

Some Reflections on Cause and Effect

When something tragic happens we ask ourselves “why.” Behind this small but penetrating question lies a profound desire to seek the cause to a particular event, one that has impacted us in a special way, usually in a negative fashion. We continue ask “why” even when we don’t expect an answer. It seems to be a spontaneous response, an exclamation of sorts or a cry for help straight from the heart. Just as spontaneous at the other end of the spectrum is the appearance of gratitude when there’s cause for rejoicing. In such instances we seldom, if ever, ask “why.” Already we know the “answer.” Only in rare circumstances do people take the step to acknowledge the cause, for they’re too happy with the boon that has come their way, often unexpectedly. We can add further that a serious “why” is often done in solitude whereas a sudden, joyful exclamation is done in public where you wish to gather as many people as possible to participate in your joy. As powerful as the sentiment of gratitude may be, it is more transitory compared with the lingering “why” associated with unfortunate circumstances. This is too bad, really. Failure to cultivate gratitude means that people are missing out on a great opportunity where the reward is doubled, more than anything they could desire. It turns out that gratitude is very personal and acknowledges something or better, a person. Often you don’t know where to direct your gratitude. In fact, that doesn’t enter your mind because you’re simply too...well...grateful. You know instinctively that you have the source of gratitude on your side and revel in it.

Pain, on the other hand, keeps us knit closely not so much to the immediate painful cause but to a reality we hope is larger than what it had produced; that is to say, a reality spacious enough to overcome the pain and bring us relief. That’s why nobody in pain clings to it but to someone who will bring relief. As for the run-of-the-mill events in life, they pass by with no questions asked nor raised. And that’s where we spend the bulk of our lives, a bland in-between land minus pain and minus gratitude. Thus we can include under the umbrella of cause and effect that which includes pain, joy and plain ol’ neutral stuff. Better to be constantly asking “why” or being grateful than abiding in this wasteland which seems neutral at first but quickly becomes mind numbing. Being so anaesthetized reduces your mind to the lowest operating level which tends to bring simplistic questions to the meaning of life because it is immune to both philosophic and theological reflection in the best sense of these words as impinging upon real life situations.

Even though this essay touches upon cause and effect, right away we dismiss it and say the heck with logic. Leave it to the academics. We’re concerned with common, everyday experience as it impacts us directly, and this has nothing to do with devaluing that important discipline. Furthermore, a good chunk of our experience goes against logic and relies upon what persons say...their opinions...fearful that we lack the intelligence to explore on our own. Some of that fear can be based on the bland in-between land just mentioned which fails to educate us properly, making us end up more vulnerable than we

imagine despite our protestations. It turns out that opinions are the source of our cause as well as effect first by way of imitation and then by participation.

In the course of life countless things happen to us, far more than those things we initiate. Events and people influence us and govern our lives without our ever being mindful of them. Actually if we were to keep track on a given day we'd be overwhelmed as soon as we began. The first insight we gain is that we suck in information which is unprocessed, thereby taking it for granted. While this state of mind may be embarrassing to reflect upon, it's beneficial insofar as it shows in an unflattering light how we comport ourselves. If this is what the ancient Greeks meant by "Know thyself," who the hell wants it? At the same time the solution to an apparently insoluble dilemma is at our fingertips which unfortunately is blocked by this pre-conditioning to be passive. Because being passive is the ultimate culprit, the solution seems to lay in the opposite direction...action...but that's not as easy to grasp at first glance.

First we must have some kind of experience which jars us out of our complacency and second, move in the right direction, that is away, from being passive. That means learning how to bring a proper understanding with regard to our innate (or more accurately, inert) passivity. Then events will unfold in a wholly new way even if to an outsider they look the same as they always had been. This new insight is so valuable that if others saw it, they'd attempt to rob us of a treasure more precious than gold. And the treasure rests upon a spirit of gratitude mentioned in the first paragraph. So the most excellent way to prevent theft of our treasure is concealment. The best form of concealment, of course, consists in being attentive to ordinary things from ordinary life, of going along with events as they come to us. No one thinks to look there because they're on the look-out for something special. The only thing special—and of course it's more than special, it's huge—is that we have learned to be active in our mentality instead of being passive. This active-ness is a condition prior to anything we encounter both in ourselves and in the world. It depends upon neither, a wickedly important point to understand.

