversial if taken too far, for all its vogueishness. Thinking is human; and we are human. *'I think, therefore I am'*, says Descartes. Dr Johnson, the great diarist, had a point when decrying a stoppage in the track of thought: *'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'?''*

What of the idea that we should transcend our ego in Meditation?

One mainstay of oriental meditation is that it is partly designed to uplift a practitioner out of his ego. In the trying to do this, one can concentrate more on oneself than normal. One approach is 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 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 there is a risk that 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...'*

It does not sound like a barrel of laughs!

There is a backlash in some quarters against some of the extreme injunctions of Eastern fashion. Frédéric Lenoir<sup>6</sup>, to give one example, talks of the widescale self-deception of people who wish to deny their emotions and their essential humanity.

There is a vast corpus of philosophical literature in the West, concomitant attitudes and accepted modes of behaviour that are conducive to thinking about the Big Questions of life, about how to lead a rational and a productive life. This includes taking stock of evidence such as there is about the spiritual dimensions. All of this goes to an understanding of how to reflect in the Western Way. There is much value in Vedic traditions or Buddhism and so forth but this should not detract from ideas of great Western teachers. The path of reflection does not lead only down a strict Cartesian line, turning away with indifference from anything that one cannot see with the physical senses.

### **Is there a difference between the mindset of the East and that of the West?**

'The goal of meditation is not to get rid of thoughts or emotions. The goal is to become more aware of your thoughts and emotions and learn how to move through them without getting stuck.'

- Dr Philippe R. Goldin, Professor of clinical neuroscience, University of California

One way or the other, there are arguably differences in the wellspring of thinking that distinguish East from West.

The global village has been urbanised. New age people, South American tribes, people from far afield in the East share cyber-space with the First World when being drawn into Meditation. It can be that our fundamental thinking wells out of a Collective Unconscious, as Carl Jung posited. Straight away, questions arise: if so, is there a single Collective Unconscious? Did it exist when major religions got going and there was no communication between peoples separated by vast distances but striking similarities in the underlying belief systems. Are there different Collective Consciousnesses. Many and controversial may be the supposed differences in the mind-sets of people around the globe.

There are studies on differences between Eastern Meditation and Christian Meditation. In Eastern Meditation, one goal is to empty one's mind with the intention to connect with essential nature. Christian meditation has the goal of filling one's mind with Scripture with the intention to connect with God.

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<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Lenoir is a French sociologist, philosopher and writer

In terms of different personality type, it is held for instance by Christophe Allain<sup>7</sup> that an alignment of chakras comes more readily to a person of Eastern background when seated without movement whereas this chakra alignment works to better effect in his Western counterpart when engaged in athletic activity.

Whatever the political correctness of it, most people think that there in general are different types of thinking going on in different countries and continents. For present purposes, an authority is Carl Jung. His view was that the oriental psyche is more oriented towards understanding man's nature than the psyche of the Occident which is more directed towards the exterior world. The Orient has a spirituality of self-deliverance centred on man whereas the mainly Christian Occident is moved more by a faith in a Divine exterior. The Oriental wants to finalise or complete man's sense of the world by an affirmation of the spirit that is facing the material world and looks for a true sense in man's nature: Man is the measure of self-realisation. The Occidental faces outward or upward towards Divine revelation. Some Oriental teachers like Lama Chogyam Ripoche in 1971 laid into would-be devotees of Eastern traditions going as far as to refer to *'the spiritual materialism of the Occidentals who consume Oriental spiritualities to nourish their egos like they consume everything else.'*

*Vive la Difference!*

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A question of ego – of who are you and I? – is among the differences in what is here called the Eastern from a Western approach. Jung wrote:

*'It is through our emotions and feelings that we have consciousness of ourselves with the strongest acuteness.'*

Reflection affirms a basis in feeling as well as in thinking and aims for clear thought about it; we can work on understanding our feelings and the part they play in motivations.

Charles Dickens wrote 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...'*

A 'Western' aim of reflection need not be glamorous or ambitious. Common sense and contentment can take precedence over Bliss and Nirvana while we are incarnated as human beings. We can console ourselves that *'All good things come to he who waits.'* We can get our kicks, our ecstasy, elsewhere, without decking it out in exotic robes and philosophies. Contentment is a great boon; we can try harder to appreciate what we have in life.

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<sup>7</sup> Christophe Allain wrote in *'Vacuité, contemplation et jouissance de la matière (Spiritualité)'*: *'The degree of man's sleep and unconsciousness today has reached unprecedented levels. He prefers to kill his feeling of life, and ultimately life itself, rather than make his way of functioning all together, which, however, leads him in an obvious way to his downfall.'*

In 'reflection' in the West, there is not the same emphasis on the perfecting of the self as is a tendency in 'Eastern' approaches; more encouragement is given to a free-wheeling ambit covering a range of subject matter which goes beyond self-absorption.

To quote Susie Woodman in 'Sassy Godmother':

*'There's a huge amount of bullshit around meditation. And a lot of misunderstanding about what meditation actually **is** and how you do it. It's become much more mainstream in the last twenty years or so. ... some people want to make it prescriptive and mysterious. Something which is basically very simple is in danger of becoming complicated and intimidating.'*

### **Some basic concepts of Western Reflection 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.

The emphasis is different from what one might hear if one was in an Ashram being treated to a discourse by the Maharashi.

Many are the academics who have realised the power and purpose of deliberate reflection.

Jenny Moon<sup>8</sup> has written on reflective learning and the use of learning journals to support professional development. In *'Reflection in Learning and Professional Development: Theory and Practice'* (the word 'practice' there refers to practical work), she defines reflection as a thought process: "[Reflection is] ...a mental process of thinking about what we have done, learned and experienced..." (J Moon, 1999)

'Thinking on our feet' (immediate reactive reflection) can solve immediate challenges, whereas critical reflection (i.e. after-the-event proactive reflection) can produce more complex changes for future improvements. Put very simply, thinking about a task as we are doing it can lead to making changes to improve the outcome of the task.

Reflection can help us:

- Understand our own strengths and weaknesses, and become better learners,
  - Encourage and plan development of our capabilities,
- Adopt and apply Reflective Practice in the workplace, in professional situations, so that:
  - Very serious risks are minimized,
  - Quality on a wide scale is optimized,
- Others adopt and use similar Reflective Practice methods,

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<sup>8</sup> Jenny Moon, an Associate Professor at Bournemouth University, developed a framework for reflective writing, which outlines key differences between descriptive and reflective writing

- And ongoing improvement and risk avoidance become deeply embedded into organizational culture, to avoid stagnation and encourage innovation.

We can start using Reflective Practice by simply (and mindfully, intentionally) thinking about things that have happened in our lives, whether in a personal or professional situation. We can reflect in lots of different ways on a range of different events or experiences that are important to us. Using Reflective Practice does not require any extra time.. For example, on our journey home from work or study, (especially on public transport when we don't need to concentrate on traffic) we can devote a little time to consider things that happened during the day.

We can reflect while walking the dog, doing the washing-up or ironing, cutting the lawn, cleaning, and even when watching TV – you'll be surprised at how much time is spent sitting in front of a TV not actually engaged with what's on screen, just day-dreaming, in a trance. Instead, we can use and build on these moments to trigger deliberate reflection. During this process be mindful of the requirements to:

- Reflect at the right time – Reflect at appropriate times in relation to any experiences which are stressful or intense (intense experiences need a cooling-off period before 'cold' reflection is possible).
- Balance subjective and objective reflection – Be aware of the difference between your subjective reflection and your objective reflection – both are useful and relevant, but you must understand what is subjective and what is objective, and you must strive to balance each in arriving at the most helpful and clear overall understanding.
- Understand how and why you think in the way you do - generally and about specific things - this is 'metacognition' – ("Awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes.")
- Seek external clarifications - external references, advice, information, clarifications, facts, figures - especially where you believe that your thinking is not factual enough or are not fully informed about situations. (See heuristics tendencies within Nudge Theory<sup>9</sup>, which offer helpful alerts to our natural human vulnerability to making assumptions, blind faith, unsupported fears, following the crowd, etc).
- Consider your personal role and responsibilities – examine your strengths, skills and development needs (for example assess your multiple intelligences to understand your different skills and abilities – and perhaps find new ones)

There is more to Reflection than meets the eye. It is part of the preparation in some Universities for training the mind, indeed is an academic discipline in its own right. As such, it might be the thing for you to take it seriously, practice it. Let it become a habit so that one does not have to consciously put oneself in 'the right mood'.

## **What is involved in reflection**

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<sup>9</sup> 'Nudge theory', popularized by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, suggests that small, subtle changes in how choices are presented can significantly influence people's decisions and behaviors, without restricting freedom of choice.

Reflection is largely about cultivating the right attitude, about practising, forming the habit of thinking things over, thinking them through as best as one is able.

One can be unflinchingly honest with oneself. No one else is there to tick you off. One's own understanding, as opposed to soaking up unfiltered views of others, helps the process of thinking to be unclouded as far as possible by too much prejudice and emotion.

Many thoughts rise to the forefront of the mind. This is no doubt from a subconscious realm unless one posits the idea of inspiration coming to one from outside oneself - when one is sitting quietly thinking, contemplating...

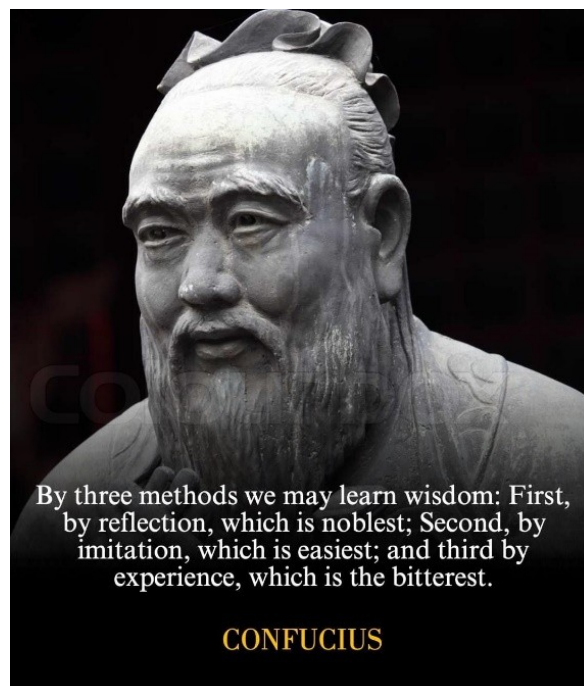
One needs to make time for this. If it is seen as an important thing to do, making time for it will be that much the easier.

The West has a vantage point on Reflection that also has been long in the brew. Westerners too have a vantage point on cogitation. There are so many things in Western culture, long and hard fought for in the past, that we are in danger of forgetting. Perhaps we have had it too easy for too long; perhaps we are not vigilant enough in defending freedoms.

To touch the tip of a tip of an iceberg given that so much can be said on this subject, not just books but whole libraries, lifetimes' worth of study, here are some quotations:

Marcus Aurelius<sup>10</sup> wrote '*Meditations*' but it can be described as '*Reflections*'.

Or.....



Or....

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<sup>10</sup> Marcus Aurelius was Roman emperor from 161 to 180AD and a Stoic philosopher.

**" The mind's true work  
lies in the power to choose, reject,  
desire, repel, prepare, intend, and  
affirm. A corrupted mind is a barrier to  
the fulfillment of its own potential. "**

**~ EPICTETUS ~**

Or...The success of Fontenelle<sup>11</sup> was due partly to his handling with a light touch subjects that till then were for long-faced pedants. His Dialogues contained juvenilia, or worse it is sometimes said, but taken in the round his attitude caused rethinking about the mind-set of the day. He was not mesmerised by tradition. One has only to think of the contemporary doctrinaire attitudes to religion. He thought for himself, much as is being advocated afresh in these pages.

Commentators had taken Cato's<sup>12</sup> suicide as one mark of his greatness but Fontenelle reflected on the story and concluded the suicide was but about sullenness and vanity. He was seen by some in French pre-revolutionary drawing rooms as a vapid, if witty, dilettante and had to fight to get into the *Académie Française* but when he achieved his ambition, he saw the key issue and he knew where to stop.

Socrates said with what may seem like unction: *'The unexamined life is not worth living.'*

Surely one does not have to go quite as far as that? There are plenty of achievers who never ask themselves why they are doing what they are doing. It is enough to say that one ought to think carefully about what one is doing.

If we think we're up to date in our thinking, there is a good chance that we have been pipped at the post several centuries ago. 'Philosophy' was in its infancy when Plato signposted a path but we can just as easily say: *"Life is an awfully strange can of worms or wonders."* Separated by time and cultural tides, we are of the same clay as was Plato. 'He was a man for all that!' Some of us – if we've pretensions to be sentient let alone cerebral – hanker to get to the bottom of profound Mystery, or at any rate to what bottom we can delve down.

The ancients may not have put things better than you and I though often they did so. Like the friends to whom we often feel closest, they got in there first. There are no end of possible citations to make in this field. Cue in Plato:

*"Philosophy begins in wonder"*

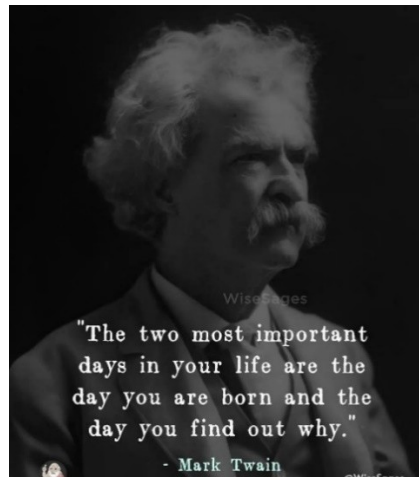
*In philosophy we can be lazily relaxed in both mind and body, and this endangers our well-being. Laziness of mind is a threat to proper philosophising.'*

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard Le Bouyer de Fontenelle (1657-1757) was a French author and an influential member of three of the academies of the Institut de France, noted especially for his accessible treatment of scientific topics during the unfolding of the Age of Enlightenment.

<sup>12</sup> Cato the Younger was an influential conservative Roman senator during the late Republic

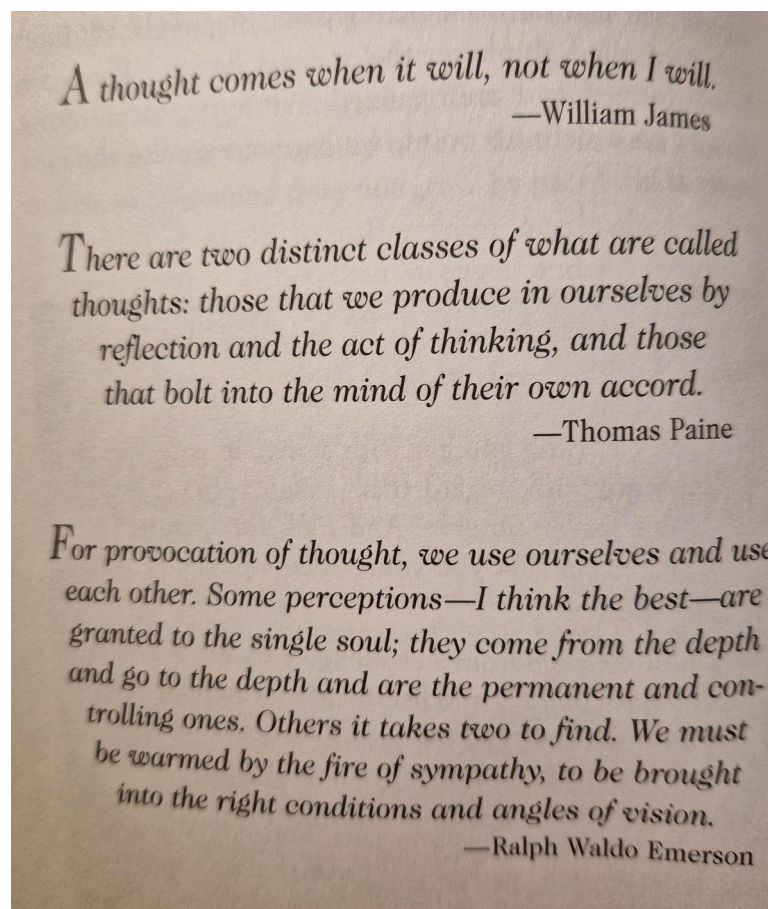




We don't want to reinvent the wheel, especially in a square shape. It is often as well to think about what is said by those who think things logically through to a *reductio ad absurdum*. It is comforting to know that there are professionals on the case. It is in any case not easy to think anything up on this subject that is genuinely 'new'.

There are so many ideas that have tend towards the idea of reflection in Western culture.

Or....



Some age old, wise - and sometimes maybe not so wise – precepts could be reconsidered.



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 the Institute of Reflection that it in a small way can help restore generally tolerant open-mindedness.

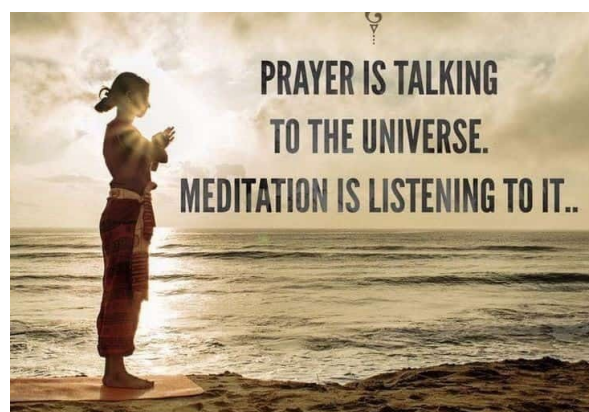
The goal of being able to direct personal thoughts and then rise above them as an observer, see them for what they are, re-evaluate them much as we can do in dreams recalling them in wakefulness, may tell us sufficient of what we need or want to know about ...ourselves, both individually and as a species. It is a far cry from the notion that arose mainly in Oriental lands that we need to rid ourselves of our ego, our human feelings, and gravitate to our true essence and our ethereal Home. In the West, our personality tends to be seen as an integral part of us - our 'lower nature' perhaps - and though we can try and rise above it we rarely see fit to completely shed it.

When we sink into meditative trances or attempting to reflect on what matters in life the better to attain self-awareness, we can make a start by asking ourselves if 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 makes the best use of the gifts with which we are personally endowed? We may for instance see a need to fuse a perspective of the long-term with exigencies that arise day by day. This may provide ample matter on which to justifiably reflect.

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 reached during a process of reflecting but in the habit acquired. The more one does of a thing the better at it one gets. Few people think of training intuition but most agree that it comes from one knows not where and quietness of mind can help coax it to the surface of the mind. One can train the mind as well as the memory. Enhancing intuition is not to be done from one day to the next. Spirituality and suchlike intangibles fall into the same category; there is more chance that they can be brought into the open by concentration.

There is an emphasis in the reflective tenor of the Western mind on probability rather than on certainty. There is a tendency to see such things as are possible within a compass of what one can understand for oneself. There may be no certainty almost anywhere in life and usually the most that is to be hoped for is probability. The likelihood is forming of a habit can lead on to the habit becoming second nature.



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There are ways in which the validity of principles and understandings, especially those that are personal, are best curated by oneself so that we can live better-adjusted lives without need of following some Faith or lifestyle prescribed by Teachers.

Hard-won hallmarks of civilised thinking such as open-mindedness, respect for others, care in thought and so forth should be kept clearly in mind. The best habits of mind are rarely a quick fix. Thinking things over may result in better life choices and attitudes.

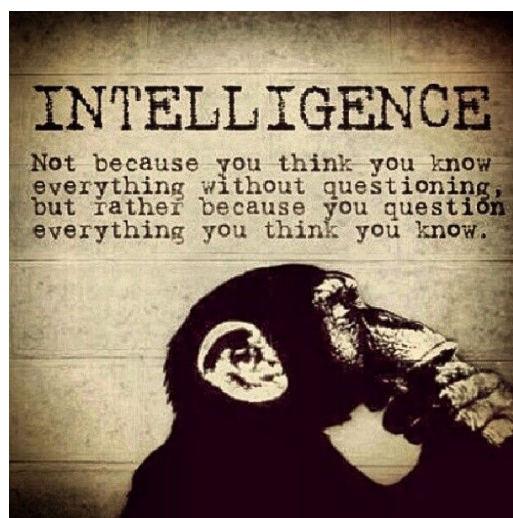
This approach should reinforce an understanding of our place in this world and what might be the Hereafter, or as much about them as can be reasonably surmised. It can help query 'fixed' landmarks in some of society's root concepts, and enhance personal fulfilment, peace and happiness.

