# Random Thoughts on Spontaneous and Directed Thinking and the Problem of Evil

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Just the other day I picked up Hermann Keyserling's *Travel Diary of a Philosopher*. This is a volume which I had read many years ago and found it very valuable. And I was casually looking at it and happened to turn to the chapter entitled "Colombo." There was a point made in the very first paragraphs of this chapter that suddenly stirred a possible insight into a facet of Oriental epistemology that may be significant. I am not yet ready to arrive at any decisive conclusion upon this subject matter at this time, but I shall present the thought that arose. To introduce this, I shall read the first page under the heading of Colombo. The quotation is as follows:

> What becomes of me on the green island of Lanka? Every hour I am sensible of a change in me. I feel that in this hothouse air it is futile to work, to wish, to strive; nothing succeeds but what happens of its own accord. And an incredible number of things do happen here by themselves, more than I had ever thought possible. In fact everything within me is happening of its own accord. My volition wanes irresistibly. I am transformed into a gentle, soft creature who enjoys life without ambition and without any creative desire.
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> The whole of my life has turned into a process of vegetation. But of course this latter concept appears to be true only when drawn from the flora of the tropics, not from that of northern latitudes. There vegetating implies a minimum of life—a form of existence barely sufficient unto itself. Here it implies a maximum. These plants which rise overnight from the earth to the sky resemble gods in their vitality. In Ceylon, as elsewhere, vegetating signifies a form of existence which proceeds without effort, but then effort is superfluous here: everything succeeds without it. Here vegetating becomes the form of all life, even of mental life; the mind becomes rampant, like tropical plants. Already I realize in myself that the mental life of tropical man is comprehensible only from the botanical point of view. His images blossom forth like flowers wildly, luxuriantly, confusedly, without effort and without the supervision of the gardener, and are therefore irresponsible. It is in this way, no doubt, that we should explain the history of Indian mythology: the stern teaching of the sages of the North-West could not survive for long in the southern districts; its simplicity soon began to develop into aimless exuberance. Thousands of gods sprang from the fruitful soil like mushrooms after rain. Hindooism in its boundless richness can only be understood as a vegetative process.[1]

[1] Hermann Keyserling, *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926), 39.

The reading of this caused my thought to return to an insistence I found in the writings of Sri Aurobindo. This was the point made by Sri Aurobindo: that we do not think, but thoughts occur. We can accept or reject these thoughts, but we do not think them. There remains the question of from where do they come? But in any case, this never seemed really obvious to me. I felt rather that the truth of the matter was expressed by Descartes when he said, "Cogito, ergo sum," I think, therefore I am. But this quotation from Keyserling suggested to me an explanation that may be far reaching in its implications. I have never had experience of tropical lushness of growth. I have known throughout most of my life the semi-arid and the arid portions of the west with brief contact with the lushness of the northwest, but predominately I have known the country in which vegetable life struggles hard to exist and survive, and there is no lushness in its growth. In the far north, northern countries the problem would not be the same because there it is a question of coldness, not necessarily of an arid country, but the difficulty to exist as a plant is essentially the same. It is not lush growth. So when reading this paragraph from Keyserling the thought struck me, is there a sympathetic rapport between the mental processes of man and the vegetable process of his environment? Would it be true that a different kind of epistemology would be evolved in a tropical setting where all vegetable life grows rapidly and with great fullness so that, as suggested by Keyserling's confession, thoughts happen in one, everything happens of itself and requires no effort on the part of the individual thinker? Does this then lead to the epistemological statement that thoughts happen and that we do not think them?

The contrasting position I may present from my own experience. I have known difficult problems, as my work was very largely centered in the mathematical field and then in the philosophical, problems the resolution of which did not happen of itself, but required positive effort and in some cases the utmost extreme of effort. For instance, I remember once when I was assigned a final examination paper, namely, the restatement of the metaphysical and transcendental deduction of the categories of Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The professor said that this was the most difficult part of all Immanuel Kant's writings and if one could grasp that, he would not have difficulty in any other portion of Immanuel Kant. I remember that on my first reading of this section in preparation for the paper, I got no meaning at all. So, I approached it with the most intense concentration I could summons, and I broke it down and wrote a paper that earned an A grade. Now, there was a sense of "I" putting forth supreme effort here. There was no sense of thought just happening. Thought was labor of the severest sort.

Now, is there some relationship between this kind of thinking which originally was produced by Immanuel Kant in northern Prussia, a cold country where vegetation would have to struggle to survive or would have to be pampered to enable it to produce, and, in contrast, the standpoint of a thinker in subtropical India where thought seems to happen of itself? Is there a significant difference here? Could it be that in part if one lives in a northern or an arid country his thought is a result of self-produced effort, whereas, if he lives in a subtropical country his thought is so spontaneous in its manifestation that it seems to happen of itself? And does this difference in geography and meteorology have a bearing upon a difference that is of epistemological importance? That is the question which this paragraph aroused in my mind.

There is also another question here, namely, in what sense are we speaking of thoughts? Keyserling, in the quotation, refers to images arising in his mind. Is he thus speaking of the action of the sense mind, a process of flow of images rather than in the sense of mind that has been called *Buddhi*, which is the conceptual form of thinking? The question is not wholly clear. There's simply a suggestion of a possibility. I myself have little experience of imaginal thinking. My effort has been almost wholly conceptual, often in fields where it was impossible for the image to furnish any aid. The result being that thinking in such a field is difficult, certainly takes effort. This is also pertinent to the question.