The passivity just mentioned needs to be dealt with right away, like our heads are on fire. It is a dreadful pall that hangs over us we're unaware of most of the time which prevents us from really enjoying life. Only here and there do we get glimpses of somehow being hindered or constricted yet at a loss as how to remedy this, let alone define it. The constriction is not necessarily stifling but total. It holds our entire bodies, minds and spirits in an indefinable grasp. Hence our dilly-dallying in coming to grips with this eats away at the urgency we should have because our lives are at stake...not just now but forever. Of all things that affect us (causes), passivity is the chief source of our woes and makes us ask almost unreflectingly, "why?" We weave in and out of various scenarios with this question in mind and can't get rid of it, figuring it's part and parcel of life. At the same time we know it's artificial because we feel it imposed from without...not directly but from the corner of our eye.

A starting point for getting a handle on our innate/inert passivity is by pondering the Book of Ecclesiastes where the cycle of natural events mirror what's going on inside us. "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun" [1.9]. In twelve short chapters the Preacher delineates what boils down to a boring process happening all around us. He takes the alternation of natural events...their rise and ultimate fall...as indicative of human passivity. The same holds true in this modern era which would not be foreign to the Preacher. "Just more of the same stuff" he'd say or something similar. Of course, he'd have to keep this to himself or get stoned to death. Even having recourse to religion can be misleading, for it re-enforces the passivity which we label as cause and effect. That makes the approach under discussion suspicious to some, and that's understandable. But it all comes down to an appropriate assessment of what's involved, that our heads are on fire, and that fire needs to be extinguished as quickly as possible. The urgency cannot be stressed enough.

The term "malaise" is an apt term for this situation because it denotes an all-pervasive state of mind so difficult to get a handle on that we give up and want to explore no further. A malaise is also more difficult to shake than a regular physical illness which is more localized by nature. Even if such an illness invades our entire body, it doesn't necessarily assault our minds and spirits. As for the malaise at hand, it bombards us with stuff from everywhere, some of it stimulating, but most of it coming up short of expectations. So to get out of a passive state of mind is like the famous example of a fish attempting to get out water in order to see the water, inconceivable for the fish. We hear people talking about all sorts of remedies to this malaise, many of the religious variety, but most fail as how to make this leap because of two factors. First, the language isn't in place to discuss it and second, it requires a super slowing down of our minds, virtually an impossible task. It just doesn't seem to be part of our culture. So if you want to be counter-cultural, still a hip thing to do, think and read slowly. If followed through with discipline and encouragement, totally new insights will emerge which will demand a new way of speaking. It will place less emphasis upon the idea of form which is part of the malaise at hand, a point we'll bring up later.

Perhaps the malaise consists in a certain restlessness and dissatisfaction with our innate passivity, the only solution being the adoption of an active stance towards it. It's easy and natural enough to recognize a solution. However, as noted earlier, to adopt this active stance is very different from our customary perception, so we have to be especially careful in getting it right. First, we have to perceive how slippery it is to perceive this restlessness and secondly, come to the momentous insight that passivity has the potential of ruining us. The active stance of concern here situates us *before* the emergence of thoughts and emotions whereas the passive one comes *after* them to which we end up becoming enslaved. In fact we're so naive about this that we stand around deaf, dumb and blind not knowing how this passivity came about. The perfect sitting targets, for all we do is act in accord with this passivity. The effort produced from this passive stance (this seems like a contradiction) is fruitless, not unlike the "vanity" of Ecclesiastes, because thoughts and emotions have taken such a firm a foothold in our lives.

It's important to understand well this striving done in vain in order that we may cure the malaise by staring it in the face and without flinching. This gazing comes about by way of a decision which says "Enough. Time to take a stance." It is the simplest of all gestures, actually one of withdrawal, which counters our tendency to always to be something other than we are, and society is all too willing to lend a helping hand to realize it. Our inner tumult, whether small or large, snaps at our heels not unlike a small dog as it begs for attention yet fails to find resolution. On the other hand, it has the benefit of indicating that indeed we are aware of a reality other than our present existence, something close by which embraces it. The Greek preposition *para* is helpful here (as in 'Paraclete'). This word means "beside" or "close by" and is difficult to render adequately in translation. *Para* implies a closeness yet involves a discreet distance, two objects, if you will, running in tandem and always keeping an eye out on each other. In the so-called Last Supper discourse in St. John's Gospel when Jesus speaks of his relationship with the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, *para* occurs numerous times. This little observation about a seemingly insignificant Greek preposition is helpful because it lifts an insight from Christian tradition and puts it at the service of a point being put forth here. Granted, it may be taken as reading into the text is offered with this caveat. We can compare it with another example lifted from the Bible, the example from Ecclesiastes syndrome as already outlined.