It is a sceptical starting point from which to reflect on trends.

We should be as certain as possible about why we want to do things.

A large part of why some people like to meditate is because they recognise a need to set apart a space to do an unostentatious thing, reflection. How many of those who go in for a Meditation Session separate this goal from what they might have wanted to achieve, unschooled and uninfluenced by others? Reflection in the ordinary sense of the word can be the ingredient that takes one where one really wants to go. It has no need to call into play all the *bruhaha* of cult or ritual.

People like a 'purpose' that is respectable, justifiable. The *fons et origo* of their wish can be to simply sit quietly and reflect on life. Meditation as a practice can come from that deep-seated wish. It may be that we tend to conflate a fashionable idea about meditation with this humbler goal of what we may wish to achieve. A prejudice has crept in against, for instance, silently staring into space but it is fine today to say 'I am doing my Meditation'. We may not be following our own wish as much as we like to think when we go in for Meditation with all its' bells and whistles.



Reflection makes no grand claims of itself. It is not like someone in a gaudy dress giving a large account of himself who grabs the attention. Unobtrusive types in the background can get overlooked though have valuable ideas.

Reflect: is a staple of our *persona*, a 'given' part of how we 'are'. It comes into intuition which 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?

## Ways to prepare for Reflection

The whole exercise can help to reset a practical course in life.

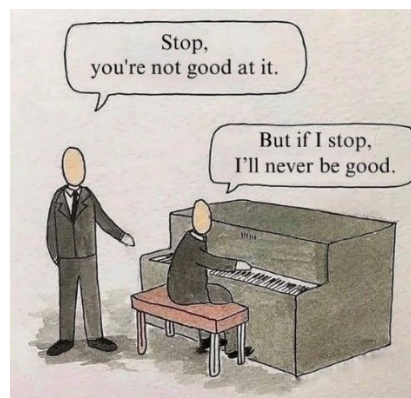
The first time we do it, we may not get very far. If we make a habit of doing it slowly, by degrees, then a feel for where we are in life, of what our lives might be about, may swim more clearly into view. As Ludwig Wittgenstein put it:

*'What's the good of having one philosophical discussion! It's like having one piano lesson!'*

We should take stock of the big questions rather than flip our eyes over them.

Arrival at what seems to be the right decision can be that one's 'guts' are in the right place. Understanding oneself is as much of a challenge as understanding any other issue. Fog can be cast by the tendency of philosophers, politicians, and indeed many people, not to know where to draw the line. There is a tendency to follow things through too far to what seems a logical conclusion. There is a glass ceiling set above what we can hope realistically to attain. Physicists can have a handle on this phenomenon; they realise that at a certain point the law of gravity that holds good on earth is no longer holds true.

A pillar of Meditation - much the same holds true of reflection - is to get into the right frame of mind. That preparation may feed a need simply to ease up on the throttle. 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.



Reflection requires equilibrium, one may have to work at attaining it.

Some ways of Reflection overlap with those of Meditation.

A lit candle, say, or some gentle background music put on – Musak, say, but preferably not singing, which tends to be more intrusive.

Breathing exercises and posture can put one in the mood for reflection. 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 with a hint of the exotic or the adventurous thrown in 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.

Take a step back, mentally, relax, concentrate on your thinking side. It can include your emotional side. Hold up to the light and coddle ideas or feelings swirling around in your thoughts. So much so far for a Socratic method in conversation through which, sometimes via circuitous ways rather than casuistry we can approach the main point perhaps surprising ourselves, and tease out relevant truths en route.

A wholesome perspective is vital, the idea in Frederick Langbridge's couplet:

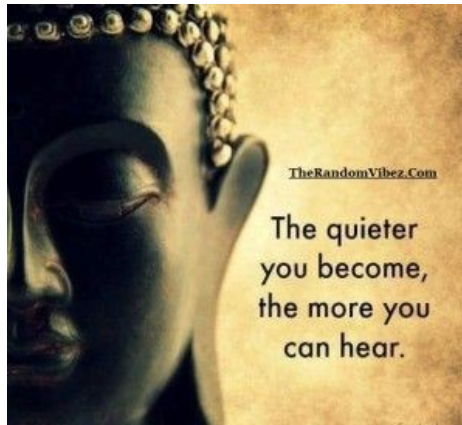
*'Two men looked out of prison bars*

*One saw mud, the other stars'.*

One may as well use the best tools that are to hand. It can be easier to think your own thoughts and find your best perspective when in a congenial space for a retreat. A Sanctuary is any place that you think is one. It may help you feel comfortable in exploring what is important to you. People who are sensitive to surroundings can choose the backdrop for reflection with care. Its foredrop – to coin a neologism – may work best on the principle that the loftiest thoughts can come to one when in, say, a cathedral

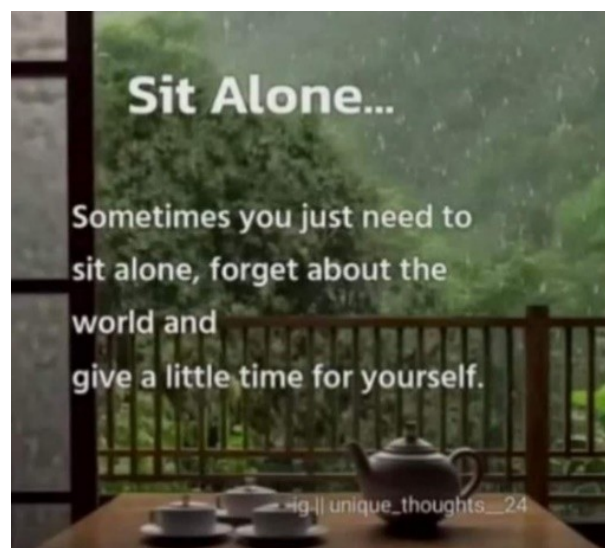
To quote Susie Woodman, a life coach:

*'Firstly, find a place where you're comfy. Every morning I sit in my meditation chair in my study. If you try and do it at roughly the same time, in the same place every day, you'll have a **much better chance of building a habit**. So gently rest your gaze on a point just in front of you. Notice yourself breathing in and out. If you haven't done this before, I'd suggest trying it with your eyes open as you'll stand more chance of staying present. I think if you shut your eyes you're more likely to nod off or drift off into your thoughts and To Do list. Play around with it and see what works best for you. For me, meditation isn't about drifting off or falling asleep. You need to be 'relaxed and comfy, but all your senses need to be activated and you need to **be present**.'*



We look up to early totems. A subconscious voice often is founded on initial impressions in life, then conscious layers later overlay them. We look up to parents and teachers and, as Wordsworth said, '*the child is father to the man.*' Someone who wishes to attune himself to his inner voice may like to surround himself with scenes or artefacts that call to his mind the early phases of his life, when one was more in touch with one's original thinking. Marcel Proust<sup>13</sup> in '*In Search of Lost Time*' described how, as a child, his aunt gave him madeleines dipped in tea. To the adult Proust the act of eating a madeleine resurrected the context of his childhood. The memories come to him as a sensual activity without being summoned, not an intellectual one. A conscious act and reminders of congenial former surroundings can help to restore the thread of memory.

Benevolent feelings tend to uplift one to see broader vistas from a higher and more serene vantage point. The Rabbi, Naftali Lowenstein, asked by a tremulous pupil what last minute preparation to make on the day of an exam, advised the examinee to make a donation to charity. She said later that doing so helped put her in the right frame of mind for her task.



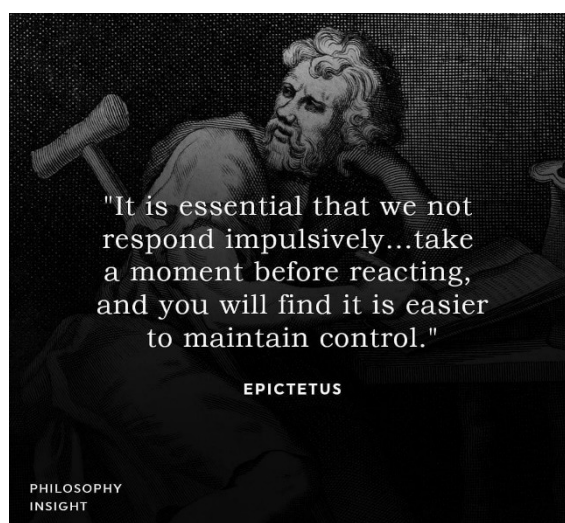
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<sup>13</sup> Marcel Proust, 1871-1922, was a French novelist, literary critic and essayist best known for his 3000 page '*À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*', a pseudo-autobiographical novel told mostly in a stream-of-consciousness style.

Reflecting can be like weeding. Self-destructive feelings or ideas that pursue you should be rooted out. Here is a little trick but anyone can come up with their personalised substitute: try exclaiming 'WEED!' whenever ambushed by them. It may be easier for septuagenarians who, as toddlers, saw the TV series: *'Bill and Ben, the Flower Pot Men'* in which the name of *'Little Weed'* was spoken in a haunting cadence that tended to stick in the mind, as if to say 'Better steer clear of this entity!' This ruse won't work the first time. Negative thoughts will have already arisen before evasive action can be taken but the self-brainwashing that comes of reiteration of the same thoughts, good or bad, then linking them with a conscious reproof where it is called for can become second nature if the will is there. If all else fails, jab a pin into your flesh by way of aversion therapy! Choose a ruse for use for yourself.

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. This 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, in doing we may compound illusions by which we live. It is the saddest thing discovering this too late in life.

Self-destructive thought or emotion may arise even after work has been done on alleviating it but can be drained of a capacity to induce fear or anxiety. 'Bad' things may happen for inscrutable reason but that is not necessarily a bad thing; some actors deliberately make the most of first night nerves so as to give better performances.



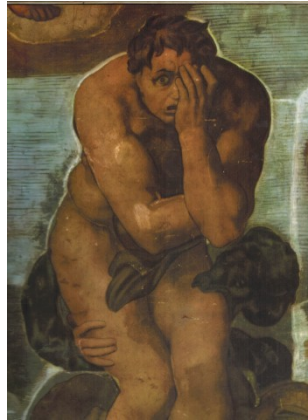
It is preferable not to follow a session of meditation with a busy schedule about which the mind may be turning. In some sects of Zen Buddhism watches are not to be worn. The striking of a gong and/or suitable rubric also helps create a sensation of time out of time.

Insight is more liable to surface when in a calm and rational mood. Emotions and personal demons can be mastered – not necessarily entirely suppressed – so that they can be viewed in a detached way and seen as far as possible for what they are.

If the predominating note in the mind when wanting to reflect is of anger or fear one is liable to be more grounded in the things of this world, more the victim of emotion, less able to reach

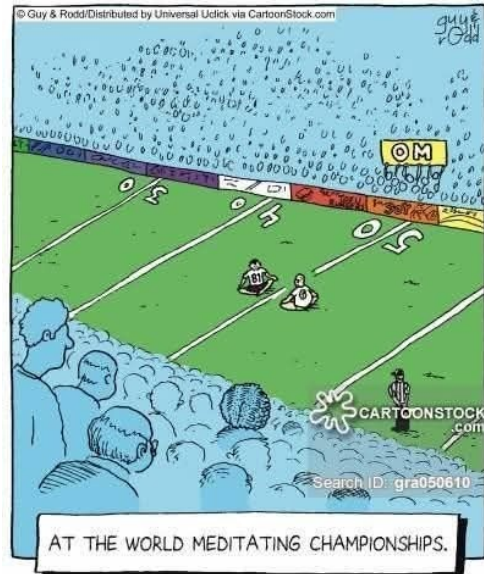


for the stars – more corralled into one line, one dimension. The last thing needed is to allow the worst thoughts full rein to prey on one's mind.



Some Meditation sects in the East kick-start sessions with a bout of belly-laughing to ginger up participants into a happy mood and imbue their thinking with a sense of proportion. The same idea can apply with Reflection. How these groups are able to belly-laugh on cue isn't too clear; perhaps a Swami doubles as a stand-up comic or a Master of Ceremony calls out a number from a shared list of jokes consensually found hysterically funny? Meditators in the West tend not to overdose on slapstick and aim for a calm equilibrium of mind, as do most people who wish to reflect.

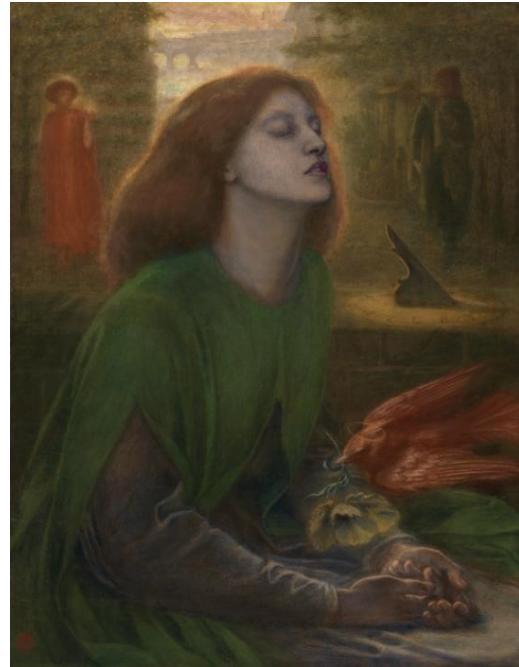






## Further reflection on REFLECTION

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?



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

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One joy of contemplation is the feeling of freedom, a freedom more tranquil than that of a liberty to court physical danger. It affords warrant to wonder and wander whither whim or wish beckon. To Contemplate is to go on tiptoe. No need of a jingle to get the ball rolling or a compere. Its purpose and its method are a metaphoric suit of armour against assailment on your nervous system by an uncaring Outside World. It can't stop all slings and arrows but it should stop a few. There's no a clarion call in these pages to soar into 'Enlightenment' or any of the other exciting goals that lend allure to people who just want to peel away scales over their eyes.

Contemplation isn't showy. We have a lot to be humble about and, so the argument runs, are the more realistic for realising it.

Contemplation primarily is a cerebral activity. It will take into account emotion but mainly it is about judiciousness, a mental stance. One also can think in the course of activity - the Englishman of old was said to go in for 'unconscious cerebration' while on horseback. The difference between the good and the run-of-the-mill sportsman lies in an ability to think well on one's feet. A step in time as well as a stitch 'may save nine'.



Most deep truths of most religions are common to all religions however much their stalls may be set out in different ways.

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 *per se* may be placed on a pedestal but signposts do not usually point in their direction unless they are statues. Novelists and playwrights depict deep truths but tend to do it *en passant*. They sneak in reflections about 'why we are here' and 'what to do about it'. It usually is tangential to ladling out entertainment. Sagacity is all very well in its place - which is in business. *Pensées* - digestible, pithy, categorizable - were *Thoughts* popularised by Blaise Pascal<sup>14</sup> now re-emerge as acceptable when they are sound-bites. It is as if the fruits of reflection *per se* are all very fine if they are shrunk to sound-bite size.

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?

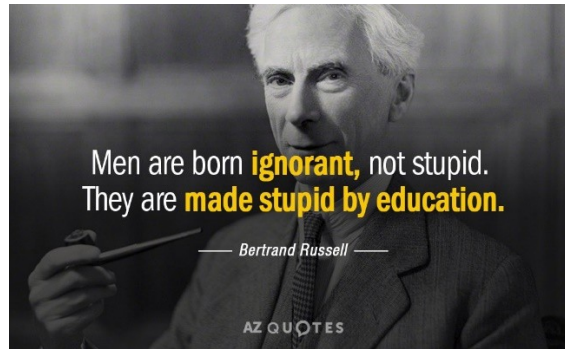
The poem continues:

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

Reflection 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! 'There is no accounting for taste'.

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<sup>14</sup> Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French mathematician, physicist, inventor, philosopher, and Catholic writer. He was a child prodigy who was educated by his father, a tax collector in Rouen.



*One does not have to agree with the above idea; one goal of Reflection is to be better able to think carefully for oneself.*

Reflection sets us free to speculate on ...anything; why try to still that little voice in our minds that allows us to reflect on ...whatever we wish?

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. This may even be more important than an 'arrival' at...we know not whither.

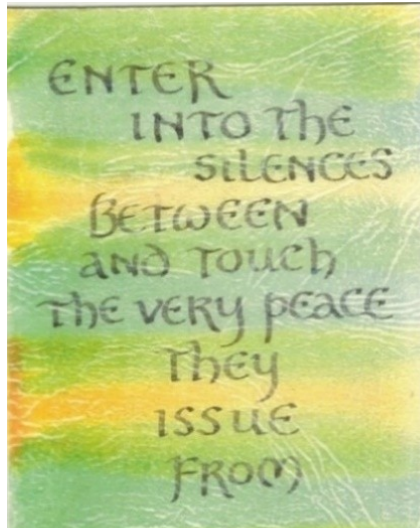
A thought often is freighted with emotionality. It is a matter of choice, a skill that comes of practice - unless one is the victim of one's own mind - as to how far to allow emotion to creep into and overwhelm lucidity. Quietness in thinking allows greater control.

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.

Reflection, like writing is a solitary occupation. That however is open to the objection of one reader:

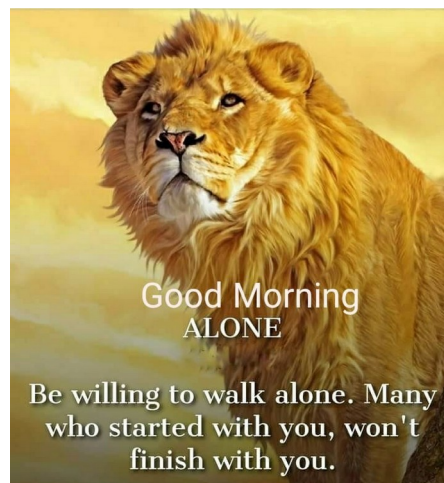
*'At no time during the writing process am I alone; my characters would never allow that. Much like social media, they vie for my attention. BUT I do find those moments where I lose time and my heavy tapping fingers come to a stop, and my eyes lose focus, and I find the midpoint. I rarely remember what I'm thinking about, but I am thinking, only on another level that's triggered during my journey. I also find this in dangerous times, driving for instance. Those moments that you can't remember can be scary.'*

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.



*Card by John Moffat for Rosemary Cockayne*

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 what are '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.



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 was the focus of the photographer on the plate of food rather than the guest...*

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.

Meditation 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 will readily be seen that the above ideas are but stray thoughts are of myriads possible.

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.

Anyone who is up for 'reflecting' can consider any theme from the most sublime or romantic down to the mundane. One can think about loved ones; 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.

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.

**Finding yourself includes Observing Yourself** - Further thinking about who you are.

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



*Self-observation is the beginning of progress, says Buddha*

We are aware, but do not fully see, the 'eye', or 'I', that is attempting the seeing, and being the awareness, just as the eye cannot see itself. That awareness is different from the consciousness that is producing the thoughts, and what, from depths in our being, produces an intellectualisation of what is going on.

The wish to be an observer of ourselves is enjoined in some Meditation systems. The crux idea in this context is to look down on ourselves and see ourselves as from an outside perspective. It may be that it is the perspective of being an observer rather than plumbing the depths for a picture of our place in the universe is the key to this. It can be that we just want to get things in proportion, get a handle on our attitudes, see things from the standpoint of what matters when it comes to our lives on this earth, rather than when set against the eternal truths of our spirit.

Following from this, how many people think it worth their while to put aside some time to think how they might, one day, as their end approaches, look back on their lives? What of the astronaut who carried out all his allotted tasks on a Space Flight and, on returning, said that his one regret was that ...he had forgotten to look out of the rocket portholes!