We can easily fall into the trap of over-seriousness with regard to the passivity so pervasive in our lives that we're unaware of it. Part of this stems from the fact that by nature our innate passivity lacks a sense of humor, if you can put it like that, a fact verifiable from observation of our everyday behavior. The task at hand, of shifting from passivity to an active stance, is by no means a trivial gesture, but fortunately the seriousness just noted isn't transferred. Its true colors are now seen as something imposed from without, added on, to what we are by nature. In other words, anything natural can't be labeled as truly serious. The passivity has been grafted onto our awareness, so it's a matter of un-grafting it. Any "un-" work can't be characterized as laborious and thus serious; it's more a gesture of letting go and allowing the passivity to lift off on its own accord while we just sit back. This gesture, quick and lightsome, presupposes a firm conviction that our passivity has to be displaced, not removed, and removal = effort. To put it in terms of removal implies labor, not what's called for here, and this is where we can get confused. A quick example may be of help. Imagine this removal as we slowly sink under the surface of the water...not at once but gradually...until any pesky bugs are left on the smallest of surfaces. Then they're let go and float away.

Thus we become freed from that desire to be elsewhere or someone else, meaning that we're reduced to what we've been from The Beginning. Such language is both paradoxical and straight-forward as it pertains to a realm which is little explored since it lays on the other side of form, of what we can grasp clearly. That doesn't make our inquiry any less real. In fact, it's the "most real" type of inquiry we can

make. The freeing-up or shedding (a better term since it suggests we don't take direct action) consists in situating ourselves to what's right in front of us and where we've been all along, the physical world. This means paying attention to the last things that enter our minds: bodily functions, each and every one of them, as many as we can and as often as we can. This can alternate from attentiveness to our heart beat to the blinking of our eyes and to the scratching of our heads. Movement is characteristic of them all, and instead of being bored, we're intrigued by all these manifestations without getting lost in them. The list (and order in which these observations happen) goes on and on, an infinite amount for any given day. It contributes significantly to what we mean when we say "time flies."

All people on the planet (and most animals) perform these functions without which they wouldn't exist. They are the most immediate and reliable tools at our disposal, undeniably real and immediate, which is why we should pay attention to them and not waste time on the wild goose chase of our thoughts and imagings. Should we be faithful to this simple practice which has an endless amount of options, in short order we'd discover a surprise beyond our wildest dreams. That surprise consists in the fact that we don't have an individual personality...we never did have one but had worked all our lives under the illusion that we were so constituted. Through the process of sustained, indiscriminate observation, one which shows no partiality to the stuff that arises in our minds, we discover this to be true. There simply doesn't exist a personality on which to hang a name no matter how hard we look. The type of attention of interest to us here has shed what we considered our personalities but not in a negative way. It might be better to say that we have slithered out of our personalities for a much better life and look back in wonderment at how we had been so duped for so long a time.

As for the just mentioned bodily functions, people everywhere have them...no exception...but rarely are they attentive to them. Instead, they're focused upon thoughts and emotions which are proper to each individual's personality, isolating to the extreme compared with the rest of the universe. In fact, that's one of the most painful realizations anyone can hit upon. The focus upon attributes to our individuality may be entertaining at times but quickly leads to boredom and intense isolation, a fact easily verifiable. Boredom may be said to consist in being fed up with the continuous cycle of causes and their effects. It seems to be less intense when in the company of other people but more so when alone. That's why being alone is helpful for our mis-informed minds, at least during the outset, so you're more freed up to get a hang of what's going on both in and around you. This has the added boon of shedding the agonizing question whether a genuine perception of reality is possible. You know you've hit upon the Real Thing when you bump into it, simple as that. While being alone seems to be the best approach, you realize when you should step out into society after such-and-such an amount of time has gone by. As for the conundrum of whether or not to be in solitude or with people, this gets you nowhere. They are thoughts originating from the mind as well as from the memory, a fact that can't be harped upon enough. They can be nagging when you're making the shift to attentiveness to bodily functions by

taking attention away from them, a sign that something requires further adjustment. And that adjustment means continued focus upon bodily functions or if you prefer, our corporeality.

Because the task at hand is so delicate and easily passed over as insignificant to the extreme (who, as some claim, wants to pay attention to their bodily functions, a sheer waste of time), we're bound to run into strong opposition from our emotions and thought processes because they rebel at being challenged. In fact the challenge is so strong and vigorous we sometimes question what we're doing is the right thing or that we're dilly-dallying in some exotic fantasy. This is re-enforced by the fact that no one around us seems to be doing the same thing. Perhaps this is why so few people are disposed to follow suite, understandably so. Yet it conceals the fact that the passivity being discussed here is such a formidable obstacle to shake off. It does anything to stay put, almost taking on a life-like character. No small wonder most spiritual traditions speak of demons and the like. Since we in the West are quite attracted to form, it appears we're more prone to focus on these lesser realities and are hindered by them from further growth, hence the immaturity we encounter when it comes to things both philosophical and spiritual.

A further difficulty lies in the attempt to locate where the transition occurs from a point in which we're caught up in thoughts and emotions to a point which exists before them. This is more than difficult...it's impossible. Such is the very crux of the matter that is of utmost concern in this article. We're intrigued when the above mentioned shedding of our personalities—and this primarily means memories and thoughts—knowing full well that it happens in secret or behind closed doors, figuratively speaking. Then, mystery of mysteries, in its place there arrives on the scene that which is impersonal. And this arrival is sudden, completely unexpected. It can take us off guard because for the most part we're not prepared to accept this new reality. One thing is for certain. We don't produce this insight; it comes to us in time but appears timeless in comparison to what we know. The insight pops up here at one time and then over there at another, hangs around a while and drops below the surface just as quickly as it came. In other words, the manifestation of this impersonal reality...our very nature...is discontinuous. So the task is to make what's discontinuous, continuous. And a strong contributor to this discontinuity is the on-again, off-again appearance of thoughts and/or memories. Dealing with this alteration is quite vexing but might as well get used to it. It's the lot of those who desire to transit from being passive to life to being active. Despite the wearisomeness, ask a person who's really into the practice. He'd rather do nothing else in life.

Now for the good news. We're encouraged by the joy that comes from a totally new discovery. If ever you longed for a sign of something larger than your individuality, you've found it, not diluted but full strength. Yet we have an inbuilt resistance to this insight and fight it mightily. The reasons are shrouded in mystery “this side” of its realization by what we've asked to abandon, that which appears most dear to us, our individuality. Instead we're shifting to an almost exclusive focus upon physicality which had been

with us from the womb but rarely attended to. Any thoughts required to make a living or get along in the world follow automatically, so there's no problem there. Yet in such an advanced technological society where thought is vital the contrast between the two realms are much more stark. Some might say it's impossible to bridge the gap, this being the Ultimate Dualism in the universe, and they may be correct. Still, this doesn't preclude making stabs here and there, discreet and not forced. Even the Ultimate Dualism will give way and yield fruit in due season.

The secret place under discussion may be designated as where the traditional notion of cause and effect breaks down. It's a threshold up to which causality works just fine in everyday life yet beyond it no longer has validity. Here the example of sub and further subatomic particles comes to mind, an endless descent. By no means is this a magical-mystical realm but the point where reality begins in the fullest sense, because nothing jumps out at you the way reality does. Lack of precise language isn't an excuse to wiggle out of describing the transition at hand but is indicative of our limited ability to discuss the matter. We're dealing with a realm where words (i.e., forms) fail us, and where we're pushing up against the limits of speech and hence rationality. This can be frustrating but is the only way we can communicate it. Just mentioning this can rile some people as a way of coping out of a genuine discussion. In fact, such people can't accept the existence of other realms, if you will, not because of their own fault but the way our culture and society has evolved. As already noted on two occasions, some of this difficulty derives from our culture's attachment to form instead of awareness, a theme developed in another essay on this home page. Getting into that is a bit far afield from the present discussion but something to be aware of. In sum, imprecision is not that the reality as presented here is something fanciful, but we lack the vocabulary to speak of it. So instead of arrogance, humility is called for. As for the proof of this reality, the best way to see it in action, is from a person has experienced it, right out there for all to behold: you can see it in one's unbounded gladness and contentedness which is far from being flashy. That person is grounded in reality whereas most of us aren't which means this person can't be missed...or on second thought can be. The problem isn't with him but with the thick overlay of our thoughts and memories.

By pushing up against the limits where cause and effect hold sway we discover that something larger...much larger...awaits us. Always we've had an inkling that some other principle must be operative as yet unknown to us though its articulation had escaped us. However, it obeys rules very different from the ones familiar to us. Here again language is imprecise, a sign of our deficiency, not that of reality, hence the need for humility to acknowledge this fact. Regardless, some may not buy into this explanation, figuring it's a cop-out, but that's the most we can do for now. The real proof is in the experience or by going out and trying your hand at it. One way to put this experimentation is by the Buddhist statement which runs more or less, "It happens because it is so." A bland, matter-of-fact sentence not terribly inspiring but on target when describing events from a vantage point other than the operations of cause and effect, a parallel of sorts to how Ecclesiastes looks at things. Here attention to our

physicality is essential, of course, because it precedes the operations of our mind. The Buddhist statement seems to work on the assumption that physicality is rooted directly, not mediate-ly, in a transcendent reality.