In reflection, our perspective on others can be brought to bear on oneself as others might see us, in a natural fall-back position. It is without the excitement of situational or emotional melodrama, above the 'fray of battle', closer to history than to politics; judgemental rather than engaged. It is an altered perspective of our own on ourselves. We train on ourselves both the communal mind and our personal perspective.

An outside eye looking in on a situation is advisable on the principle of *'a man who would advise himself has a fool for a client!* We have to be on guard against self-delusion, special pleading, and so should go as far as we can in the direction of stringent honesty.

Susie Woodman in *'Sassy Godmother'* writes:

*'....Self-awareness is the first step on your path to growth. Being able to understand what makes you tick, how you react under certain circumstances, how you come across to others, what you want, where your strengths and natural tendencies lie as well as understanding your blind spots and shadows, will give you the clues to being a more confident and fuller version of yourself.'*

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.

Finding ourselves can be like 'finding' other people as there is much that we do not know about ourselves, without thinking about ourselves. People are notoriously prone to delusion. We look at ourselves, in this context, as if inspecting a phenomenon 'out there'. Thinking out the motives of others may be a way for us to consider our own motives. As mentioned above, it is an idea when playing chess to walk round the board to see it from the standpoint of the opponent. It can be a surprise to come at it from a different perspective. There is Inward and Outward perspective; seeing the world steadily and/or seeing it whole.

*Examples:* 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; a husband seen by the wife, or by shareholders in his business in a different light... the ego in tranquillity and/or in action ... the still, small inner voice as against the clamourings of circumstance...

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 with the situation in which one is, and perhaps from a standpoint that one imagines one will think about it when recollected in tranquillity. In considering one's life from the vantage point of being 'outside of one's day-to-day *persona* and challenges', it can help get one's life in perspective to try and come at a reckoning from the standpoint of how one may think about what one has done in life when approaching the end of one's days.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> More on this can be found in the passage on *'Longevity and maturity'* below.

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 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. 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.

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, what we are, and what we feel and peer into ourselves.

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 especially if one makes a practice of this type of Reflection.

The ongoing essence of ourselves that links our past with our present and our future; the ego of the moment, of the day is a marvellous *pot pourri*. There is so much written on this but perhaps one thing we can do, and which is often not part of the analyses: we can marvel.

It is sometimes in later life that one re-identifies with feelings or goals that one had when young. They were there all along though 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.

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 with care about the underpinning our assumptions, including about ourselves. For one thing, if we stopped to analyse ourselves as far as we can, we might not be able to give all our attention to such practical goals as 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. A 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* if we take decisions entirely because of what our 'head' is telling us so risk neglecting what our 'heart' is telling us.

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 however much or not we are conscious or unconscious of it. It is partly that different aspects of ourselves may be at odds with one another; partly that two truths about ourselves can jog on well enough together till a context where the different streams of thought and impulsion collide; then mutually contradictory thought processes are thrown into sharp relief.



In many meditation techniques, it is enjoined 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. As Arianna Huffington<sup>16</sup> points out:

*Meditation is not about stopping thoughts but recognising that we are more than our thoughts and feelings.*

In 'Sassy Godmother's Pearls of Wisdom' by Susie Woodman, we read:

*'Start by becoming more conscious of what your inner voice is saying. Actually capturing the language you use when you talk to yourself and the beliefs you're holding on to.... It can be five minutes of quiet reflective time first thing in the morning or last thing at night, depending on whether you're a lark or an owl. Sometimes just allowing your mind to wander and reflect on the day's events is a lovely practice.'*

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.

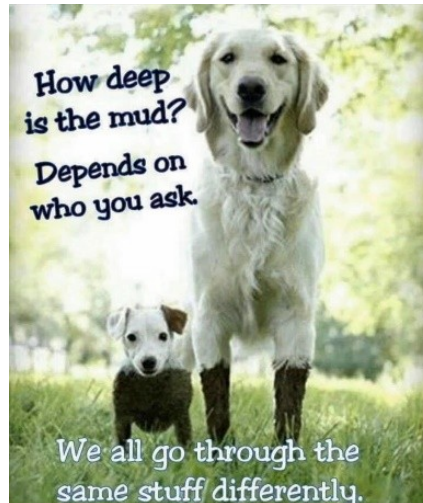
What are the sensations that we experience on trying to 'see ourselves as we really are' without all the mind-clutter? It can be put into words in ways that we all recognise but that does not mean any particular reaction is the same for everyone. Why junk it all as being just circumstantial baggage in 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.

### **What, if anything, is unique about me?**

No one knows a person better than he knows himself – *'to understand a man you have to walk a mile in his moccasins'* – but that does not mean he knows himself well or that we can capture inmost thoughts in a neat set of precepts. This is despite apparently a near universal wish to have a framework to cover our sense of selfhood and to find our way around this strange labyrinth that is the world. It is a far cry from the rationalist way of getting through our quotidian lives.

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<sup>16</sup> Arianna Huffington born July 15, 1950) is a Cambridge-educated Greek-American author, syndicated columnist and businesswoman.



Take away bodily urges, drives, ambitions, pare us down to our essentials, and what do we find? What are we? What is 'I'? We may think differently from one another while using the same language?

Is it just my personality, as distinct from my 'soul' or spirit?

Any claim on a personal 'uniqueness' is that, it could be argued, no other replication exactly may have come about. It is a small, if real, difference.

Are most of the distinctions we make about the tiny sliver of difference at the periphery of our personalities akin to that of the 'mahoot', the driver of an elephant whose slight twitch here and there affects the lumbering path of the elephant that in terms of gait proceeds in accordance with its great bulk?

It is - as is the way of most texts related to most matters - shorn of the individualistic touch, aside perhaps from an occasional quirk. Such sensations as the author may be feeling, no matter how ideas may have been, born, do not, or should not, obtrude. Almost all hint of his personality except that of thought processes is absent from the written words. Individualism is subsumed under a communities' linguistic umbrella just as a soldier 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.

A similarity in sensations or thoughts in different individuals is among the things that allow us to relate to one another. It enables us to see how other people react. A different starting point in each of us and differences in experience can be masked by shared language. Is it that language in reporting feelings is not up to the job of defining an exact personal 'take' on the world?

To reiterate, what constitutes the difference between different people's roughly equivalent landscapes or cityscapes of their 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?

Individuals also may be in a sense slightly different individuals at different times in different contexts. If there is some connecting thread running through any given personality over time

and if so is it transmissible? Rupert Sheldrake<sup>17</sup> in his theory of 'Morphic Resonance' ascribes the transference of ideas to a type of pictorial transfer through energies as opposed to genetic differences.

If nothing else, though we may feel exactly as do others over given issues, we each have a different 'connecting thread'. Is it to do with a given perspective, where one is in a particular physical, emotional or mental state? 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 each 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.

Should we fight shy of pursuing a thought about ourselves to its logical conclusion, as going a bridge too far (See above point about physicists knowing better than most where to draw the line)? It may all seem so obvious as to be not worth thinking about, but when one does try to think about it, obviousness seems to regress in a series of distorting mirrors.

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

Much was known within us from the start. Some people feel this from personal experience rather than from any form of logic. It is a factor that leads some to think that our destiny is written in large measure by the time we come to this earth. Roy Maunder quotes his late father, aged around 80 saying: *'There is something about me that has never changed!'* It has a ring of truth that is verifiable through personal experience rather than logic.

As mentioned above, there is hardly any situation in which human or animal, reactions are a 'first'. It may be that, occasionally, one has an entirely original thought, often through a new synthesis of ideas that have been tried and tested elsewhere. Everyone's reactions have been experienced by someone else to some large degree though perhaps triggered in different strengths, or with different prejudices and/or by different chemicals in the body.

The feelings shared by everyone who is trying to sift what lies at our core may be the same, or much the same, but we cannot know if we share them even if we describe them in the same way. These thoughts 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 would look like a very strange creature. When reportage of what we feel or think is much the same as reported by others 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?

Much of what we observe – in both senses of the word – or are likely to observe is about ourselves, not the 'I'.

Speculation 'about us' distracts from seeing and understanding our essential selves.

Mr and Mrs Average are what we are in terms of the mental and physical apparatus that is a birthright or 'a given'. We might do our best to improve on the model but even an ability and

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<sup>17</sup> Rupert Sheldrake's theory of "Morphic Resonance" proposes that living organisms and other self-organizing systems, such as crystals, inherit a collective memory that influences their form and behavior. This theory suggests that past instances of a process or behavior make it easier for subsequent instances to occur. Essentially, nature operates on a "habit" rather than strict fixed laws, with past events influencing present and future ones.

will to do so is in itself to some extent part of this 'given'. Bodies, as well as minds, are grafted in us before we had choice in the matter. Some say that one chooses one's parents, a claim in a simple sentence that embodies a huge amount of underlying philosophy whether or not verbalised.

Some aspects of our being appear as quintessentially identifiable with who we feel and think we are - below the level of how we normally present ourselves to others, or to ourselves. They might not be, for the most part, the obvious circumstantial indicators of our self-image. A certain way of lying in bed, for instance, may induce in someone the homely feeling that this is their personal True North; the way they lay abed as a child. It is like a homecoming to ourselves, whatever the world can throw at us.

Or it may be that we crank up and identify with our physical attributes to so great a degree that we see our physique as integral to our self-perspective, an extension and a part of 'who we really are'. We may see advantageous or disadvantageous physiques which 'came with the package' as being such a key to our *persona* that we identify ourselves fully with them or alternatively we may rise above the chance gifts. Raquel Welsh, the sultry sex bomb, spoke of the blossoming of her bosom, so tantalising to testosterone-fuelled manhood, as being when 'the equipment' arrived. Was it 'her' or 'that which she could usefully employ'? People for the most part seem not to reflect on this conundrum so their physique is more likely to become an integral part of their psyche.

There are of course exceptions to this approach. It is impressive sometimes how people with acute physical impairment do not let themselves be defined by their condition.

If the ideas that I have were all generated by others and I may have a new synthesis, that is a form of words but, again, one that doesn't seem to get at what is actuating me.

Our thinking is only clear up to a point. We know it when we experience, say, grief, or love. We can sometimes detect when in the throes of such feeling a slight ache in the region of our hearts; or when we, rarely enough hopefully, are prey to fury and can 'see red'; is that inner vision or a counterpart of blood rising behind our eyes in what seems to us a mist? I may feel sensation in my body, even when at my quietest. Do you? We are observing what is going on but as to understanding it, that is an elusive kettle of fish.

It is the sensation of who we are that, in large part, demarcates us as individuals. Part of it is ascribable to sensations in our body, part is the thoughts we have. How to describe it? Is it a thing that could or should be rendered into words? *'Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to the Lord that which is His.'*

A.A. Milne<sup>18</sup> wrote: *'The things that make me different are the things that make me.'*

Most of us think, probably rightly, that we are individuals in our own right. An accentuation or a slight difference here and there might not seem satisfactorily to account for genuine individuality.

Maybe we were 'thinkers' at the very start but then life overlaid the most authentic tendency?

Perhaps only minor differences that differentiate one person's inmost reactions from that of another are the hallmark of individuality and we are the same as one another for most if not

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<sup>18</sup> Alan Alexander Milne (1882-1956) was an English writer and playwright best known for his books about the teddy bear Winnie-the-Pooh, as well as for children's poetry.

necessarily all purposes; if so this is in line with Eastern teachings that we are, all of us, one and the same.

There are those who think that, especially when we are in deep and dreamless sleep, we are part of a shared identity rather than individualised vessels. We are individual on the surface but can be '*likened to different glass jars that are all lit from the same sun*', as Roy Maunder thinks. IF this metaphor is valid we are individualised mainly by different shapes of the 'jar'.

How can we think afresh, or clearly, about the core of our being? It is not just a matter of thinking ...thoughts. It is a perennial question: when to totally go along with feelings, intuition or a hunch?

We are multi-dimensional, multi-faceted and also comprised of that which animates us and has correlates in our physical bodies; so, odd though the terminology may sound to our ears, there can be more than one heart and mind, in fact any number of hearts and minds, in the makeup of what we are.

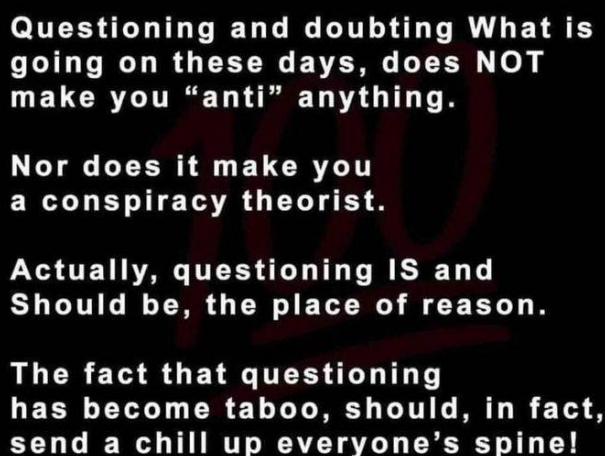
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### ***Philosophy comes in many guises***

- *Having the right attitude to life is a basic sine qua non*

Philosophy is everywhere if you keep your eyes open.

As seen, we do not have to have tested all arguments and counter-arguments and their ramifications to arrive at the right path. A concentration on it as a chosen subject may render one less inclined to look for philosophy in other mediums.



**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!**

It is often the ideas behind the action that have been the prime mover in progress, or at least change. In '*Making the Weather*', Sir Vernon Bogdanor<sup>19</sup> analyses the effect that six politicians had on the Britain's body politic, none of whom held the highest offices of state.

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<sup>19</sup> Sir Vernon Bernard Bogdanor CBE FBA FRSA is a British political scientist, historian, and research professor at the Institute for Contemporary British History at King's College London

The idea can be found in Shelley's view of '*poets being the unacknowledged legislators of the world*'. There is a chapter in '*In a Dangerous Field*', the story of the European-Atlantic Group, where the speeches of illustrious politicians are filleted for their philosophies in life. Nuggets are buried in discourses about politics. Here is General John Galvin talking about NATO in 1987:

*'I remind you of the words of the Greek philosopher, Heraclites; 'An invisible bond is stronger than a visible one.'*

Philosophy about life can get under the skin, taken on board as a sort of bedrock of thinking if one is not aware of it happening and critical faculties are not brought into play to query it.

Iris Murdoch and Simone de Beauvoir have their place in the world of philosophy but thought of themselves primarily as novelists. In novels there may be philosophising if one cares to sniff it out. A by-way can reveal a truth in a throwaway line. In '*The Riddle of the Sands*', an early twentieth century novel by Erskine Childers, shafts of illumination light up the the rubric on nautical knowhow and derring-do of an enthusiastic patriot: '*the patient fates have crooked methods.*' and '*Who knows what road will lead to the right destination?*'

Who knows what inscrutable purposes if any there may be in our fates? Terrible, or so it seems, to think Abraham Lincoln's life was cut short by an assassin's bullet. Only now, with advanced medical techniques, do we know that he was not destined to be long for this life, given his underlying medical conditions such as venereal disease. Would President Kennedy have retained his 'Camelot' reputation if his life had not been cut short? What damage could Princess Di have inflicted on the Royal family if she had cemented her ties to the El Fayed family?

Ivan Turgenev in '*Home of the Gentry*' mentions eternal verities almost *en passant*: '*Woe to the heart that has not loved in youth!*'. The idea, whether or not true, applies beyond his theme of Russian upper crust of society in the eighteenth century. Susan Howarth clearly loved the characters about whom she wrote. Laid before her readers is the gamut of human emotion and relationship. Was Howarth or her readership aware that one comes away from '*Penmarrick*' thinking that men were pretty horrid and unreasonable while the women were lovely especially if 'fallen'? This may all be true in real life, of course, but did Susan Howarth consciously set out to convey that impression?

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.'*

If the streams of thought are all but hidden in deep anchorage, wondrous circumlocutions, including to oneself, are prayed in aid to 'rescue' one from the charge of inconsistency. Take 'Revenge' which is '*...Mine saith the Lord*'. Is it always so? The whole Second World War is an epic tale of the Bad Guys getting well and truly shot up. It is revenge by another name. The thinking of the Christian and a Hindoo may not tally with each other. Arjuna seems to think that a perpetrator of evil should bite the dust. So, which Belief is right?

We are entitled to ask ourselves the key questions in life and to arrive at our best conclusions. We are entitled to revisit our prejudices. We may have made up our minds but we should always keep an open mind. Carruthers, in Childers' novel, had made up his mind

about the mother-in-law of his friend but then, on considering his view, saw her in a different light though she was acting much as he had always known her:

*'I saw strength (where before I had seen) obstinacy, courage (where before I had seen) recklessness.'*

Knowledge that we do not fully know, in the deepest sense, so much, is at the root of some of the earliest thinking. A seemingly humility is rightly enjoined on us. Peter Cave <sup>20</sup> in *'How to Think Like a Philosopher'* observes:

*'Sometimes we may know things that we did not know we knew. In both cases there is value in reflecting, thinking further, and even trying things out.'*

We understand things in a way that we do not fully comprehend.

The Obvious or the Known sometimes repays thinking about.

Sometimes, bypassing bright perceptive thinking, consciousness allows nuggets or gristle to drop into our deeps. We absorb them into that deep reservoir or library in our minds which consciousness is constantly referencing. They become part of us. Perhaps not the very deepest part.

So much that is brought out into the light had its growth in the dark. The so-called Dark Ages in Europe are now being seen in some quarters as the fomenting ground of all that came later. In cosmological terms, Robert Hazen writing recently for the Templeton Foundation, is among scientists who are proponents of 'Evolution before life'. This refers to *'a universal chemical evolution that spans billions of years and comprises all possible space in the universe. This hypothesis argues that life emerged gradually as molecules evolved from simplicity to complexity, undergoing selections until reaching biological functions.'*

What may helpfully scratch at the surface of the question is some sort of explanation of why we might not be able to answer the question. We'll 'feel better' if we can understand something at least of why we can't understand.

### **Preferred priorities may come into clearer view**

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

<sup>20</sup> Peter Cave is a popular philosophy writer and speaker. He read philosophy at University College London and King's College Cambridge. He often takes part in public debates on religion, ethics and socio-political matters. His philosophy books include *This Sentence Is False: An Introduction to Philosophical Paradoxes*, three *Beginner's Guides: to Humanism, Philosophy and Ethics*, *The Big Think Book: Discover Philosophy Through 99 Perplexing Problems* and *The Myths We Live By: A Contrarian's Guide to Democracy, Free Speech and Other Liberal Fictions*

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.

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.

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 Einstein to see it but his example is instructive. He wondered how life might look to a traveller on a beam of life. He cogitated about the reality that we perceive without questioning it and 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.

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.

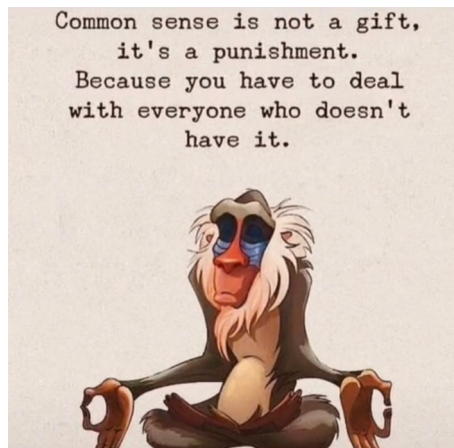
From now on a breach of common sense will be regarded as a breach of rules

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

You are never too old to learn something stupid

- *A paraprosoedian*





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 taken on board as a personal, worthwhile wish, undertaken for its own sake, it can be second nature as 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.

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If reflecting is what we want to do, we are entitled to do as we wish. There is nothing difficult in it other than to 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 play a part and a trusty electronic toothbrush machine-guns dastardly hominy grits but despite these visuals it is having the right attitude to dental hygiene that makes the big difference.