You could say that mind is founded upon physicality and finds its truest role in keeping us focused upon that plane. More specifically, the mind is to be attentive to the rise and fall of activities associated with our physicality of which there are plenty to go around...not just our own physicality but those of other persons and beyond. The words "attentive to" are important. This doesn't mean searching for a cause and then waiting for its effect to appear on the scene but observing how one set of cause and effect rises and the other set falls without putting (or taking away) value on either one. Easy to describe but tough for the Western mind to do than at first glance because we're so attached to form. Because of our attachment, it may be worth honing in on this for a while to see if it works. And to see this attachment to form in action, go out there and try looking at things indiscriminately, of how long this impartial regard lasts. To bring in the Christian perspective, consider St. Paul's words somewhere in his epistles, "pray always." "Always" in Greek is rendered as *dia pantos* or literally "through all." Indeed, a good a description of prayer as any one out there even if it might not be in line with the exact meaning Paul had in mind. We can therefore take *dia pantos* as having one's attention looking at...looking through (*dia*)...all things, even our stumblings, without allowing it to settle upon any one of them.

And so we've been born with the gift of being attentive to physicality (obvious enough) but rarely have activated it (not obvious enough). Actually, its surprising that it hasn't withered or atrophied away completely, a sure-fire sign it's essential to our human constitution. In the course of our lives we may have stumbled upon it here or there, considered it interesting, but upon further reflection, strangely abandoned its pursuit because we had thought it to be too good to be true. Some people may have a problem accepting a form of attention with which they've been born but can't make the transition to seeing how such a terribly commonplace focus is crucial important for spiritual development. Nothing in all this is spectacular in the phenomenal sense, but very much in another, making its implementation difficult by reason of its simplicity and our disbelief. Experience demonstrates that getting to this point is at one time extremely hard and on the other, extremely easy...two extremes operative at once. Not only that, we have another extreme, the one noted above, which is pushing up against the limits of language. Our ability to communicate deals with forms available to us, forms we barely reflect upon because they come to us naturally. So here we have a most unusual combination: forms in general (our physicality plus all of nature) and our attention just as it is which seems to lack form whatsoever and thus lies outside causality. Both co-exist, if you will, without one infringing upon the domain of the other...or at least we're born like that. Over time we mess the two up which isn't the real problem. The problem consists in attempting to impose a discipline that will (supposedly) reconcile the two. It is precisely here that we spend most of our time, even waste it.

Even to achieve this point of understanding, a very important step, means coming to grips with the inherent tendency of our minds to be distracted. That is, to say, we've reached a point of having suffered enough at the continual ebb and flow of cause and effect as manifested through distractions and seek a way to get rid of it. Suffering itself isn't abolished but the agent enduring it is or more precisely, tends to fade away more quickly when suffering presents itself. Bouncing around between a cause and its effect seem to intensify when we're distracted or just plain tired and hence are unable to focus. The struggle gets worse, so much so, that giving up is a constant temptation. Not that we're assailed with diabolical images or the like, but find we can't shake them, more like mosquitoes constantly buzzing around within our heads. Actually, the mosquito sound is incessant, day and night. Even though quite distressing, this is a good sign. It shows that we're making progress and without our knowing it, are drifting away little by little our attachment to form. The "mosquitoes" are agents, if you will, crying out to us to remain with our attachment, please, please, please.

In place of what appears to be self-inflicted misery, the reason for which we can't yet grasp fully, there do arise compensations. At first they're welcomed guests because they alleviate the assault by our thoughts and emotions. However, in the larger scheme of things they are just as harmful. The reason? They delay our advancement by making us pause and consider good thoughts and emotions, even those which are holy and spiritual. They arise on their own, have a life of their own, a sign that the assault we're undergoing would overwhelm us without their presence. Besides, they alternate with our sufferings and make us feel them all the more by reason of their sharp contrast. Compensations take the place of our attention's active role of "being before" the emergence of our physicality and prefer inserting pleasant imaginative ruminations which are inserted between us and this raw physicality. Just the thought of facing ourselves and everything else minus this buffer is very scary. Furthermore, everyone is doing it. Some of the forms it takes is daydreaming, serious thinking and when we're unconscious during sleep.

Immediately arises the objection that we need to think to get along, much more so in a highly technical world. No question about that, but thinking doesn't have to dominate our lives, a statement that at first seems out of step with reality. But for those who seem the benefit in this, they may even cop-out of society to focus more on their new discovery and chose a life style with less focus upon thinking. Regardless of which concrete choice a person makes, the point missed most of all is that sadly our attention always exists before physicality. It's the way we're made, a fact which gets to the heart of the matter and is the most joyful of all discoveries we can make. It's a land waiting to be discovered with few inhabitants and plenty of space. Few because of the difficulty accepting it and plenty of room because it's, well, infinite. Inertia or just plain laziness is another culprit which keeps this land from unfortunately being populated, encouraged as they are by distractions in the form of compensations streaming in from the outside. When the electronic media is thrown into the mix, it overheats our craving for

compensations since they can be multiplied in a virtual world which means compensations are now without limits beyond anything we can imagine. This disguises the fact that we're wasting our full potential on a plane wholly other than the one with which we've been born. It makes you wonder if what is being proposed here can be actualized despite the indisputable proof gained by going out and doing it. Perhaps the chances were greater a mere generation ago but have reduced dramatically in a breathtakingly short time.

Our faculty of memory plays a crucial role when it comes to these compensations. We start off by remembering instances when we've been denied, learn how to apply the right thoughts to assuage our pain, build them up into a pattern and use these patterns as a form of defense. We become so adept that immediately at a slight gesture of our will we can pick the right set of thoughts for the situation at hand. And so memories become a collection of thoughts, always coming after-the-fact, applicable for this situation and that, each one tailor-made. So we project their pastness (which is their very nature) into the future in order to affect it in accord with our desires. All this happens with the barest awareness of how it's done and with all the stuff transpiring at the moment, right under our noses. It turns out that memories are passive in form, not active, and hence without form, provable by a simple self-examination which can be embarrassing. The embarrassment arises from how mistaken we are about reality. If you stop and think that virtually every man, woman and child on the planet is similarly mistaken. Hence it's quite frightening to realize how the world sustains itself without imploding right from under us because no one is focused upon the present. But thankfully the present doesn't need us to tune in, if you will, the world and cosmos both going their merry way. Yet intuition tells us that a small group of people exists, scattered here and there, who are tuned into reality more than the rest of us. Because of them the world doesn't implode. This is no exaggeration, really, for once you've gotten insight into even a sliver of reality minus our mental and emotional projections (and it does happen from time to time), you see the truth of this predicament. So if we don't need what Christianity calls a savior, there's no hope. All this is provable provided we follow the necessary injunctions, the most important being to slow ourselves down.

The situation just described is quite desperate once we've grasped what is at stake. Since everyone is born overlaid with so much baggage, you wonder what happens to the mass of humanity or to put it in popular terms, where we go after death, a thought entertained by virtually everyone. Some kind of cleansing or purging away of this baggage seems to be in store which actually is going on right now and destined to continue after physical death. Our present struggles as well as numerous insights into overcoming our inherent inertia bear this out...dimly perceived, to be sure, but very much real and urgent. Various religions speak of this and put it in their own way. Those slivers of insight point to this which means that proof as normally conceived doesn't apply. It's a matter of having people come to the same insight, of seeing with the same collective eye, the same reality. In other words, seeing eye-to-eye,

neither an eye looking from above to below or visa versa.

This inability to see with the same eye on the same level is another way of describing the same conundrum, namely, that many people are unequipped to discuss such matters. This perhaps is the most pervasive problem affecting us all and has nothing to do with the education or sophistication of people. Neither does it pertain to those on the other end of the spectrum. Both are equally uninformed. And this state, so tragic in its pervasiveness, lies at the heart of most of our problems today. For example, a highly educated person can ask what amounts to baby question about religious faith. The answer he'll get will be on the same baby level, so expect no movement on that front. There's a seeing eye-to-eye but of a low caliber. When it comes to religion people have higher expectations, and their hopes are dashed when they're not realized. At least getting that expectation cleared away here is a start. Such vision is hampered in part by the way religious imagery is couched, even distorted, starting with the Bible and in general the tradition that took off from it. No examples have to be given because the story is well known. All you have to do is go out and talk with people about religion. It seems we grope more or less around how to reconcile biblical images and concepts with our current human understanding, conscious of the problem and addressed usually in a critical or sarcastic manner. In the meanwhile we in the West are sitting on top of a huge...simply huge...treasure house of spirituality, most of which is barely touched. Maybe the layers of sarcasm and trouncing by science over religion accumulated over the centuries has a role in bringing us to this point which makes the discussion all the more worth pursuing.