**Living for Pleasure: a valid option?**

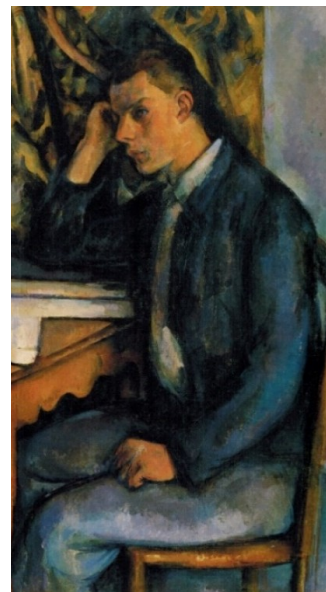
Its all right letting yourself go so long as you can let yourself back

- Mick Jagger


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, or dooming what 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.



We do not have to don the borrowed robes of the great thinkers who have gone before us. Wartime ditty of grousing British 'Tommy', or soldier:

 *'We're here because we're here, because we're here!'*

Englishmen of old – especially if about to mount a charge in the Light Brigade – were encouraged in the following way:

*'Ours not to reason why  
Ours just to do and die!'*

Remember the ditty usually sung in raucous refrain when 'the boys' get together:

*'Why was he born so beautiful 🎸🥁?  
Why was he born at all....!'*

Scriptural figures may have visions, Wiseacres may waffle – but what do YOU think about life? What do you REALLY think about! What is of real significance to you that we don't normally talk about?

We can combat a bias against reflection in our culture and indeed make a virtue of reflecting. 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. We may be 'broody' but that is frowned on. Why should we be on a defensive if we are ruminating? Because cows 'ruminate'? A dictionary definition is 'thinking carefully over something, pondering over it, meditating on it', a 'kind of deep, meditative thought that is often deemed a worthy activity'. Most theories sit better through being considered. When does a trance or brown study - by any other name - stop and inspiration begin? We can think of ruminants just as 'chewing cud' but why is it being 'in a brown study' if we are thinking by ourselves? We sometimes may better describe it as being 'in a rainbow study'.

## ***Reflection and Philosophers***

'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.

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.

Questions about why we're here can tend to slither down to a B-list of posers in Anglo-Saxon culture, way down the pecking order of priorities over which to mull unless one is orientally orientated or a professional Philosopher. That said people do tend to have a view. Deep down, most of us ARE wondering about many of the deeper questions – but not always in a context that relates to fundamental questions about life. We don't always put some of the big questions directly to ourselves and find answers without realising their application to fundamentals. We absorb a truth perhaps in a subconscious way.

What of YOUR truth? What of your still, quiet inner mind? You reflect before even starting to meditate 'on' anything.

Several people were 'ambushed' by an interviewer asking them: 'WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO YOU IN LIFE?' Their interviews are on the website of the Institute of Reflection.<sup>21</sup> There were similarities and differences in the reactions of the cross-section. Most took it mainly as relating to their personal lives, not that of the place of man in the scheme of the universe. Almost everyone says something different from other interviewees. It was churning away in their thoughts if not brought out into the light.

Some people, usually English, (Lord Barnado, Rosslyn, Chris, Crystal, Jan) felt this isn't the sort of question that merited going into detail and Health was first priority (Jan).

No one liked to think they were a 'waste of space'. Many (Suzi, Lena, Donna, Philip, John, Lucy) saw it as a prime purpose to help others, and to make a positive difference in this world. Each of us is on a unique mission or trajectory (Philip, Helen). Some interviewees had a pre-eminently practical approach (Dennis, Markus, Omar, Dave) citing balance, staying happy not working too hard, financial stability and the like but some (Nelson) wondered if we had our conceptions of what is truly important straight. Some took the course of their lives or careers, whether it was music or fencing, as providing them with answers (Stephen, Fred). Some felt that peace of mind was the ideal (Roy). Some had their life in a clear perspective, with everything in its appointed place (Theodore). Some thought that the fundamental answers were not going to be clear (Grace, Irene) and they might as well do successfully whatever lies in their power. Others (Lord Mereworth, Emmy) saw the question in religious or quasi-religious terms, seeing in this life only a staging post to the eternal. This could be put in terms of helpful metaphor (Jimmy). The soul (Helen), a source of Energy (Henry), or Nature (Adrian) figured high on the list to some. Those with a professional bent in this direction such as mediumship (Jacqueline) or Giving the Light (Tsuruko) accordingly coloured their response. The fact that one hadn't the deepest answers (Irene, Anthony) was not a deterrent in trying to live one's life for the best.

Sometimes beliefs were on the idiosyncratic side (Adrian, Helen). There were those who felt that their past was an essential ingredient in their present (Henry) or those who had melodramatic pasts (Kwabena) spent time reflecting on why their lives had taken the course that they had.

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<sup>21</sup> Visit: <https://instituteofreflection.com/personal-credos/>

Some (Claude) referred to what major philosophers thought; others (Maurice) struggled hard with the question, and his 'arrival' at a conclusion, perhaps banal, seems secondary by comparison with his struggle with the 'journey' to it.

Below 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.'*

The picture below conveys the impression of what Anja looks like. It is her ideas not her circumstances that matter. She may have a different face and wear a different dress but it is her inner being that forms the true connection we might have with her, even though we are used to going by surface appearance.



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

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.'*

One does not need to look to the dicta of celebrated people to learn about what *au fond* actuates people. Josephine at 99 says <sup>22</sup> :*'When the rain comes it is no good wishing for it to stop, one should accept it.'* Unschooled in English erudition, she had a deep understanding. She said that one should aim to get 'a taste' of things. She got to the pith without need of intellectually buttressing her theory for instance by 'Quietism'<sup>23</sup>:

*'advancing knowledge or settling debates (particularly between realists and non-realists) is not the job of philosophy, rather philosophy should liberate the mind by diagnosing confusing concepts.'*

Josephine may not have read Schopenhauer but her thinking was in that groove.

There are complex theories galore into which to burrow but a purpose of the approach herein is to be a sort of watchtower from which we can look without 'great thoughts of wise men' filtering too far what we think and see with our own eyes.

One can obviously reflect about what philosophers say but...<sup>(24)</sup> Philosophy should not be the sole province of 'the philosopher'. We all have a claim on it. 'Philosophy' is a Big Word which itself can be off-putting. Professional philosophers, true, tend to have a more rigorous or literary way of putting problems and supposed conclusions. If only they see would see eye to eye with one another we might be more tempted to take their views as gospel - even then we should beware of mixing up consensus with correctness.

Dress it up as one will, the lack of possibility of our getting to the bottom of some of the Deep Mysteries can be communicated and understood as far as is humanly possible by someone who admits that he simply doesn't know the answers. Humility is a better tool than a degree.

The journey if we walk rather than take a bus may tell more than a non-arrival at an unknown destination. The point of the exercise is to understand as much as possible for ourselves.

There is less chance of a pitfall along a less winding path. The right perspective is our quest. The quest for truth is not fuelled by a familiarity with truths inherent in higher mathematics or an inclination to repair to a library and read up what Greats have said about the purpose of life. The process of following up of every last ramification may be the province of the high power mind or computer. When mere mortals attempt it, the chance ramifies of overlooking an inconvenient jigsaw piece and so disturbing an entire mosaic. Philosophers clearly have thought deeply about the very things that concern you and I. Some try to go one better and disguise what they propound in such complexity - Immanuel Kant comes to mind - that we hardly know what they are talking about. Trying to work it out only too easily becomes a substitute for actually thinking about the point at issue. Too often we may be tempted to cry '*Eureka!*' what we mean is that we understand what a philosopher is on about, what he was

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<sup>22</sup> To be heard in '*Personal Credos*' in the *Institute of Reflection*

<sup>23</sup> See *Wikipedia*

<sup>24</sup> See the above passage on '*Reflection - Thinking for yourself*' for what people in everyday life think about the Big Questions.



meaning to say, not the meaning of what he said. We do not have to go so far as to agree with Bertrand Russell that:

*'The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.'*

A great thing, Authority. We don borrowed robes and puff ourselves up by speaking 'in the name' of a higher power. We don't think that it might even imply that we are actuated by an inferiority complex that is disguised even from ourselves. A pulpit or megaphone to interpret what is propounded has more force and so more apparent cogency than muttering in the back pew. We look to the leaders of opinion and think that they are following us, and that is what they so often say. The larger, the more august or impressive the platform, the more weight to our chosen flights of ambition, fancy and oratory. We are disinclined to give Doubt a fair crack of the whip if we parade ourselves in robes borrowed from majestic wardrobes. We look to an authority and it's also a salve to have someone else to blame. As said above, consensus or majority opinion does not make a viewpoint right but it confers assurance...

Speculation about the eternal verities is primarily a quest for an understanding rather than an academic discipline. If so, perhaps we can rest content with justifiable generality.

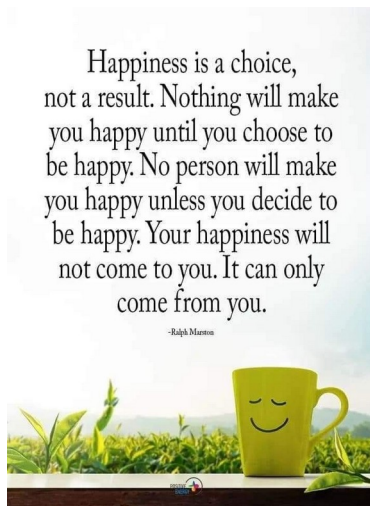
A general truth that is reached through common sense rather than one involved theorising in a too intellectual way can be the best lamp of truth. Apart from common sense, general culture - which the French tend to value more than Anglo-Saxons - can be sufficient without being a specialist. What is true of philosophy does not apply to other disciplines of science and the arts though, conversely, the exercise of cerebral kilowattage and creative thought may be the greater in the sphere of rigorous Philosophy.

However much exhaustive efforts to pin to paper the deeper mysteries may be applauded, there is no call to be too clever. The intelligent thing sometimes is not to be too clever by half. The point of the exercise is to be right, not to be clever. Erudition may distract from the shortest and best path to... ANSWERS.

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We want to avoid a wild goose chase. Thought is needed about most things 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

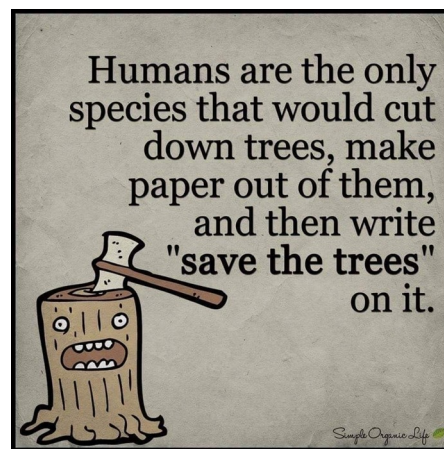
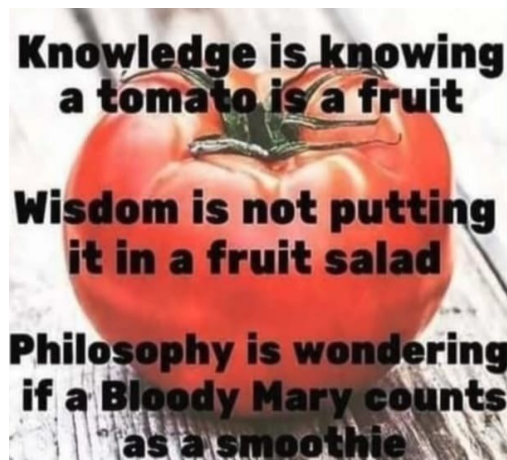
A cleansing and cooling afterglow follows from reflection. The traditional English way is just to do it and not to make a fuss about it. It is a form of unconscious cerebration. In these touchy-feely days of splurge and instantaneous reactions and when more and more rats are running the race it is high 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.

# PRACTICAL WISDOM

*An attitude of mind that helps towards attaining it*

Don't you want to be more rounded, successful and clever. Of course you do! Everything in this institute tends in this direction if you have half a mind to take it seriously. Our way of life will be enhanced in a practical sense if we allow ourselves the chance of more reflection.

We need not take anything for granted and, by questioning things, our own beliefs included, people can come up with new ideas, new theories; better ideas, better theories. We can bring them to bear on our careers, our political systems, our decisions in romance. We can adjust tactics, and strategy and much more, in the process transforming our lives.



The progenitor by the cradle of so much of Western Civilisation, Aristotle, if watching, might give two cheers to see modern lifestyles, and the reason he would not give three cheers is that, top of the tree for Aristotle were three virtues: Practical Wisdom; an Understanding of how to live life well and ethically; and Technical Wisdom.

Practical Wisdom for Aristotle is the most important!

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. 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. The 'real' world is in the forefront of our focus not abstractions like 'Practical thinking as a methodology'. If we want justifications for good practical decisions we look to the circumstances of any given case. It is as if we are bent on treating symptoms not causes. We assume that we pick up on the key aspects of our lives while 'on the job'.

Wisdom in practical action, even downright common sense, is not taught in schools. Who after all would include it in a curriculum; what form could its implementation take?

Consider the fact that there are nowadays so many courses for 'Self-help', which is almost a paradox. Shrinks, gurus, life-coaches; studies galore guide us as to how to lead sensible

lives. There is no central forum for discussion at the moment about this central aspect of our lives: acquiring practical wisdom.

The tried and tested advice for how to face up to practical situations is there for all of us in our culture; the question is of whether we take it seriously enough. We should look before we leap.

There are many ways to learn how challenging situations are faced by others. The theatre is an example, and novels. Television is not so helpful in that part of the use of 'lessons' in the theatre or in the act of reading come from the effort that is being made, rather than sitting back on a couch. Chess helps one to think patiently in a logical way; board games such as *Cluedo* afford practice at unravelling mysteries.

It is all but pecking away at the periphery of the subject rather making of it a central study.

There are about as many hints from the Ivory Towers of Academe as from the Tower of Babel as to how to live life and, worse, they are far from appearing on the same hymn sheet.

The theorist might go in for something more airy-fairy but a workaday Practical Man is likely to say that the question of 'how we should live our life' is the only useful purpose of philosophy; he might add 'if any'. You surely wouldn't be like him if you are curious enough to be reading this book.

Common sense may be innate, wisdom acquired by learning lessons of experience, but the fact is that they can be enriched and enhanced by training and by acquiring the right habits of mind.

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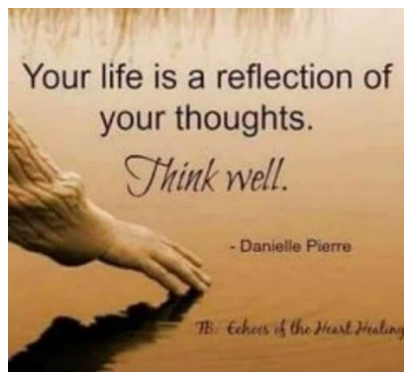
Raphael painted 'The School of Athens'; central are Plato, his arm pointing upwards, symbolically at the heavens, with Aristotle whose arm is pointing toward us, suggestive of our earthly concerns.

## ***How should we live our lives***

You and I may like to set store by our chosen formulae in life but critical thinking can kick in leaving the belief in tatters, if we are unflinchingly honest. As mentioned elsewhere in these pages, it is always a matter of probability not certainty - but certainly so in trying to unravel the big underlying Mystery of life. Even Horatio<sup>25</sup> probably would have mocked anyone for supposing that they meaningfully can produce a full explanation of so grandiose a spectacle. He wouldn't get close to unravelling even what *in toto* actuates the humblest dormouse. As in great, so in small. What applies to our belief systems applies to the way we live our lives.

## **A Training for Practical Wisdom**

It is on a par with other factors involved in Reflection; suitable practices are known but often not taken seriously and rarely if ever collated as here into a single *modus operandi*.



It doesn't matter whether you are a hare or a tortoise being first past the finishing post. It might hardly matter to them unless we anthropomorphise them but what all creatures should be about is 'playing the game' as best they can even if to a sloth what gives the game of life its' daily kick might be ongoing idleness.

Preparation for practical wisdom gets going in the mind. Helpful habits of thought set the right course. A slight change in attitude to taking reflection more seriously is a key to practical progress and a start can be made in looking closely at creating habits with a view to honing them in the best direction. There are several simple tips that are mentioned below and one of the tips is to take these tips seriously.

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'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.

Reflection has a framework – a time (regular times if it helps but the mood is more important than the timing) and sometimes a specific place; respect accorded it as a worthwhile activity,

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<sup>25</sup> In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet tells Horatio, "*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,*" implying that there are mysteries beyond human comprehension and the scope of their current knowledge.

and a cast of mind that is open to being flexible and rounded. The seeds in people's minds ideally are there and can be watered.

Cultivate an attitude that includes a willingness to try and see what may be going on in the mind of an adversary or a relevant authority etc. As said above, a chess player can gain much from simply getting up and walking to the other side of the table and seeing the board as it looks to his or her opponent.

The simple fact of the amount of time that is given over to considering such questions with care helps get the answer right. Once the time has been put in, opinions can be more settled and one's choices of action more grounded. Life can change.

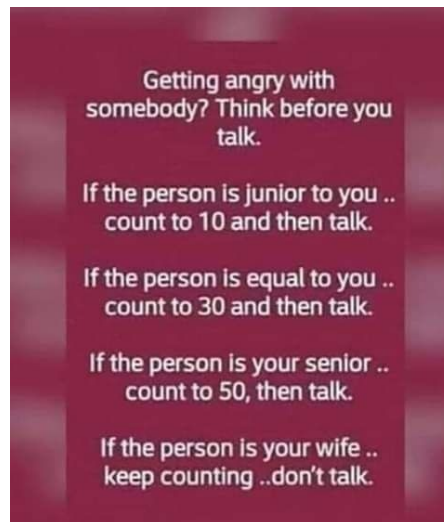
Reflection, positively undertaken, helps people to rise above temporary circumstances that seem challenging. We can kneejerk in alarm to a threat that is not what it first appears or 'spend a lifetime worrying about things that will never happen'. It can stop people flying without sufficient forethought 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 or any number of quotidian matters.

Doing the sensible thing may also be the creative thing. Goals should be realistic, not wishful thinking.

*'Emotion recollected in tranquillity'*, in Wordsworth's phrase, and freshness of mind are aspects of what leads to Practical Wisdom.

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. It has been remarked above that sitting quietly and reflecting allows thoughts to come to the surface of the mind, perhaps unbidden. These thoughts can provide the solution to practical issues facing you.

'Counting to ten' before one acts is good counsel for making policy decisions - in the sense that it is a way of saying 'Look before you Leap' - as well as how one deals with the situations into which one is suddenly thrown. Beware of making assumptions that are too facile. Sometimes it is only by wrestling with a problem that the answer eventually comes.



We should foster the habit of clear thinking about what is needed. A good starting point to fix problems can be to acknowledge what are the basic problems with maximum exactness. That may not be as easy as it sounds. The most awareness possible of what is involved in the task or dilemma ahead may do the trick. An ostridge gets no brownie points for hiding its head in the sand.

No totem is too sacrosanct for re-evaluation.

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.

We should know when we need to be strong even if it is not of our first inclination. The goal might be, say, monetary profit. It goes towards the approach advocated here with regard to the 'hidden' keys to success to mention how unusual it is to see in handbooks of business instruction that a successful entrepreneur needs qualities of character and nerves of steel.

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? That arguably is a charter for a naïvety.

There are questions to ask oneself about how to proceed in alternative courses of action but how to cultivate a frame of mind in which Lateral thinking comes naturally to one?

Lateral thinking is not natural to some people though there is an awareness in general that it sometimes helps to 'think outside of the box'. A fresh take on a subject can yield dividends. Lateral Thinking, again, is not on the syllabus of any school or university but one can practice asking oneself unusual questions. Below is one example but the suggestion here are almost the opposite what is being proposed, which is that one thinks up the unusual question for oneself:

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 military tactics of a Caesar or Clausewitz if military dunderheads



furnish examples of what types of generalship to avoid? *NB These questions are considered more in depth in the final chapter.*

Emotional Empathy can be fostered even by so simple an expedient as thinking more about a situation. If people understood more of what life was like in London in the blitz or the Black Death, we would have been better equipped to deal emotionally with lock-downs in Covid. Time and again, this is not an area to which sufficient thought is given when analysing the different courses of possible action. It goes beyond just 'to understand is to forgive' to the point where 'to understand is counteract'. Fools rush into saying what is at the top of their heads without sufficient aforethought as to the possible blowback. Diplomats reflect, that is, if they are any good at diplomacy.