With this in mind, let's return to the all-important issue of physicality. If you look at yourself closely and steadily for an extended period of time you'll find that your attention exists whole and entire prior to any physical manifestation. However, these insights are so fleeting that they fail to register on the radar except for a quick bleep here and there. Nevertheless, sufficient exposure to them is sufficient to convince us that yes, this is the natural order of things, of how we had come into the world. Instead we prefer the images we've learned to concoct since childhood (perhaps earlier) which are valid but partial because they pertain only to us. They are not defective, a temptation we could fall into easily enough, but lesser realities needing to be fleshed out with more doses of reality, to put it a bit awkwardly but to the point. For some reason never entirely clear to us we prefer recapturing experiences from the past which are one step removed from reality. In fact we believe with our whole hearts this is how the world is set up. The images, always second-hand, are so powerful that we cling to them and reproduce them, now made easier with the help of mobile electronic media. This new media blurs the line between physical and virtual reality which confuses us in discerning what is real and what is unreal, an experience now familiar to us. Currently this distinction can still be made but perhaps in the near future the ability to posit it won't be possible. Be that as it may, closer examination reveals that any compensation is partial and relative to the cosmos as a whole. In other words, the compensation as originating in the memory is neither bad nor defective, just partial, a refreshing way of looking at it instead of being tempted to see it as

defective. However, we reach the limit of a given consolation sooner than later and ask the inevitable “What’s next?” Also invariably we know that question will be asked again and *ad infinitum* if something doesn’t intervene to stop it.

This “What’s next?” is the bugaboo laying behind just about everything whether it’s front row in our awareness or not. If the question is subdued (and for the most part it is), we go on preoccupied with thoughts and emotions which assume the form of images, the first overlay of reality. If the questioning is more persistent, we’re more aware of the passage of time, of when and where things will come to a resolution. So for the most part our perceptions of reality are filtered. Rarely are they unfiltered through the medium of the emotional–thought barrier (or more positively, its partial reality, never in full). The perception of reality minus this filter can be put in terms of our awareness looking at both ourselves and everything else in an all–encompassing glance. It lasts for a second or two (if the dimension of time can be spoken of), is repeated a number of times and then forms a sequence. However, this sequence is not a smooth, continuous line. It’s broken into various lengths which gives a perception of roughness and incompleteness, more disconcerting than painful. Intuitively we know it requires fixing. In the meanwhile we’re going from one fragment to another and see each piece as being full and entire yet at the same time are aware that another fragment will pop up and so on. Such is how we perceive time whether pleasantly, painfully or just plain neutral.

This pattern is one of satisfaction followed quickly by its opposite, resulting in a depression which can’t be alleviated. So after a while it dawns that you have to resolve this problem because it gives rise to the passage of time, the “What’s next” syndrome. The problem takes on two general images apparently unconnected but in fact reoccur among quite a few people: wondering what famous people do when not in the limelight and the mysterious beckoning of a sunset, of what happens once the sun does go down. Intellectually we can project ourselves into each situation, but the problem lies in not actually being present with them or when they occur. Hence our projections are images of ourselves which do nothing but entertain us with their vacuity. Industries are built on this essential fantasy, the archetype of them all, but if you’re lucky you just might stop fantasizing like this. Putting a halt to it means that you’ve come to recognize your limitations, that you don’t prefer going down that path but instead to move in the direction of appreciating our inborn awareness which exists before any manifestation of form. This may be described as a spirit of humility. And humility means giving up the effort of bridging gaps between perception of yourself and things as they are versus their representations as images and hence memories. In their place comes a realization that your best position is on the ground or as close to physical reality as possible. Maybe that’s why all great philosophical and religious traditions advocate the cultivation of humility.

Humility at last presents us with a solution, really the only solution. Often it’s said that humility = truth,

so it's natural to make mistakes in attempting to mirror reality in impartial fashion. It's a conundrum contributing to that nagging question of "What's next" as we cling to a hope that what lies just over the horizon is achievable. In fact, humanity has plenty of this hope and always has had it, an undeniable fact. And so our heart's desire mirrors this hope which is freedom from the alteration of cause and effect. Our experimentation with the various ways of achieving this freedom is indicative of our innately restless spirit, that never will it be at peace until free from the ultimately boring and repetitious cycles which produce one endless form after another. And that freedom consists in looking into our nature as our awareness is fashioned to exist before any mental or emotional representations or forms. A great insight, no doubt about it, but another thing to put into practice.

To consider an alternative apart from the one of cause and effect sounds preposterous, but attentiveness to our hopes says just the opposite. We may entertain the idea that these desires are manufactured, a fanciful construct, but they persist through thick and thin. Even with a modicum of insight into the alternative—and we mean by that our true nature as awareness—we lack adequate means to present it as a genuine alternative (Some elements of this were touched upon, but we must inquire further why this is so). Why can't we, despite all our sophistication, lay hold of the right language to begin with? There must be multiple issues, perhaps the most overarching being is a lack of the contemplative dimension in society. This lack sets the stage in many ways for the baby talk engendered by educated persons about things spiritual as well as the baby talk they get back. The contemplative tradition always was weak in the West compared with the East, although that sounds like a glib response. Glib because our image of the East is distorted when it comes to this issue, that either it's more advanced or too exotic and inherently hostile to Western religious beliefs. Another aspect is that we're not conditioned to think outside cause and effect due to the premium we place upon logic. When we do make stabs at the East's rich contemplative dimension, they come off as clumsy, uninformed and in essence, childish, not unlike the baby talk just mentioned. That means some future generation (hopefully sooner than later) must overcome this. And just like babies, learn the original languages which gives direct access to the sources of their traditions. The same applies to the West. By digging more deeply into both our language may develop into something beautiful and lovely to appreciate. However, that goal lies in the future, an issue beyond the scope of this essay.

When putting thoughts together for this little article I became keenly aware that three themes discussed in early ones were starting to re-exert themselves and that a general theme was starting to emerge. All are based upon a desire to articulate, if you will, key elements in the West's contemplative tradition which has its roots in the Bible. First of all, our current society largely has rejected formal expressions of religion while it remains keenly interested in spiritual matters. Somewhere along the line a rupture appeared which I'm attempting to trace with a re-read of **A Secular Age** by Charles Taylor. Along the way I've discovered the West's propensity for form compared with the East's preference for awareness. That's

putting it a bit baldly and perhaps not fully informed though the insight has remained with me for a number of years. Familiarity with the Christian Syriac tradition, in many ways unaffected by the Greco-Roman world, was an important element that led in this direction. After all, it spread East (not West) through Iraq, Iran, India and China. Often any interaction between the two is condemned roundly without closer attention to the elements involved. This is a fine example where caricatures and exaggerations as hit upon by the media and less informed religious persons has played a role. By projecting certain negative images it has done a splendid job to uphold prejudices that have been around for some time. And so the baby talk continues, both ways.

The second element that has contributed to this article is a keen awareness that despite the access to incredible amounts of information...and I mean information in the most positive sense...people have neither the freedom nor leisure to study it. That leads to the issue of *otium*, the classical definition of leisure where what a person reads and absorbs is put at the service of one's society. Getting people to read slowly, the hallmark of *otium*, always has been a problem. Now it's a virtual impossibility. We're in a situation unique in history to having many religions and spiritual treasures of both East and West available online but no one around to decipher them.

Now for the third element. If followed faithfully, in a relatively short time the re-introduction of *otium*, coupled with *lectio divina*, will lead to a desire to keep one's access to the media to a minimum. In its place there comes to birth another desire, to delve deeply into oneself...in other words, the first steps towards cultivating a contemplative attitude. Such is the real meaning of "Know thyself" compared with the false one noted at the very beginning of this article. Following this age-old dictum enables a person to examine in great detail the operation of one's mind and spirit and finally get a handle on what's transpiring there. The discovery lies, as this essay states, in the assurance that our awareness comes before any form we encounter yet paradoxically revels in the physicality composing ourselves and everything else. But to do that requires getting beyond all the junk our mind and emotions spew out constantly. All this is actually quite easy because it rests on how we've been constituted as human beings. Yet paradoxically it turns out to be the hardest task a person can undertake. Granted, it has a high number of beginners, but the mortality rate soars starts soon afterwards. Thus the thoughts put down here...and put down imperfectly, a fact that's quite obvious...is a stab in that direction. In addition to hard work, the whole enterprise is a lot of fun because it deals with, well, reality.

The fourth and final element contributing to this article consists not so much in a desire to contact God whether through the above mentioned fairly new dichotomy of religion and spirituality but primarily in training oneself to become a *philosophos*, a philosopher in the classical Greek sense, one who loves (*phileo*) wisdom (*sophia*). Or to put it better with focus upon the verb, to cultivate an affection and therefore friendship with wisdom. This is crucial because most people desire to learn how to use their

minds properly. Once so trained, it's easier to switch into spirituality and theology. Going about it the other way around doesn't work. That's why we have so much baby talk when it comes to religion. Despite people being in their diapers in this matter, they have an overwhelming desire to philosophize, to become friendly with wisdom. They lack the means to outgrow these diapers, hence the necessary training to become first a *philosophos* (works by Pierre Hadot are excellent on this point). Thus if education in Christianity is to be successful it must reverse itself, if you will: do *philosophia* first and then theology. That had been the case for centuries. Yet it's amazing how in one generation or so it has virtually disappeared. To be sure, some resistance to this approach will be formidable. This has justification simply because people have been trained to do otherwise.

So with these four points in mind it's time to bring this article to a conclusion. More accurately, it will continue in some other essay. Usually it turns out another with the gain of another insight which requires further tweaking, an enjoyable task.

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