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 construction 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, the 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.

The lesson of what is done wrong by people often is a way of playing the Blame Game with a default mind set. Carping at past deficiencies is not necessarily the best way to produce better results; a knee-jerk tendency can compound the problem. That default mind-set might be slowly, subtly, shifted by putting the following question when any problem surfaces: **'WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?'**

An illustration of this approach was in meetings of the European-Atlantic Group in its heyday when high profile speakers monthly addressed audiences of some 200 distinguished guests. Speakers invariably would suppose they knew in advance what would be the text on which they would speak, having honed their arguments. They however were told that it was not the thing at this group to 'lecture' but to address themselves to the specific point of what it was that had to be done, who would do it, and so forth.

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 can practise scrutinising their belief systems and normal ways of behaviour. Their normal Pavlovian mode of automatically doing good if they are Christians or turning a blind eye to doing harm if running in the rat race may not answer all the requirements of specific questions. In business, 'every deal is a drama.' 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.

So, best to avoid 'Anal Retentive' syndrome and consider each case on its own merits rather than having a 'one size fits all' reaction.



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.

Sometimes it is not the answer to problem that counts but the way that argument is put across. 'Soft words turneth away wrath' but, in a question at issue, might not the fact that 'a madman has the strength of ten' be more to the point. And then, what of the long term repercussions of immediate success. All these nice questions and others can be weighed.

One cannot embark too early on a course of training for the practicalities in life. 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.

People think up novel ways of training.

Goldie Hawn, the actress, said that her husband's punishment for his son's poor driving was to, "...shoot up his car and dent it up, and ride around in it for the rest of his existence."

A penalty for misbehaviour of Ms Hawn's children was to be sent to a corner, and to sit there with the instruction *'to reflect there on what they had done wrong.'*

### **An Unpopular approach**

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*

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*

Hard realities have been factored into training in many situations, sometimes known as the School of Hard Knocks. 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, he said, gave him his most useful lessons in life.

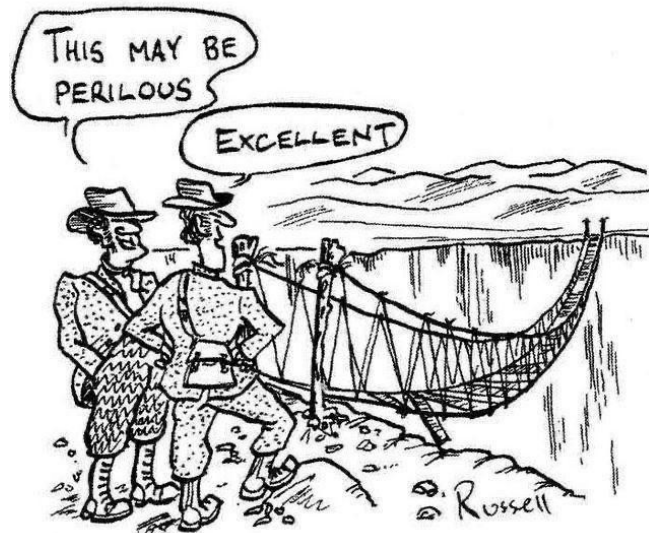
We have gone beyond the days of 'Grin and Bear it', haven't we? Perhaps, just perhaps, more's the pity!

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.

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?

## Victorian risk assessment



It is easy to 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.

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?

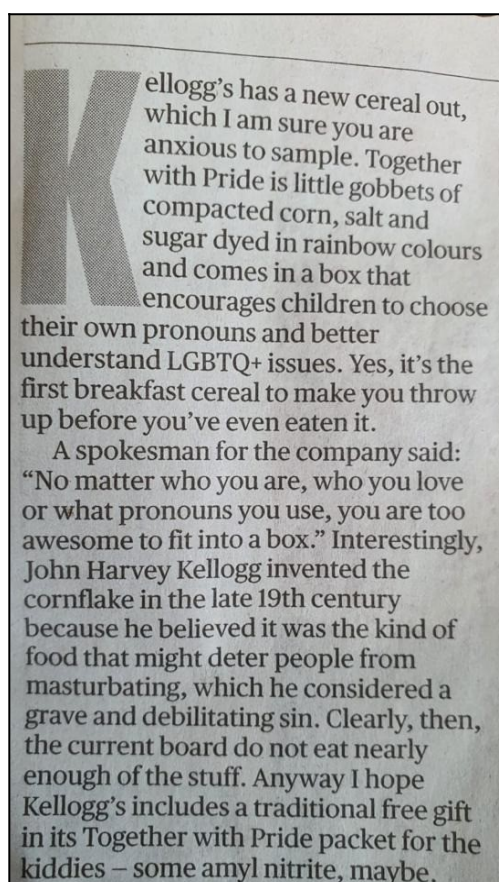
There is a short list of successful experiments in suchlike social engineering.

In Sparta or the Prussian military command or the English public school system, all *passé* in our cosseted 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. 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.

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.

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.



Perhaps older generations knew a thing or two that we have forgotten. The pill of Victorian education was soured not sweetened by candy. *'Spare the rod and spoil the child'* was a saying that is now way out of date and many would argue that we are seeing the effects in the 'Me First' generations. There are ways of inculcating discipline that do not involve such hardness.

The concept of character-building seems outdated but there is purpose in building character that is not geared simply 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, as mentioned.

Could there be a prescription for a 'School for life' other than 'learning on the job'? No institute discusses it as a separate and worthwhile objective in itself. One can see why this is so; 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. Politicians on their way up what Disraeli called 'the greasy pole' do not even have routine character profiling by trained psychiatrists; rather a televisual presence is among the qualities that bring success.

There is purpose in building character which is desirable for everyday life.

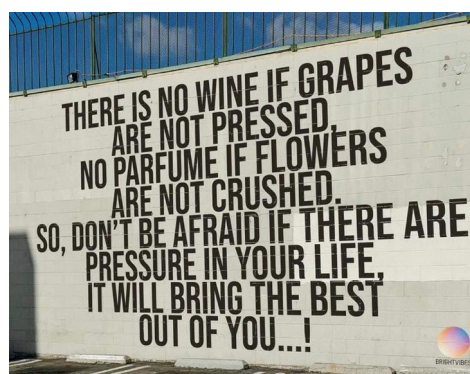
A rough ride has its uses as a training exercise, an experience attested globally and not just in the UK. That *en passant* is an acid test of whether lessons are common to humanity rather than any one culture. A toughening-up process can enhance appreciation of our lot in life. It can help graphically show how much worse off we might be than we are. Get into people's heads the idea that a certain toughness is needed in life; then Awareness of what is involved at any fork in the crossroads is half the battle.

'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.

Commandoes undergo rigorous training to toughen up and so forth but what comparable training do politicians, or opinion-shapers to undergo so as to better survive the School of Hard Knocks that is life? This is not saying that millennials or Generation Z would fancy conscription but are we to turn a blind eye to every avenue that leads in that general direction?



### Some *outré* ideas

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.

Perhaps an answer lies in hypnosis? 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.

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?

A panel of experts might be convened to consider the question of how best to help induce traits in modern generations that can best instruct in lessons in life. Much the same idea has been taken up when it comes to seeing what limits are best put on Artificial Intelligence.

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## Have You Suffered a bereavement?

### **HEALTH WARNING:**

*WHAT FOLLOWS IS NOT INTENDED TO BE A FULL ANSWER TO THE QUESTIONS POSED. IT MAY BE BEST FOR YOU TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL ADVICE. THESE POINTERS ARE JUST SOME IDEAS ABOUT HOW 'REFLECTION' AS DISCUSSED IN THESE PAGES MAY BE OF SOME HELP. YOU SHOULD KNOW WITHIN YOURSELF WHERE AND WHETHER SOME OF THESE SUGGESTIONS APPLY TO YOU.*

You have lost someone unique to you. This may leave what seems like a massive hole in the heart. Only you can know how you feel.

We are all gifted with the same repertoire of emotions and feelings in a broad-brush way. In that sense, you are not alone. It is a path well travelled even if it is one unique to you.

We know that Time is a great healer; have you fully taken on board that time is an ally?

An ache does not have to be a pain.

What is going to change over time is yourself. All your relationships will change in a gradual way, including your relationship with the Departed. In time, this is likely to become more settled than with most of those with whom we deal in this life, with its surprises. The Departed can no longer rewrite their lives save, in a sense, in your mind. They still have existence there. Their passing should set a seal on the happiest memories. Imbedded within you, they speak to you, God-willing. They do so from across a widening chasm of mortal time. True, it may be measured in a different way in the immeasurable aeons of Eternity.

One way to notice the change within yourself is to look at videos of the departed person after the elapse of a substantial period. It can induce a sense that this is no longer a record of a time in the extended present but of a time that is over, a new dimension supervening, with the deceased on screen somehow seeming larger than life.

You may care to remember the words of the lictor who rode beside the Roman Emperors in their triumphal processions: 'Remember that you too are mortal!' Whether or not you pray and with whatever verbalisations about the Divine that even Holy Books tell us we cannot fully comprehend, there is comfort in the fact that we – every one of us – are all headed the same way.

We can only do what we can. No one can ask more of us. Why tilt at windmills?

Much Reflection is about 'Thinking acting on feeling', i.e. how thoughts can affect feeling. Feeling is usually the starting point, but a brain is to be used; why else would it be there. Think about it.

There is no one 'right' way to mourn or time that the process takes. Like a long-distance runner, you can pace yourself. Why lie to yourself; you know how you feel. You can be true to yourself as well as to the memory of those you love.



Can Reflection help dampen the sense of loss? A related question is 'Do you want it lessened, or will you feel that it somehow 'betrays' your loved one', as if to imply that you don't care enough?

One aim is come to terms with your loss; have it enshrined as a part of your being, a mental blanket to keep you warm when cold blasts of acceptance come. On our mortal plane, we feel temperature; cold is that which humans don't like; we are more than human. We surely are spirits as well as flesh and bone that is unanimated.

All religions provide comfort and words of wisdom at such a juncture. At the end of mortal day, we know our beliefs will be tested by reality. We cannot not know specifics and even the Good Books are replete with opacity, with the Lord appearing 'in a cloud'. Are all psychics and mediums, even ghost hunters, wrong, generation after generation? Do you know better than them with their third eye or sensitised instinct or sense of profound revelation?

There is plenty of evidence that the energies or life force of those who loved us when they were alive are engaged with us on an ongoing basis, as from a powering source, even if they are not physically here.

You loved them. They are gone. Perhaps. In that word 'Perhaps' is a great salve. Why? Because perhaps they have not gone, in an essential sense.

Sadness there will be. But it can be coupled with gratitude that you have had the relationship. How much better that they were there, once, to love, than that they had never been there. In the words of the Prophet: *'When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight'*. Where to find comfort? It is there to be found, perhaps in the unlikeliest of places. Perhaps you are a Republican but you can appreciate what the late Queen Elizabeth II once said: 'Grief is the price you pay for love.'

Review, reflect, think again, and in the process of thinking you may arrive at a peace and harmony within yourself that is a truth you need, even if a verbal formula fails the test of 100% certainty. As does almost everything.

You need time for you to hoist in and transmute the feelings you have about bereavement into a form that is more bearable for you. The approaching-the-final picture may not surface immediately in your mind. Run-of-mill situations do not need constant reassessment but this is a different situation from normal earth-bound tales. Pieces in the jigsaw of the life of the Departed and your relationship with them tend to float up to the surface of your mind over time. Allow yourself space as well as time for this to happen.

Here is something that you might like to reflect at a time like you are now going through:

*'Mayest thou rest in peace, dear friend. Death has severed the tie that united us in this life, to be renewed everlastingly in a happier world, whither I hope one day to follow thee.*

*Now, faithful to thy memory, I implore God to grant thy soul's repose, and to vouchsafe to me the grace of our reunion, when His holy will shall call me hence.*

*My God, permit that the soul of him/her that I mourn, freed from earth's painful struggles, dangers and difficulties, and purified through Thy mercy, may share the joys of the blessed in eternity. Amen.'*

## Are You Undergoing a Divorce?

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Impudent, isn't it! Someone trying to tell you how you should think! But if you ask for help, you're partly responsible. Giving advice on big matters is a bit like telling someone about eternity. There is so much that isn't known by Mr Wiseacre. Broad brush-strokes, categories, can be got right; the specific ways that you feel, and what you should do, and think, varies from case to case. The 'Weight' or importance that you assign to different points – when the language used overlaps or is identical – may be different. All such talk *au fond* comes from a shared humanity; and that is fine within limits.

*Health warning:* Notes below are not to be seen as a substitute for professional help nor are they engraved on tablets of stone. They are signposts that with luck and effort can help you look within yourself to see if they help you, even if you reject them.

What to do and what to think:

- 1) No one else can know exactly what you are going through at the moment. You are your own most understanding patient.
- 2) Sometimes wisdom is enshrined in some saw or maxim that hasn't floated to the top of your consciousness. It is unusual to have, as below, a list pertinent to your situation. Why not practice a spot of self-brainwashing and repeat the following proverbs or axioms as mantras to yourself. It may be on a regular basis. They are a repository of the wisdom of the ages. They are all too easily overlooked through familiarity – like the idea of Reflection itself. You should really hoist them in, perhaps repeating them slowly, rather than skim over them:

**'Time and the hour run through the roughest day.'**

**'I'll live to fight another day.'**

**'Whatever will be, will be; the future is not mine to see.'**

**'When one door closes, another opens.'**

**'I am a creature of the stars; I should be gentle with myself.'**

**'Count my (many) blessings!'**

**'Step by step: Rome wasn't built in a day!'**

**'There very well may be a light at the end of my tunnel!'**

**'There is a silver lining to my cloud, even if I can't see it.'**

**'It is no good crying over spilled milk.'**

**'I should Keep calm and carry on!'**

**'Worse things happen at sea – and land!'**

**'We live in hope!'**

THE FOLLOWING APPROACH IS RELEVANT AT ALMOST EVERY CROSSROADS OR DECISION FACED....

**.....(a) One thing at a time; (b) Consideration of the problem; (c) Decision; (d) Action.**

3) You cannot now deal completely with all that confronts you. The objective at the moment is not to eradicate the problem at one fell swoop but to drive it down, to minimise it.

4) We have to look within ourselves to find an inner strength that must be there – don't dissipate your energy bemoaning the fact or facts of the situation or what might have been.

5) Dealing emotionally and intellectually with an issue are two different challenges, if twinned. Your thought processes and critical abilities can be a solvent on downbeat emotions as well as signposting the best course of action. When reflecting about the challenge:

a. Focus your mind on exactly what is best to do in the circumstances.

b. Thinking sensibly can help damp down darker emotions.

c. Aforethought is most likely to induce the wisest actions that make you feel calmer.

You WILL survive this period. Much can daunt you at a contemplation of the journey ahead so try not to do that or, if you must, in the least over-emotional way possible.

If you cannot do anything about a problem, it is a fact, so there is nothing to be gained by wallowing.

Look hard for what is positive in the present bind; there will be something. Your own answer might surprise you.

Military manuals can tell us how Generals fought campaigns but there isn't a separate faculty within us, a 'military gene'. Common sense, and heeding the inner prompting of instinct, produces answers that can be weighed in reflection with care.

How can you know that this is not the best-disguised best thing that can happen to you? Sure, it does not look like it at the moment but how will your life story seem when looking back at it from the future? And then, ...can you know what the future has in store, let alone the even more huge problems that may lurk round the corner if nothing occurs to upset what was the present applecart, the alternative future that you will never experience unless in the unlikely scenario of a multiverse? Life may really open up for you after you have surmounted what is in the immediate future.

The best lessons in life – and you are learning right now – are usually digested at the cost of suffering. If, in one sense, we have lost, we gained much by what has now been lost. If it is all easy, we don't learn – even if on an intellectual level we can think that we understand better.

We all know that a proverbial glass can be seen as half full or half empty. Reflection is an aid to positive thinking – which is to be distinguished from purblind optimism. There are 'positives' as well as negatives in almost anything we contemplate and Reflection as a habit, and the common sense in looking for the silver lining in a cloud and working it up so that it becomes more in the forefront of our thinking, can have beneficial knock-on effects.

Depth of understanding, even a new perspective on the reasons for our being on this earth, can be of inestimable value in your future; perhaps the present situation is a stepping stone along that way.

We can look to some greater Guide than ourselves on which to lean but it is also satisfactory and salutary if we find in ourselves the resources to deal with the problem. We already know within ourselves what is the right course to take even if identifying it may be far from easy.

Sometimes one needs to reach out to an empathetic soul and/or be given the best advice whether or not from someone permanent in your life as sometimes strangers may offer the best guidance. An understanding heart is worth more than a coronet and...there is very much to be said for good sense.

Reflection helps teach you to think carefully for yourself and helps you reflect on advice from others. Thinking about what to do helps take you away from being unduly absorbed in your painful feelings. The most rounded perspective augurs the best course of action; you may reflect on what it is.

Where do you – and those you care for – want to be when the dust has settled? You are far from alone in facing a divorce. Please take comfort in that. 'Courage, mon brave!'

If the above suggestions do not resonate enough with you, hang in there and keep looking.

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## DOUBTING THOMAS – the downside of Reflection

It is not as if Reflection can have no possible drawbacks. Of course there must be some.

Too much forethought can result in paralysing action, Necessary decisive action can be stifled. As the Bard put it in *Hamlet*, one can be 'sicklie'd o'er with the pale cast of thought!'. Reflection needn't result in a 'sick lie' but it can go too far. The reader is emphatically asked to form his or her own opinion.



As ever, balance comes into play. That in itself can give rise to difficulty. It does not mean, at the end of the day, it has to be 'six of one and half a dozen of the other'. This attitude is a peculiarly English malaise though it can also be glimpsed in the politeness of the Japanese. A confusion of precepts (see above) can result in the process of being balanced morphing into being magisterial and tends towards thinking that there is something to be said for all sides. But sometimes it is not a binary case of right or wrong. It can be eight of one and two of the other.

Other controversies may arise, for instance a calm consideration of a given view so as to get it balanced may result in becoming angry when one wasn't before.

Here is what Dan Remenyi<sup>26</sup> writes about one of its' central lines of argument:

*I am struck by the incongruity of the idea that somehow reflection could be catalogued as a subsection of Western Meditation or for that matter meditation be a subset of reflection. I see these two concepts are entirely different.*

*For the purposes of simplicity, I will use the Wikipedia definitions of Meditation and Reflection. Meditation is described as a practice in which an individual uses a technique –*

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<sup>26</sup> Dan Remenyi is a partly retired author and teacher with a strong interest in helping research degree candidates complete their masters or doctoral degrees. With an original interest in ICT he has over the years migrated to research methodology and related topics. His positive views on Reflection appear on the *Institute of Reflection* website under the head of 'Reflection as an Academic Discipline'

75

such as mindfulness, or focusing the mind on a particular object, thought, or activity – to train attention and awareness and achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm and stable. Reflection is the act of giving something serious thought. Using dictionaries, thesaurus and just common English usage there is no direct connection between the concepts of meditation and reflection. The Wikipedia definition is how I use the word meditation. On one of your webpages, you cite an extract from a Jewish prayer which says “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.

The use of the word meditation here conveys a different idea which is neither what I call meditation nor reflection. In the religious context here the word meditation is being used to describe the process of focusing on a sacred object to reach a state of some tranquillity. It is much more like the way a mantra is used in proper meditation itself.

I see the word reflection as bringing to mind a number of things. Firstly, to reflect is necessary to pause and concentrate. Secondly reflection means engaging in active thought on a specific subject. Thirdly, the active thought needs to be in the form of asking questions such as:

1. What precisely am I doing?
2. What do I really know for sure about what I am doing?
3. What are the expected consequences of my current trajectory.

There is another level of questioning, and this is generally referred to as using reflexivity. Reflexivity employs a different level of questioning. The “what” word is often replaced with the “why” word can be quite problematic. In practicing reflexivity the questions would now address issue such as:

1. Why am I doing this thing?
2. Why do I think that what I am doing matches up with my values?



## A Virtual Agora for Occidental Meditation

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

*and*

**THINK!**

*By 'the Novelist'*

— --- —

*Note: Some of what follows is recapitulation*

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 Ruminatation 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

Until I understand where I am, I can't get to where I am going. This is the value of a compass when we are out walking or hiking and need to know we're going in the right direction. But we also have an internal North Star. It's that little nudge that tells us if we are on the right path to fulfilling our potential, or on the wrong path wasting energy traveling somewhere we don't need to go.

- John C. Maxwell, author, speaker and pastor

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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 Empyrean 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.

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## Contemplation: *'Ruminative' reflection in action*

Subjects on which to reflect are so many and so various that it is clearly Mission Impossible to go into anything remotely like comprehensive detail in the space of a single book. Suffice to say that there is a charm of allowing one's mind to speculate on any subject we choose. We can roam free, untended. Why hedge around our natural curiosity. We are here taking what might be the first or perhaps second steps in a fascinating journey. What features below are ideas that may strike a chord or which may prompt a delve into a topic. By enlarge, the topics as chosen relate to bigger questions in life but there is no end of subjects onto which a fancy might swoop and a host of ways in which to do the swooping. In some ways this piece can be compared to a ramble through the scenery of our lives, our precepts and societies, or like a conversation in which the requirements of essay or tract are put on one side and free rein given to talking as mood or inspiration takes.<sup>27</sup> Each reader can adopt a different approach and indeed this writer may take a different approach tomorrow.

'What is the SIGNIFICANCE?' That is the burning question. Get the evidence but go on to ask 'What is the meaning of this knowledge?' One needs the facts like one needs a body but what matters isn't so much the agglomeration of cellular tissue but the animating spirit. An example of 'Ruminative reflection brought to bear on intellectual reflection' can be found in the virtual Institute of Reflection.

The more a problem is seen in general terms, the closer one can approach to a truth.

What follows is a dip into a dip into a dip of perennial Philosophical Problems; the defence for including this 'dip' is that one of the purposes behind 'Reflection on Reflection' is that it is meant to arrive at understandings for oneself not just absorb and regurgitate the ideas of others. So, this is a *tour d'horizon* of musings rather than hard, disciplined *tours d'horizon* of the accumulated knowledge of mankind.

*Note: Many subjects blend into each other and so many of the headings below shade into other categories and related subjects.*

### ***What follows are a few thoughts about relevant topics:***

#### **Language**

How much of the intangible, actuating force behind the world is helpfully reducible to prose? Language can mask truth. The answer to big questions may lie in our deeper natures and we use language as a fig leaf to cover our lack of self-knowledge - even from ourselves.

*Example:* Are we closer to uncovering a meaningful truth if we consider the following words of Wittgenstein?

*'The solution of the riddle of life is that space and time lie outside space and time.'*

It might seem that a truth has been speared, a riddle solved, allowing us to feel satisfied at least on a cursory glance. Is it this a clever-clever formula for an idea that is fundamentally

<sup>27</sup> This approach is in the passage about Celestial Justice

beyond our comprehension, especially given that Wittgenstein was writing before people in the main drew conclusions from the opacities of quantum science? Does his 'solution' guide us to a purportedly safe harbour in any but the sense Alice B. Toklas had in mind when she wrote: *'When you have got there, there is no there there!'*

The claws or painted finigernails of linguists and philosophers might be unsheathed already, their possessors raring to be up and at a supposed disparagement of Wittgensteinian truth. As this may be seen as an attempt to pick at a great philosopher, let us don the borrowed robes of Authority in a reposte. Bertrand Russell once said of Wittgenstein's philosophy that it *'became at best a slight help to lexicographer.'*

Are we being drawn into little more than a semantic game that even players do not see that they are playing?

In Alan Jay Lerner's *'My Fair Lady'* a lady unrequited in love sings: *'All I get is words, words, words! ...SHOW me!'* In that ditty, what in part miffs this lady, played by Julie Andrews, is an all-too-English attitude of not showing emotion going hand-in-hand with a typical British reticence about giving tongue to deeper thought. We are given no end of words, analogies.

BUT...

It is understanding we need, not the expression of it that may be the best at which we can arrive using the tool of language.

Is there, on the other hand, something wise about Wittgenstein's formula? We should ideally arrive at an understanding in our own way, having first acquired sufficient of the facts on which to make some sort of judgement.

Words *inter alia* may satisfy an impulse within us towards neatness.

Neatness and the wish for freedom are among categories in a framework, or labels, that cover a polyglot of jostling ideas. It may be salutary to make a list of the 'drives' within us that fuel our curiosity about such matters, but it would still just be 'about' what makes us tick.

An occasional neologism aside there is not a word in our vocabulary that hasn't been thought up and used by someone else. True, concepts may be a synthesis of words that sometimes we put together in a way unique to ourselves, if usually with less than striking originality or importance. The exception to this rule are sentences in this paragraph and this is a sentence with which you do not have to agree! We are thinking thoughts and probably experiencing feelings that others have had, can have, and might have. The notion of concepts is further looked at in the Appendix.

We quaff the bromide of words and, philosophers aside, sometimes don't ask of them that they are as precise, let alone as helpful, as they seem. Further, an answer may be more of a question; a 'solution' more tangled than the initial conundrum. Language in this context might mirror the confusing world in which we live.

We no doubt knew much if not all of this, whether or not we put it into words. Did we stop to think how very strange it is?

***What can we learn about ourselves from the animal world?***

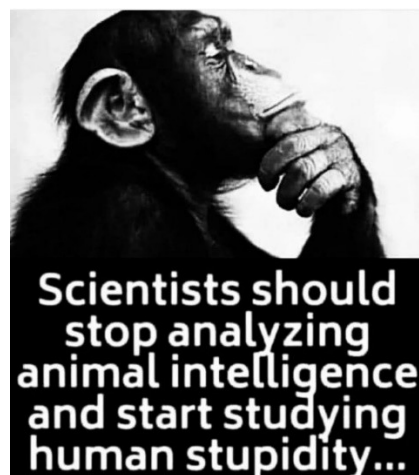
The Lord is said to have regard for the meanest of creatures: *'the fall of a sparrow is a significant event.'* It is an example of how the scriptures – in metaphor at least – have a reality in a sphere of morality as well as eternity.

Much of what is said about mankind goes for the animal world too. Animals display many of the same drives and emotions as humans. A mouse shows signs of cardiac arrest on being tossed about by a dog; look at the pleasure evinced by a purring cat, observe an insect struggling to be free of a spiders' web. The maternal instinct. Missing in a 'lower animal' is an ability to talk or rationalise, we presume, as we do.

If we can see natural life, feel for animals - none of which, like ourselves, had conscious choice in what they were born to be - we can see a mirror of our lives. The celebrated British empire-builder, D.H. Lawrence, was said to have had no time for animals, going on to say that as far as he was concerned the animal kingdom was an utter irrelevance to man. Why is it that this seems faintly shocking? It is partly because, as with the art of reflection, we can take something for granted, not fully aware of its part in our whole world. The animal world repays studying it at least to the extent that it displays to us a mirror of our own nature.

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.

Many of us preen ourselves as being of a higher order than animals though in the Hindu pantheon animals, particularly cows, 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 and pure form.



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 try and appreciate more the wonders of the *fauna* of our world and occasionally cast more than a blind eye to, say, the pigeons that wing their way through cities, each having a life of its own.



Mao Zedong declared war on birds in his Beijing and the faithful went forth armed with guns to slaughter them in droves. The effects, long term of this policy, were not beneficial. 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 more than cerebral processes, the late Rosemary Cockayne once astonished strangers by knocking at a front door asking for water for a thirsty rat. 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 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. It is a human story in its essentials.

To quote a section above about the Communal Mind:

*'Experiments seem to show that when chimpanzees in the northern hemisphere have learned a trick taught them by animal behaviourists, then chimps in the southern hemisphere suddenly show a tendency to perform the same trick.'*

Can we make deductions of relevance to mankind from this? Or from the fact that animals seem unaware of themselves, surprised by their reflection in mirrors, 'throwing themselves' into what they do, not being 'observers' of themselves, and are impelled by their deep, and only, prompts.

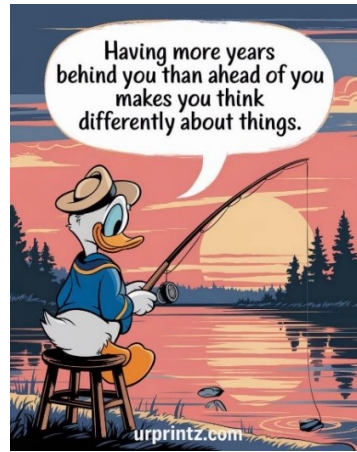
We like our illusions but do not like to face up to our own judgements. We like to think that we would like to communicate with life forms yet to be discovered on other planets but quite why we think that if we encounter alien life from another planet, we will want to understand it, or they us, is anybody's guess! Maybe we could make a start by trying to fathom what animals on earth think about us?

## **Longevity and maturity**

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.

In the last phase of our lives, one perhaps can more easily make sense of the pattern of what it has all been about. In Hegel's words:

*'The owl of Minerva takes flight at the coming of dusk!'*



This twilight zone may be a happy time – *‘the Lord walked abroad in the cool of the evening’* – one’s memory goes back most strongly to an early phase in our life when we were formulating our character and ambitions. In Laurence Binyon’s words:

*‘They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:*

*Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.’*

It is sometimes in later life that one re-identifies with feelings and goals of youth. 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 were and are about.

The twilight zone when ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’. There’s a poem by Winnifred Emma May, known as Patience Strong<sup>28</sup>, about the quiet period after a lifetime’s struggle.

#### SHIP OF HOPE

*May the winds of fortune blow  
Your dream-ship safely home,  
O’er the hidden rocks that lie  
Beneath the rolling foam.  
Laden with the things for which you’ve  
Waited, worked and tried.  
May you ship of Hope come home  
Upon the evening tide*

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 one’s genuine self down. It may well involve not being a traitor to one’s youthful aims and ideals – notwithstanding that Jesus Christ once said that He *‘put from him the things that were childish’*.

<sup>28</sup> Winnifred Emma May (4 June 1907 – 28 August 1990) was a prolific English writer best known for her inspirational poems and prose. She published under the pen name Patience Strong

We make our own patterns, our own stories, self-brainwashing ourselves with them and they are like a long-playing record in our mind and so they become like a judge who forever walks beside us.

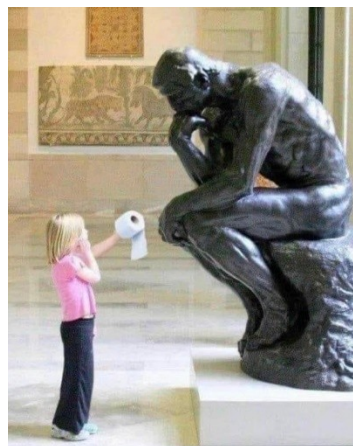
## The Physical world

If one tries to uplift oneself to realms ethereal, can one plausibly believe that one somehow can shed the physical apparatus that makes one hum along in life all but unconscious of a billion 'piston-hammers' that makes the bodily 'machine' tick?

We are grounded physically in ourselves and this is 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'.*

Buddha, whose modesty despite a Royal pedigree which he discarded in the service of the poor, a truly Christian approach, did not allow his goal of enlightenment to blind him to the importance of being grounded in the things of this earth. 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. Thought processes themselves originally are said to be connected with physical mobility - a need for movement. Much imagery of spirituality, astral travelling or levitation where one 'sees' oneself beneath oneself contain physical surroundings, our mortal anchorage.



Physicists and biologists are expert in correlating mental events with physical counterparts. The question yet to be resolved is of how far the physical counterparts, the alpha or theta waves, the brain lesions, the testosterone quotient and the rest are akin to the 'hands rather than the brain', to use a neatly confusing image. Is there an animating force that stands as the puppeteer?

When preparing for an exam, it can help to imbed facts in memory if they are studied in different places. Alzheimers - by way of further illustration - attacks memory and this aspect implies memory has a physical locus.

Are individuals little more than a sum of all their physically-based reactions which perhaps no one else senses in exactly the same way that they do?

To Bishop Berkeley, an 'Immaterialist', 'Reality' consisted of 'spirits, minds, souls with notions and perceptions' as well as sensations like taste and sound.

Peter Cave writes: *'Are all to be explained by neurological changes within, If so, are we not betting that electrical impulses and chemical signals being so patterned that when we engage with shapes on paper and sounds from mouths, we encounter things that 'make sense'?*

## **Individuals are communal beings as well as being individual**

Simone Weil<sup>29</sup> writes:

*'A man alone in the world would be paralysed by the vanity of all his projects...but man is not alone.'*

We are communal beings in one sense; it is obvious. Is there some communal mind, some way in which we are all part of the wider society in which we live? Is there some overarching communal ether or consciousness to which we are all tethered? These questions have engendered much debate. Jewish people have the idea that reincarnation takes place within the tribe. Is there an 'England' such as envisaged by Laurence Binyon?

*'...England mourns for her dead across the sea.*

*Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit...'*

Everything we write about ourselves, what we think about ourselves, at least when put into words, is in communal language, with concepts we have taken into ourselves, that have been taken into what is 'there'. We can feel more confident in clubbing together.

So many sayings that come to mind are borrowed from elsewhere if put together in a unique way, or at least tone, and in some perhaps only slightly differentiated way, by each person (*see the above passage about language*). If I can be seen as an individual from outside, how do I know that I feel any different from anyone else on the inside, let alone that that I am in some way special? This is one of the ways in which we are undifferentiated. Most of us having the same wish to feel distinct as a person.

IF we are the 'same' as one another, that may be a comment on the ambiguity of the word 'same'. It does not mean that we are 'one and the same'? 'Same' may mean 'identical', or not. Much that is strange in life is not the case, we think, when we discover that other people think or speak or feel the same way.

Our disposition makes us gravitate to one another; our predisposition makes us feel at one with our tribe or herd. Women and men were physically made to be a complementary couple - to say the obvious without going into gender politics. But what of the hermit type preferring his own company? What of the person who sees how others feel but doubts that his cleaving to a tribal totem makes such a difference to the outcome of communal objectives that it is not

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<sup>29</sup> Simone Weil was a French philosopher, mystic and political activist. Her ideas concerning religion, spirituality, and politics have remained widely influential in contemporary philosophy.

worth his participation to the same extent as his fellows in a communal enterprise? Some people may be more gregarious than others but much springs from the areas outside conscious 'thinking'. We know what it is to experience need, material or emotional, and see that need, as well as more esoteric emotions, draws us near to someone for reasons beside 'Deep calling unto Deep' or 'Like being attracted to Like.' *En passant*, as so often, there is a powerful backstory to the use of familiar phrases.

Words of wisdom, prescriptions freighted with truth, expressions of mood that we constantly hear are seemingly designed for us all but seem to be for our personal consumption. It is as if people are speaking to us from inside our own head. So much of what we hear and read in psychological ways has a direct relevance and resonance for us. In turn - unless we post a sentinel in our mind sternly charged to watch what escapes our lips - we can talk to others as if talking to our own selves.

The less we stop to think for ourselves, the more we unquestioningly take on ideas of those around us, the more we are a representative and less individualised part of our community.

Experiments apparently show that when chimpanzees in the northern hemisphere learn a trick taught them by animal behaviourists, then chimps in the southern hemisphere suddenly show a tendency to perform the same trick. This again argues for there being a Communal Mind into which we all tap. It lessens any claim we might make as regards our uniqueness, save in one, and a relatively superficial, sense.

We engage with other people; their ideas filtering through our thinking to the point when we claim authorship of our plagiarisms.

We should not slough off responsibility for knowing and understanding for ourselves or be too slavish in swallowing *dicta* of others, thinking them our own thoughts. To borrow Kant's words: '*Sapere aude*' ('have the guts to think for oneself'). Not that one should be borrowing anyone's words to make the point about borrowing words.

### ***What is it that conveys an 'essence'?***

*As so often, to answer such a question may be Mission Impossible. Musings of Mr Average may get us closer to the limits of what we can understand than all the rigorous attention to detail of a logical thinker and, at the same time, offers a defence to the imputation that even a gifted visionary may be prey to illusion.*

A recording of a few words, or an ornament, or a garment might call to mind the essence of a personality, that part of a 'soul' that encapsulates a perception of someone from the perspective of an onlooker. It may be the feeling that is remembered as opposed to a particular event or episode.

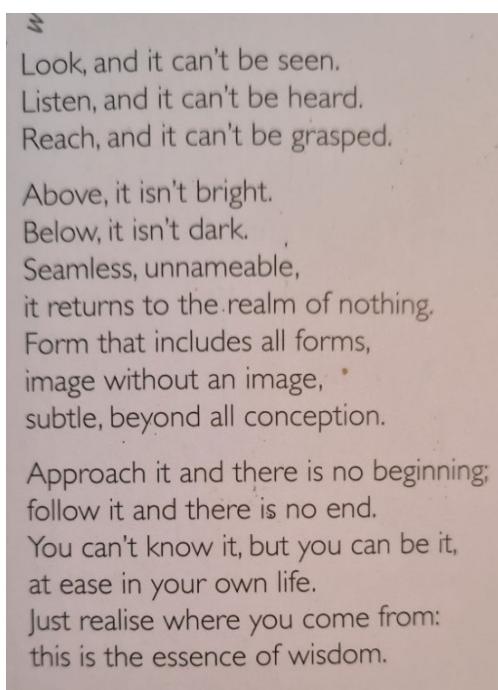
The elliptical or allusive way we come by our knowledge of these matters was overtly stated by Kierkegaard<sup>30</sup>: '*the most important truths cannot be communicated directly.*'

Lao Tsu says: '*I do not know its name. I call it Tao.*'

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<sup>30</sup> Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish theologian, philosopher, poet, social critic, and religious author who is widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher.

An apocryphal hippy who with much effort and high hopes went to Tibet to meet a wise seer, only to be told life is 'like a fountain'. This story has many variants; life for instance can be 'like a big fish'. The formula implies that the secret of life is clothed in enigma but of great depth. Maybe the simple fact is that we don't like to admit where the boundary of language ends and the world of deep meaning begins? Neither 'existence' nor 'essence' can be pinned down meaningfully other than in the form of a roundabout linguistic way.



Look, and it can't be seen.  
Listen, and it can't be heard.  
Reach, and it can't be grasped.  
  
Above, it isn't bright.  
Below, it isn't dark.  
Seamless, unnameable,  
it returns to the realm of nothing,  
Form that includes all forms,  
image without an image,  
subtle, beyond all conception.  
  
Approach it and there is no beginning;  
follow it and there is no end.  
You can't know it, but you can be it,  
at ease in your own life.  
Just realise where you come from:  
this is the essence of wisdom.

Where is the area spiritually within us where the happening is taking place? What do we see or what will we find 'in' ourselves? Is it that which we would wish to face? Are we to think like Romana Maharshi<sup>31</sup>: '*You will recover your true nature as unconditioned life, if the idea I am the body dies*'.

Is the bedrock of our individuality devoid of physicality, much as in the opening lines of John Wyndham's '*Consider Her Ways*' ?:

*'There was nothing but myself. I hung in a timeless, spaceless, forceless void that was neither light, nor dark. I had entity, but no form; awareness, but no senses; mind, but no memory. I wondered, is this...this nothingness – my soul? And it seemed that I had wondered that always, and should go on wondering it for ever...'*

Here are some lines from Hemal Jayasuriya that can be found in the Institute of Reflection.

*'In the evening sky./ Dining Philosophers get up/ Restlessly stride up and down corridors, / Loiter Around, unable to know the depths Of Mind and Consciousness driving them, now for Two thousand years.'*

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<sup>31</sup> The sage of Arunachala to whom is attributed such pensées as '*All problems disappear when we remember who has them*'.

There is this potential within us that we know is there so of which is only activated at certain times under certain stimuli. It is the doing of it, the results of seed growth, not the seed itself, the vast hinterland, about which we are particularly conscious.



Past thinkers without the knowledge at modern disposal, anticipated such counter-intuitive situations as where past, present and future are mixed up. The chorus in Oedipus at Colonus singled out for blessing those who have never been born. The chorus in Oedipus at Colonus singled out for blessing those who have never been born.

Some who make a study of particularly Eastern traditions believe that we return after life on earth to a universal spirit that is aside from corporeal identity altogether.

In trying to understand what makes us tick in the deepest sense, and whither we might be heading in the spirit world if it exists, are we trying to run before we can walk?

When all is said and done, how much can we say we confidence about the most ultimate of our realities? One can perhaps place a degree of reliance on those gifted with a 'third eye' or 'second vision' especially as each generation seems to produce people of this type, which to some extent offsets the idea that these are 'old wife's tales'. So many people fall into this category that there arguably should be pause for thought before dismissing such a view simply on grounds that one has not experienced it oneself.

If a Universal Soul and Enlightenment - by another name - is to be our eventual destination (assuming we acquit ourselves favourably in tests of various conjectural stripes) why do we try and wrest control of the process? Is it just understandable curiosity? How are we with mere physical senses to justifiably arrogate to ourselves a role of godhead? Prescriptions by gurus as to attainment of enlightenment surely can hardly go beyond the physical 'apparatus', the mortal clay? There may be limits set upon deepest understanding of worlds beyond this world. Why say that what we actually are, including a lack of full understanding, is somehow 'wrong', as it may seem from the premiss? Why try to rise as completely above it as we can?

It is argued here that the most that can be expected of most of us is to be aware of the depths and complexities of the matter. One may be content at least to have understood that much, assuming it is likely to be correct, as, in its way, it is an answer. It is easy to see that we may



well not be equipped through our limited physical senses or mental apparatuses to understand properly all answers to the Great Riddle of Life.

It could form a part of this Riddle that we are 'programmed' to be unable to understand what makes us fundamentally tick. If so, it would seem to be a sensible part - assuming, that is, we were 'designed' by a higher Power rather than having just sprung up as a consequence of physical conditions. If we knew for an absolute fact with full proof, say, what could be our fate in an Afterlife, this knowledge would affect the whole way we live our lives. Is this an indication that some form of 'Designer' had a hand in the human make-up? (*This idea is explored further in the section below entitled 'Our soul and the Afterlife'*)

Our thinking is the way we notice it, much as we shroud it in words and concepts that we cannot really understand in all their different manifestations.

There is a perspective according to some Teachers 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 also have been there in a Pre-life, 'pre-life' being par for the course if there is an afterlife.

The moment one focuses on one or another aspect of our essence, it 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.

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

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. Here, even, there is a theory that the locus of the animating spirit of a person is immediately outside the body; and experiments with instruments of vast microscopic power have trace the 'flow of information' that is being fed into the body.<sup>32</sup>

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

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<sup>32</sup> The film '*The Matrix*' – to be distinguished from the sci-fi blockbuster of the same name – gives some telling examples

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 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 eludes our memory - is there a particular niche in our minds that is slippery? Is that particular name shorn of enough 'grappling hooks' such that it cannot easily be attached to us or absorbed into our minds unless by dint of strenuous effort? This supports the idea that what actuates us at its kernel, its *fons et origo*, is in an unseen world. Can we say that we can be conscious of everything except what makes us conscious?

What, surely, we cannot say with certainty is 'Unless I can see it with my own eyes, it doesn't exist!' The Blur (see above) begins in the world of the intangible and, if so, it is a respectable scientific endeavour to inspect the unseen world, by any other linguistic name it is given, from godhead to ghost, from Soul to Blur. 'Somewhere' it is 'there'.

To continue....

### ***Our soul and the Afterlife***

There is such a well-forked over corpus of work on this that no attempt will be made here to summarise it; the idea here again being just to throw up some questions.

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.

Some doctrines would have us blended into an overarching Universal Spirit. There are intellectual difficulties with this; if we are destined to an Afterlife that includes the spirit of Adolf Hitler, however much cleansed, is that something which should want, and does it make a mockery of many of the standards and teachings by which we have lived our lives?

Can we 'come back to' or revisit our past as embodied on earth?

Some advances of science seem to open up a 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 Hugh Hefner-like code of conduct is required for a Playboy Bunny: '*You can look but you can't touch!*'.



Another 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. Perish the thought that 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

One traditional answer is that there is an essence or a soul though nowadays it can be described as an Energy.

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?

Many people believe that everyone has a soul and some people think that there may be a communal or community soul. Or 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 abroad that DNA in a varied way is the cornerstone of individuals and maybe of races though eugenics has given this a controversial reputation; some science posits that DNA is more like a Receiver than a Transmitter of human information; if so where or what is the originating spirit of such a transmitter?

We are comprised of a modified essence at different stages of our lives, 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'.

It is so tempting, after reflection, to fall back on old truisms such as 'it is all so strange'.

## Celestial Justice

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

If so there is a paradox: 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?

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 mankind's views into account.

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? A Red Indian has no words for 'Good' or 'Bad'; their nearest approximations were 'Useful' and 'Not useful'.

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.

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.

Memories are manipulatable but not to a non-Blind Eye of perfect recall.

There is good reason from the standpoint of society to say '*Do to Others as Ye would be Done By*'. 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."

Assuming the above to be true, credos at least in part derive from innate tendencies and from convenience more than through objective ratiocination. We are created in a certain way, and various elements in our lives, our use of language, helps produce our Faiths. 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."

**A stand-out question:** How is St Peter at the Pearly Gates going to decide on who to let into Heaven? He surely doesn't think like we do. Celestial justice may seem unfair to us?"

What might Celestial Justice, not human justice, look like? But perhaps it is impudent to try to second guess a Creator.

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?"

Is Celestial Justice like a sort of differential calculus and not with for instance such human ideas like mercy or revenge at its core?

## A Blur

A soul? What is that? It seems a blurred idea. Why not call a spade a spade? At our actuating core is a ...Blur. To call it a 'Blur' seems not entirely satisfactory but at least it is shorn of baggage in a way that 'spirit' or 'soul' is not. 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 like 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 what constitutes our soul. Many writings, philosophical, religious, metaphysical, and speculative, try and get at the truth of this state, not that they all agree with each other, but imagine 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 tales of ghosts and the extraordinary messages via Mediums may be an illustration that we are in some way tethered to our lives as we live them, or have lived them, on this planet. In a putative afterlife, according to some, we will be untrammelled by the physical irks that mark our course in life. Ghosts - assuming there is something in the many tales of sightings - may be an instance of the inexpressible and unmaterial being made visible, almost tangible. It is fair to say that some careful thought has gone into analysing or verifying the tales of ghosts, and it would seem only fair for the sceptic to read such books as *'Ghosts and Hauntings'* by Dennis Bardens<sup>33</sup> before dismissing all accounts out of hand. Ghostly phenomena if they exist may show how we - or a part of us - are shackled in some way to our own small compass on earth even when we leave our mortal life.

All in all, there seems a deep wisdom on the part of people who look on these questions with a touch of wry humour...

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<sup>33</sup> A review of *Ghosts and Hauntings* can be found at

<https://instituteofreflection.com/dennis-bardens-ahead-of-time/>

*Epitaph on the Tomb of Adam Harting, d. 1842 :*

**REMEMBER ME**

*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!



The cartoons above might be seen by David Hume, the philosopher, as servicing his concern that he could find philosophy difficult as 'cheerfulness would keep breaking in.'

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, when 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 a logical person can realistically say is that we do not have the facts and have scant basis at present for thoroughgoing speculation with any degree of certainty.

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 the 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, 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 even if by another 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. (*further detail below*).

### **Schrödinger's Cat...**<sup>34</sup>

...and allied considerations

In some ways this discussion has similarities to the Placebo Affect. If you want to believe something, that makes it happen – or more likely to happen.

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<sup>34</sup> Whether it is alive or dead depends on whether its cage is opened up for inspection





*"About your cat, Mr. Schrödinger—I have good news and bad news."*

Some would argue that all this proves is that Herr Schrödinger is an optimist. G.E. Moore, with an aim of pinning things down to reality, looked askance at the idealism of his lecturer, McTaggart, who believed in 'time being unreal'.

*"Are you telling me. Jack, that I didn't have my breakfast before I had my lunch?"*

There are many allied concepts here. The act of observing quarks changes their state, so why shouldn't that apply to a wider family of energy packets (Quanta)? Crystals in water react to different tones of voice; and we are approximately 99% water; the physical world is changing according to how the spirit, particles or waves are coalescing, each in a different dimension. Is the interpretation put on the movement, or the object and the state in which it is, by humans with their limited senses that make the table, or the cat alive or dead? Or is according only to our perspective? Is it not in both, or many, states? Perspectives that are not human may have equal validity, for all we know. This protean way of thinking about the universe can bring in the circularity of time, with everything happening 'at once' and infinity being compared to a sphere whose centre can be anywhere or nowhere in particular, as can be said of its' circumference. The human voice can affect the chemical composition of the water. It may be that mankind has a valid, if small, voice in this celestial chorus.

We tend to think that there is one predominating aspect of ego; that we're a unified or cohesive entity. 'I' and '!' 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?

What could G.E. Moore say to the quantum physicist of today who maintains that time is an illusion tailor-made for man, no doubt an excellent framework for human experience but not reality, objectively speaking, other than as seen by much of humankind. On this reading, the future and past may be imbedded in the present.

We can allow for different perspectives and there invariably is more than one way of looking at things. As Spinoza put it: *'The curved glass from one side as convex, from the other it is concave. God could not be conceived as separate from the natural world. around us.'*



### ***Is there one truth or system that is sufficient to explain the Mystery?***

The philosopher, Avicenna, who lived in Bukhara in the tenth century, sought a way of unifying all our explanations of the world. And Schopenhauer later wrote:

*'To repeat the whole nature of the world abstractly, universally and distinctly in concepts, and thus to store up, as it were, a reflected image of it in permanent concepts always at the command of reason; this and nothing else is philosophy.'*

This theory – the uncharitable might say – begins in seriousness but can end in the farce implied in the title of Julian Barnes' *'A History of the World in Ten and a Half Chapters'*.

To reiterate: There can be more than one heart in the makeup of what we are, and what is. We are multi-dimensional.

We build on what we have experienced. Experience and heredity, nature and nurture, chronologically come first. It is ground much forked over by philosophers. Jean-Paul Sartre put it: *'Existence precedes essence'*, an approach also of Joseph Hume:

*'What can we make of our belief that physical objects exist when we lack experiences? What can we make of the continuing self? What is the 'I', the self, when I have memories of what 'I' did?'*

Our existence is 'who we are' is a starting point from which much follows.

What does that really tell us? Is it a neat form of words with which we swaddle what is an unknowable riddle to give us the comfort that we have somehow penetrated to the nub of a question when in reality we have only defined that which it isn't.

Some philosophers like Hanah Arendt start from a basic truth: we are what we are.

Inheritance determines our actions and thinking, alongside choices we have made and the lessons we have been taught. A check list of influences helps us form a neat table of what we are but it is only representational. It does not get to the bottom of it.

From whatever point of the compass one approaches this riddle of who we are, and how much of an individual any of us are, we come up against the same sort of buffer.

Everything may be subordinated to the passion or the thinking of the moment, or our dominant characteristic at a given time. I am aware of the compulsion under which I act. It is allied to my state of awareness. What lies behind all this?

It is reminiscent of the tightrope that devout Christians can walk when considering whether salvation might be the due of a non-Christian who acts in a Christian way.

We all have different pieces of that infinite puzzle called reality and we should put them together to make sense of it.

The itch to resolve the question about the riddle/s of life is still there.

Perhaps Plato had the right metaphor in his image of the cave inside which sits an immured dweller who can never get out. He sees the wavery silhouette of flames on the wall but doesn't actually know what is fire. It is all very fine to take pot guesses at it but a soupçon of humility is in order before jumping to hard and fast conclusions.

Even saying that we might have 'lost touch' with our deepest roots or selves, or our view on these questions, may be a hand-me-down from what we have read or heard.

So many philosophers, divines and ordinary people seek to explain the profound mystery by reference to a Power Above, whether it may be one of the prophets of traditional religion or New Age views exalting 'Nature' or 'Energy'. In Spinoza, reality is fundamentally derived from God but also Nature. Einstein, once asked if he believed in God, responded that he '*believed in Spinoza's God*'. The Great Architect of the Universe', in Masonic terminology, has many guises. How are we to do other than worship in our own way through acceptable allegory; the Buddhist under the Sri Lankan Bo Tree may never have heard of Christ; an Eskimo in his igloo may be ignorant of Buddha. How and why are they responsible for backsliding from a true Faith when so much does not have rationality as its fundamental bedrock?

You may be a mere human but, as is said in 'Desiderata':

*'You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars. You have a right to be here.'*

### **More about 'Unseen Nature'**

The fact that we cannot see or reach certain concepts does not mean that they do not exist. Bertrand Russell's hypothesised teapot that orbits the sun might have been too small to be seen by telescope but 'Absence of evidence' does not mean 'Evidence of absence.'

Have we lost touch with deeper nature through an overlay of 'sophisticated' culture?

Lao Tsu as early as the 6th or 5th century BC felt that human beings do not stand apart from the natural surroundings. Nature is one unified whole. A few differences in language over the course of time, but the basic idea remains much the same.

A Cartesian thinker who only holds with what can be seen and touched may not agree with much of what is below.

Why must remote tribal people be in closer touch than urban man with their nature, as some people assume? True, they do have the time and opportunity to commune with Nature and no need to grapple with our computerised society. They may be closer to one aspect of their nature than us. Does that make their nature more authentic than ours, more recognisably at one with Nature? The spirituality of a Western spiritual retreat from the everyday world by those who see a need for it may reflect about what is going on in the deeps of our nature as much as living one's life in Nature.

It may be begging the question to say that the insights of Tribal Man unlike those of Urban Man are not blurred by the decoy of rational thought. Rationality is part of man's nature as well as 'presence', consciousness etc. An 'outsight' - as opposed to an 'insight', to coin a neologism - is not to weigh all human abilities in the balance. How far does the concentration of a 'tribal man' on what is 'within him' make him more at one with his essence than anyone in the developed world. He may see it with plant-based aids that after experiment over long periods of time are said to produce inner truth. In fact, they may stopper his fully accessing realms of, say, his personalised inspiration and creativity? There is a rich history on which Western man can draw.

The world of the mystic and the tribalist, both less affected by 'rationalist thinking', may have much in common. Some people in the West go on drugs to find themselves or take Allen Ginsberg's advice: *'Follow your inner moonlight; don't hide the madness.'*

Some people into cultist meditation, if following their wish to go 'high' rather than being suited by temperament to the objective, may try too hard to reach enlightenment. The mere fact of trying to attain a Nirvana-like state in such a way may lead them to overlook what is in front of their eyes.

One answer is to the question of who we are, *au fond*, is that we are in essentially in that zone, or that sub-conscious, that wellspring, which is driving us – a fertile zone in which are creativities and imagination. We cannot explain satisfactorily these abilities and often need to rest content with their parallels or explanations in spheres like physics and biology though how far does our understanding about understanding about ourselves matter, as opposed to living our lives according to our true essence.

Wherein lies the root, or root cause, of our impulsions? Can we know what it is, other than seeing it is there? Knowledge and knowing are different. The observer of oneself, which is oneself, is not all of oneself. What is the trigger in the author of this piece that loosed off these words? It presumably is constantly cocked for action. We 'know' the exhilaration of doing what we are born to do. In a less obtrusive way, we feel we know when something seems right to us. Then, again, perhaps the 'tribal man' does know himself better if at a different level from Western counterparts.

At any moment, though not conscious of it *per se* and directly, but aware of it as a third party might be aware, that there is a vast hinterland of memories, etc. There is so much that is, in one way, taken for granted in our thinking and, in another, so much that has not been fully appreciated. Take the phrase: 'a vast hinterland of memories': How does this impinge on a concept like 'Synchronicity', *to whit*, we are thinking of someone, and at that moment, we hear from them; things happen to us as if for a purpose? If this is a valid way of looking at our lives, does it imply a 'vast' interlocking of tributary events and streams of happenstance from the past that has been brewing up just the 'co-incidence', with all that in turn it implies of

possible predestination or a difficult-to-understand etherial 'Puppeteer' working up events just as they fell out ....'by chance'.

It is said that in poetry is a kernel of what we are in a spiritual sense. Allusiveness is all; a poet might get closer to what is our essence in the realm of vague longings and feelings. Here is Shelley, in 'Adonais#:

*'The One remains, the many change and pass, Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly; Life, like a dome of many colour'd glass, Stains the white radiance of Eternity.'*

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### **A few observations on this way of looking at the world**

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. 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', as defined in these pages, shows 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.

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.

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.

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.

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Let us descend from these heights to some other ideas that have been the staple of much philosophical thought.

In the words of Kant: *'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe the more often and steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within me.'*....

### ***A all-too-brief gaze at the heavens***

...In these few pages, it can hardly be more than a cursory glance.

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*And this grey spirit, yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge a sinking star  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought*

- Alfred Lord Tennyson in 'Ulysses'

What thoughts surround you if you contemplate the vastness and peculiarity of the universe? Is it more facts supplied by the researchers, or a handle on the mystery of it all?



### **Is Humankind representative of the cosmos?**

Are we mini replicas, hologrammatic, of the universe? We come from the stars. Maybe there is much in ourselves that can tell us about the origins of the universe and about the cosmos?

We can describe and map the biological system of inception but that does not mean we understand it from within, let alone what power started the process. We don't know our own essence any more than we know the animating spirit of the cosmos or how it started. We have accumulated much astronomic evidence about the universe and biological evidence about ourselves but we are no closer to fully understanding consciousness than we are to getting the full story on Dark Matter.

If so, we might as well train a microscope at ourselves rather than a Webb or Hubble telescope at the further reaches of the physical universe if we want to see into the essence that is behind it. If we want to know what Being created us, we can consult our own thinking; not that we will necessarily find the answers there, but it is a good place to look.

David Deutsche, credited with originating the theory about a Multiverse said in conversation with Jim Holt, as reported in *'Why does the World Exist'*:

*'A quasar out there in space, billions of light years away. And in our brain there's a model of a quasar - a structural model with the same causal and mathematical relationships. So here you have two objects that are physically as dissimilar as they could possibly be - a quasar which is this black hole with jets, and our brain, which is chemical scum - and yet they embody the same mathematical relationships.'*

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 given solely to the requirements or wishes of humanity. 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*.

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.

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Is this just an analogy to help us try and make sense of a world which we are unable to do because we have not been granted the apparatus of sufficient outreach by the five senses? Even the next world without the hindrance of our limited physical apparatus might have us stumped, to go by a Wittgenstein dictum: *'Is this eternal life not as enigmatic as our present one?'*

In *'The Machine Stops'* by H.G. Wells, a dweller in one of the identical homes that cover the globe must leave home – not a normal thing to do in the story – and fly to the other side of the world. In the course of this flight, a mountain range is seen through the plane's porthole. After a cursory gaze the traveller asks for the blinds to be drawn, commenting *"I'm not getting any ideas!"* Is it new ideas that should come to mind or a sense of wonder at the immensities of an alien landscape? We surely won't be able to understand the panorama to the extent that it yields up the secrets of the universe even if some ideas are bound to present themselves.

We cannot be a part of anything that is not in the universe. There are billions of cells in each of us, more than all the plants and stars in the cosmos, scientists say. A vast blow-up picture of the smallest nano cells of matter within us reveal coral-like plants waving gently as if in the sea; save that they are in ordered, almost geometric lines or files. There is nothing recognisably 'human' there.

All this immensity and the tininess by comparison of myself! But then, a planet cast adrift in a colossal firmament is also tiny. A world unto itself it may be but everything is relative. A planet to itself may seem vast, and so, too, you and I. We are worlds unto ourselves *'A drop in an ocean and an ocean in a drop!'* Two ways of looking at the situation, neither exclusive.

We 'stand on the shoulders of the Greats'. How much we have learned from the scientific community! An accumulation of facts has served us well; we know that the earth is not at the centre of the solar system let alone the universe. We have an inkling of how much there is still to discover, for instance the import of Dark Matter. But the great mystery at the heart of it all remains. The fact that we don't have final conclusions and may or may not ever have them doesn't mean that the questing should stop. As some thinkers and believers in the Afterlife might say: *'While there is death, there is hope.'*

Scientists test theories, shake phials, perform mathematical prodigies, a metaphoric towel round their eggheads, awe-inspiring work, grounded in reality. We are still back to 'What is

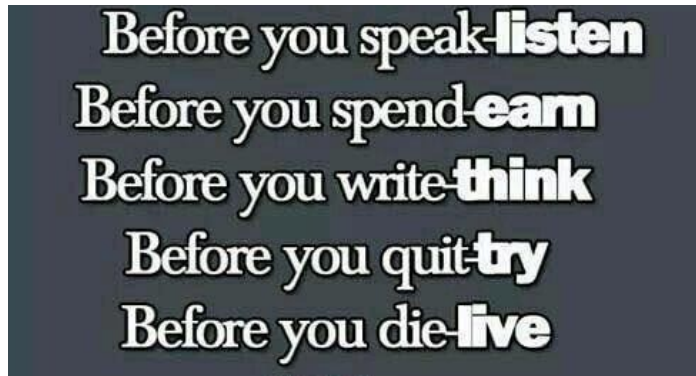
'reality'? We are reliant on allusion, if not illusion; we must hang our hat on ellipsis rather than on a solid hat stand. Some scientists see this quandry. NASA didn't send up a poet to the moon simply to rid planet earth of a noodle-head! We wish to understand more of the mystery yet, how even to define the mystery?

We can say of the Bard that he didn't exalt his homily up far enough into the vaults of the cosmos when putting into Hamlet's mouth: *'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'*

Lucretius, in the 1st century, might stand in contention for coming up with that cod aphorism:

*'Look back at the eternity that has passed before we were born and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight – anything depressing – anything that is not more restful and the soundest sleep?'*

## SOME CONCLUSIONS



The concluding check-list below takes an *Occam's Razor* approach ('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. 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 print – black & white isn't a tablet of stone.
- 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 often 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 in its intricacies can lead to discovery.
- Sense of self can lead to false narrative.
- Perfection does not exist save in stories. So aim at humility and tolerance!
- Render unto society its due, and spirituality its due, and ourselves our due.
- You are your own guru.
- We are not about being just 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.
- 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' and even anal-diahorrea.
- Practice reflecting, taking time for it, even when apparently not needed.

**A thing ain't over until it's over**

- Yogi Bear

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## **APPENDIX**

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.

- Philip Larkin, English poet, novelist and librarian, from 'This Be The Verse'

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### **(1) CONCEPTS**

How sure can we be of all the hand-me-down set of precepts by which we live our lives?

To reflect further on the question of concepts that are imbedded in our thinking – what was called earlier in this book 'the petri dish' - what follows are a few of the 'Principles' by which we live our lives and take for granted. We could reconsider how we think of them.

There are so many concepts that can be challenged or considered rather than being taken for granted. All that is hoped for in the following pages is that some basic concepts may be reconsidered; this may lead the reader on to consider his own take on the assumptions by which he or she lives her life.

Concepts precede actions. Concepts! We have so many. Some of them we are not even conscious of. Yet there they are, subconsciously influencing our decision-making. Some concepts we take as gospel all the more because we have not read that particular gospel.

None of the patterns of thought listed below - 'Irony', 'the Moving Goalpost', 'the Threshold point', 'the Proximity Principle', 'Probability versus Certainty', and 'Binary Thinking' and, following, some precepts by which societies are organised - are usually held up to the light and inspected. Everyone may have a check list of their own that might be entirely different.

We are so used to thinking in grooves but, every now and again, we might like to consider the concepts by which we order our lives.

#### **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.

We should not just make allowances for the fact that '*Donna e mobile*' (*women change their minds*) but that this is not an unusual or necessarily a bad thing; what is unusual is, to quote Mrs Thatcher '*The Lady is not for turning*

## The Irony Principle

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.



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

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.

### ***Examples of irony***

- 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?



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

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.

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

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.



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

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



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 gnomish utterance was as previously: "*We will see!*" Two years later, war was declared. Amid enthusiastic patriotism all the boy's peers Apriled 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.

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.

## **The '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, etc. 'What sort of a friend or lover is this and how close should he or she be?' is a question we could pose up front, it is a variant of 'Horses for courses' though applied to a proposed direction of relationships.

### **The Threshold Point**

*As discussed in 'A Training for Practical Wisdom' above.*

One Indian 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 and then past the point when it makes little difference....

It appears from the laws of physics that gravity is not of fixed but varies according to place. 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.

How often is the idea stated that there must be one law for everyone. But why? Manifest injustice is one thing, but assuming that all are equal before the law can be taken a step too far. If a headmaster sets rules for his pupils, does that mean he has to obey them? If one shoots a murderer that is still 'murder', but one might like to think that it is not as heinous as shooting someone innocent. Why is it wrong in principle if the ruler of a country does very well financially; why should it be assumed that he or she within reason should not have any perquisites for carrying the heavy responsibility? Why is it irrelevant to look at what people are demonstrating about if they are demonstrating in support of a noxious cause, the reason for apprehending them under merely laws forbidding affray may be understandable on grounds of the difficulty of deciding what is noxious but it is an argument of convenience not inherent justice. One could understand the federal authority in America bringing Al Capone to heel for tax evasion as murder couldn't be proved.

The argument of convenience can work both ways. The principle of common sense is not so far removed from that of a 'nod and a wink'.

A useful principle that is not in basic thinking but could be more so than at present, might be: 'At a certain point, this framework system may no longer apply.'

Some people however know when enough is enough. 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. Many of us, having got onto a track, do not know when to stop.

### **Probability *vis-a-vis* Certainty**



*Sir George Jessel (1824 – 1883)*

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

- Sir George Jessel to Lord Coleridge

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

'It is only the tentative about which anyone can be certain'. 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.

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.

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. As things stand, the idea of 'speculation' has a connotation of riskiness. We are entitled to talk mainly 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 too much doubt.

A person certain of his ground can be right, in one sense, to be positive. We may have good reasons for accepting a decision, or they may be proven right despite being born of fear or credulousness. The issue at stake surely 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....

## **Binary Thinking**

How often is it said of an actor or a politician that he or she is excellent or awful. But there is hardly an actor whose every single performance measures up to the ideal that we have of their abilities; how many politicians do we junk or exalt on the grounds of our prejudices against or for them. You may hate a President of the USA, say, but does that mean that each and every cause he promotes must be wrong-headed? Further, we have in our heads all too often a benchmark of sainthood and find it all too easy to point to deficiencies, rather like one black spot on a white board which instantly commands attention. Are politicians, so often reviled as a breed, any worse than, say, builders in terms of a propensity to fleece people? The wish to categorise and label allows of disparagement which rarely is sufficiently nuanced to take account of fallible human clay.

## **Concepts relating to international relations and society**

A few examples only can be mentioned in relation to a question that would take the shelves of several libraries to do it justice.

## **Overall Goals of Society**

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.

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 women badly have a lifestyle that is to the disadvantage of the vast majority?

We are content to learn the lessons in life honed for the exigencies that we face, not generally for those we do not face. Another question is: 'what sort of character'?

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?

Education is at least an answer for the future generations but more thought by responsible people could be on what is for the best.

In Saudi Arabia, textbooks are being rewritten that do not foster the endemic hatred in the region for the state of Israel.

In China, it would be helpful if future leaders did not have in their heads the idea that there was a 'century of humiliation' at the hands of Westerners. Indeed it could be argued that the intervention by colonial types benefitted the people at large more than the Emperors. This could help sweeten the pill for Communist re-educators?

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.

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? By enabling people to experience horrific nightmares from which they wake in the morning but about which vivid remembrance is left in the mind?

### ***Morality should be the same for leaders as for the led***

Machiavelli<sup>35</sup>: how much damage has he done?

How often has a country leader soothed a conscience by reference to the fact that a 'Prince' can have no truck with ordinary norms of behaviour. Affairs of State require hard-headed grappling with realities. This should be challenged.

Why has morality no part to play in a State as elsewhere? Brickbats flung at politicians are often on grounds of insensibility to ordinary codes of decency seem to have little traction save as benchmarks to which expedience might require a nod in their direction. In the short term, dishonesty may pay but what of the longer view? A history with right-thinking morality as a touchstone of evaluation of statesmen's records may be a field day awaiting a historian.

Dr Johnson thought that '*Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel*' but his was a minority view in the days of 'My country, right or wrong.' It still is thought of as a comment on decent patriotism rather than a comment about scoundrels. Founding examples had much effect on

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<sup>35</sup> In the field of personality psychology, Machiavellianism is the name of a personality trait construct characterized by manipulateness, indifference to morality, lack of empathy, and a calculated focus on self-interest. (*Wikipedia*)



generations of followers. Machiavelli would have had high praise for success, little aware of the long shadow his theory casts through subsequent history.

Peter the Great of Russia is thought 'great' by dint of his soubriquet. He enlarged the territory of his empire. Did a man or woman in his vast realms become the happier for it, aside from his venal cronies? More incriminating is that he had his very own private torture chamber constructed in all his Palaces. The horror of it! Look at Russia today. His example seems to have permeated the air of the body politic, with a cowed acceptance of repression and misrule.

Afghanistan, known as the 'Graveyard of Empires'. Clever, brave Afghans massacred the entire 20,000 strong garrison of British troops in 1842, the worst defeat suffered by the British army that century. But how clever and brave were the Afghans? They gave Governor MacNaughton free conduct through the Kyber Pass if the British laid down their arms. His troops then were sitting ducks, picked off one by one from behind cover. It is reversal of the honour code, to put it mildly. What sort of a country is Afghanistan today? Decent mores of conduct have been blasted by the sort of behaviour that gained for it independence. Would it not have been better in the long run to set greater store by gentlemanly conduct?

The founder of Christianity was meek and mild – leaving aside His reaction if affronted by Pharisees in the Temple. His example coloured his followers' behaviour. Buddha gave away his Kingdom, arguably outdoing in Christian conduct even Jesus Christ who in material terms had nothing much to give away. Buddhist and Hindu temples sit side by side and no discord arises between the two Faiths. To follow the logic of this, what is the picture of life where followers of the successful warrior, the Prophet, hold sway?

This is hardly the place to start an inspection of what all the philosophers have had to say about how to live lives but one or two further examples may give pause for thought – and a Pause for Thought is one of the goals of reflection. John Stuart Mill's philosophy is described here in the words of Peter Cave:

*'Utilitarianism is consequentialist: ultimately what I morally ought to do depends on the eventual outcomes and the morally desirable outcomes are those of the greatest happiness of the greatest number.'*

Whither led the happiness of the greatest number? Sshhh! Best not to decry capitalism in these pages.

We are in favour of giving people free speech. Has Søren Kierkegaard<sup>36</sup> a valid point to make when he says:

*'People demand free speech as a compensation for free thought, which they never use.'*

Which are the nostrums to which we choose to cleave?

Listen to any sermon in church on Sunday and then on Monday at the office; ask how much in common do the prescriptions overlap if one is seeking to become a CEO of a company? One might be forgiven for thinking that the CEO would get more brownie points for adhering to a charter for sociopaths.

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<sup>36</sup> Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish theologian, philosopher, poet, social critic, and religious author who is widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher.

Take two of the best-known prescriptions of how to live one's life, 'Desiderata' and Kipling's 'IF'. Read separately they make such sense. Compared, one might be left wondering how one can keep hold of two poles so far apart.

The fact that we can choose how to live our lives doesn't mean we can take pot luck or that we are rightly excused the opportunity we all have, to greater or lesser extent, of getting it as right as we can.

### **Value Systems as opposed to Belief Systems**

Imagine a world without the various religions or without familiar overarching political systems such as Communism, Democracy, the labels of 'Left', 'Right' and so on, or a world into which baddies like Marx and Hitler or, for the matter of that, some of 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 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.

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 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?'*

There are so many questions:

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 this book - 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?

We hang values on our beliefs as on pegs in our mental frameworks so is a belief-system a glorified form of window-dressing?

Does it matter to a Feity if history found as in scripture does not impress a man who likes to question what he reads? What of 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? Are these factors to argue for Value-Systems, as opposed to Belief-systems? 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?

The Study of Lessons of World History might be a tad too lively for comfort – so if we are going to discuss them round a dinner table it may be better not to take up positions that are too entrenched; a certain fuzziness about who says what, and why, might make recollection less prone to people taken against one another...

## **FURTHER ASPECTS OF REFLECTION**

There are many practitioners of Reflection and in places it is part of the academic curriculum. The handbook for the Institute of Reflection takes one approach to Reflection but there are others, some of which are mentioned in the virtual Institute of Reflection. It is not proposed to give an entire rundown of these alternative practices and what is below is to be seen just as a taster:

### **1 Reflective Practice**

Reflective practice is a core component of professional development for all health professionals. Without it, learning and self-growth become harder, and job satisfaction can suffer. It could be argued that at its best, reflection on what's gone well or badly in the day is a natural yet unstructured aspect of a nurse's role. It's part of being a good practitioner.

### **2 Reflective practice encourages innovation**

Reflective practice allows you to adapt lessons to suit your classes. You can create and experiment with new ideas and approaches to your teaching to gain maximum success. By varying learning and experimenting with new approaches, students have a richer learning experience. They will think more creatively, imaginatively and resourcefully, and be ready to adapt to new ways and methods of thinking.

### **3 Reflective practice encourages engagement**

Being reflective helps you challenge your own practice as you will justify decisions and rationalise choices you have made. It encourages you to develop an understanding of different perspectives and viewpoints. These viewpoints might be those of students, focusing on their strengths, preferences and developments, or those of other colleagues, sharing best practice and different strategies.

### **4 Objective Thinking**

Objective Thinking is a crucial aspect of Reflective Practice.

The nature of thought is obviously personal, being the product of our own brain, so our own thinking tends to be subjective to some degree. Where our thinking is very subjective, for example when we feel very emotional about something, this subjectivity can become unhelpful, especially if we are stressed or angry which can substantially distort interpretations. If reflective thinking is to be useful for our learning and development, and for

improving our actions and decisions, then this reflective thinking must include some objectivity. If decisions are based on wrong data, then outcomes tend to be unhelpful, or worse.

We need to be more subtle in understanding what objectivity and subjectivity mean in relation to Reflective Practice. We can increase our objectivity by increasing our awareness of our assumptions and expectations. Or put another way, we will reliably increase our objectivity in Reflective Practice by recognising our assumptions and expectations, and being able to differentiate this data from objective facts and evidence. Each of us has a different individual outlook on the world. This develops from the circumstances and influences that shape us into adulthood. Our reflections are filtered through these beliefs, values and attitudes, so that our interpretations are likely to be biased. Our thinking is instinctively 'value-driven'.

## 5 Metacognition

*"... Metacognition can take many forms; it includes knowledge about when and how to use particular strategies for learning or for problem solving. There are generally two components of metacognition: knowledge about cognition, and regulation of cognition... This higher-level cognition was given the label metacognition by American developmental psychologist John Flavell (1979). The term metacognition literally means cognition about cognition, or more informally, thinking about thinking. Flavell defined metacognition as knowledge about cognition and control of cognition. For example, I am engaging in metacognition if I notice that I am having more trouble learning A than B; or if it strikes me that I should double-check C before accepting it as fact,.. (JH Flavell 1976)." Wikipedia*

Metacognition is an important aspect of modern Reflective Practice. There is a broad correlation between metacognition (being aware of one's own thinking) and conscious competence (being aware of one's own capability) – because, for example, people cannot go beyond their limits until they know what their limits are. Metacognition is awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes. To achieve a more objective view, we can reflect on our prejudices and assumptions.

We can also use objective evidence to support our reflections, and in this way reduce bias in interpreting events and experiences. Truth requires objective confirmed evidence. Subjective reflections can be faulty, especially when based on perceptions alone. So particularly when reflecting on human values and social relationships we can increase the validity of our reflections by using evidence. Subjective reflections can be valuable, provided we are aware of the dangers of bias. Moreover, while isolated reflections are often unreliable and transient, a collection of subjective reflections can produce a meaningful picture. This 'whole picture' tends to be greater than the sum of its parts.

Searching for new knowledge or truth towards our own personal development requires more than merely increasing objectivity, and reducing the potential for bias inherent in subjective interpretation; we must draw on both of these data sources, weighing and balancing them to formulate thinking which is informed by:

- Facts and evidence, and other objective data, and

- Personal relative reactions and feelings, and other subjective data, and
- Our analysis of what these things mean, their relative validities and their most reliable blend.

## 6 Critical Reflection

**The National School for Healthcare Competence** describes **Critical Reflection** in the following terms:

It is highly relevant as you transition from training into practice. It is particularly valuable during periods of unusual/rapid change to maintain safe clinical practice; will help with ensuring that you enter future practice with insight of what will be required of you and from you and foresight on how you will manage those expectations; will help you realise where you need to focus your energies as you continue to develop in your role as a Clinical Scientist

The **Scamper** method.

The **Scamper** method was proposed by Alex Osborne in 1953. In 1971, American psychologist Bob Elerle advocated the SCAMPER method in his book *SCAMPER: "Games for Imagination Development."* It is a way to stimulate people's creative thinking and it is one of the easiest graphic techniques of mind mapping for critical thinking and brainstorming ideas.

## 7 Transformative Learning

It divides knowledge into three types: Instrumental, Communicative, and Emancipatory.

**Jack Mezirow** .an American sociologist and Emeritus Professor of Adult and Continuing Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, is generally considered to be the founder of the Transformative Learning concept

Mezirow asserts that examining our outlook on the world, and challenging the assumptions and preconceptions underlying our values and beliefs, can be emotionally threatening. *Transformative learning "...Incorporating the examination of assumptions, to share ideas for insight, and to take action on individual and collective reflection..."* Challenging the values and beliefs that form part of our self-identity can challenge the very core of who we are. Conversely Mezirow's work suggests that self-reflection can empower us to be more open and emotionally capable of change and reflection: a liberating process of intellectual and emotional growth. In his 2000 collaborative book '*Learning as Transformation – Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*', Mezirow

defines Transformative Learning as incorporating the examination of assumptions, to share ideas for insight, and to take action on individual and collective reflection. Mezirow offered the following transformative learning structure:

1. Critical reflection on one's assumptions
2. Discourse (communication) to validate insights from the critical reflection
3. Action

## **THE ART OF SELF-SCRUTINY**

The act of self-reflection is a 'spiritual act' by taking time out to connect the inner-self with the outer world. A view, Olsen suggests, that parallels Florence Nightingale's thoughts that providing nursing care to others can be a spiritual act. More importantly, he highlights how reflection is essential to avoid burnout by helping nurses to stay connected with their passion for their profession. Yet, the reality for many nurses and midwives is that their working day is full of emotional extremes coupled with physical exhaustion. As Knight (2015) points out, working in highly pressurised clinical environments isn't naturally conducive to the idea of pausing, engaging with feelings or staying with uncertainty.

Without some structured support, the focus on self-reflection can be viewed with suspicion and cynicism.

### **Reflection-on-Action v Reflection-in-Action**

Reflection-on-action is the most common form of reflection. It involves mentally re-viewing events that have occurred in the past. The aim is to value your strengths and to develop different, more effective ways of acting in the future.

Reflection-in-action, on the other hand, requires a higher level of self-awareness and the ability to reflect on your actions or those of others, in the moment, as the activity is actually taking place

If recalling incidents with strong emotional content blocks you from consciously reflecting on your day, try viewing it from a detached, dissociated point of view. For example, seeing the incident play out in your mind's eye as if on a movie screen.

At the end of a stressful day, this can be a good way to consider what you would like to change about the situation. This form of reflection can also be a useful stress management tool, as feelings that might otherwise have been suppressed can be reflected on consciously, deliberately and openly.