Another consideration comes into the picture by a reference to my own experience in the field of thought during the period before 1936 and since 1936. Thinking before 1936 was preeminently in a form of self-effort, a process that was essentially fatiguing and could be very fatiguing; but since 1936, I have had the experience of thoughts arising spontaneously, particularly when I had the action of what I have called the "transcendental function," a kind of thinking which I have also called *on-beam* thinking. This thinking is spontaneous. It is essentially easy. It does have a quality that suggests that it happens of itself. And this leads to the question, do we have possibly two kinds of thinking—a thinking which proceeds of itself spontaneously as by inspiration and a thinking that is laborious? And would we therefore have to take this fact into account and say that some thinking simply happens, as Aurobindo claims, while other thinking is of a sort that one would have to say, because of the sense of effort, that "I think." I am not prepared to come to a final answer on this question. I am putting it forth as an interesting possibility. But it would have far reaching implications in the practice of yoga and could well mean that the yogic patterns which are indigenous to a subtropical country like India could not be transplanted to northern lands or to desert lands where the principle of conscious effort is very evident.

Unconnected with the foregoing is a line of reflection which has invoked my interest over a considerable time. This is in connection with the Last Supper of the Christ as represented in the Gospels. On the occasion of that Last Supper it is stated that he broke some bread for which he said, "Eat, this is my body." And then drank a cup of wine which he said is my blood. And it is said that he commanded that this should be done often in remembrance of him. This statement may be taken in the literal sense as it has been throughout most of Christian history, but it could be a symbolic statement which is the meaning which I suspect Christ really had in mind, that he was in fact referring to something of a subtle or spiritual nature and not to the gross food, that the gross food was used simply as a symbol. But it has been interpreted in the literal sense. But this leads to a consequence which I find distinctly shocking, for it suggests cannibalism as a part of a religious rite.

No doubt, in the history of primitive religiosity cannibalism has played an important role. In fact it is part of the general human conception of human sacrifice to the gods. It was a very important factor in the religions of Mexico in the pre-Columbian days and was involved in the religious practices of the Phoenicians where infants were hurled within fiery furnaces as an offering to the gods. All of this is to us today highly shocking, but reflection upon it indicates that in the primitive form of religiosity man found himself surrounded by forces that were stronger than himself as an individual or even as a collectivity. These forces were in many forms. There were the forces of the form of the

flood and the drought, of the earthquake, of the volcano, of powerful animals that afforded a real danger to man. And there was a tendency to deify all of these things and an effort to offer sacrifices to them so that they would not be too harsh. We might say that as man has grown in his scientific understanding, many of these forces no longer are dominant factors before which man has to bow. No animal today can stand against the powers which man can wield, hence the animals have lost the status of godhood which they held in more primitive societies; and we are even thinking today in terms of the possibility of bringing earthquakes under control by a sort of lubrication of earthquake faults whereby a buildup of great violence could be avoided through means that would release tensions in a more moderate way. This is a side of religiosity that belongs essentially to primitive man.

There is another aspect in general religiosity, namely, an orientation to the racial or clan entity and this seems to be the largest manifestation of religiosity in the world even today. It is characteristic even of the Ben-Israel religious groups where there is a very strong orientation to particular races as being the "chosen ones." The great contrasting religious movement is that of the Buddha. Even Hinduism, in general, is oriented to the East Indian race, but Buddhism, in contrast, transcends the racial barriers and proclaims a way which is for all men and even for all creatures. In principle Christianity is viewed today as a trans-racial religion, but there is reason to believe that this element in Christianity is ultimately derived from the Buddha, for Christ in his morality and his general orientation expressed more the morality of the Buddha than of the Ben-Israel form of religiosity. This is obvious in the case of the Golden Rule and the general statement of the moral principles enunciated by the Christ. And furthermore, both the southern and northern Buddhists claim Christ as one of their own—the southern Buddhists calling him an *Arhat* and the northern Buddhists a *Bodhisattva*. So it may well be deduced that it is the influence of Buddhism, in the last analysis, that brought about the pan-racial orientation of Christianity so that in the last analysis the one figure responsible for a pan-racial religion was the Blessed One himself.

There is another thought which I would wish to consider at the present time which is not connected with what has gone before. I should like to direct your attention to a portion of the tenth among *The Mahatma Letters*. This is one written by the entity known to us in the older days as Koot Hoomi. The particular section I would draw to your attention is that on "Our Ideas on Evil." I shall quote a rather lengthy paragraph here.

> Evil has no existence *per se* and is but the absence of good and exists but for him who is made its victim. It proceeds from two causes, and no more than good is it an independent cause in nature. Nature is destitute of goodness or malice; she follows only immutable laws when she either gives life and joy, or sends suffering [and] death, and destroys what she has created. Nature has an antidote for every poison and her laws a reward for every suffering. The butterfly devoured by a bird becomes that bird, and the little bird killed by an animal goes into a higher form. It is the blind law of necessity and the eternal fitness of thing, and hence cannot be called Evil in Nature. The real evil proceeds from human intelligence and its origin rests entirely with reasoning man who dissociates himself from Nature. Humanity, then, alone is the true source of evil. Evil is the

exaggeration of good, the progeny of human selfishness and greediness. Think profoundly and you will find that save death—which is no evil but a necessary law, and accidents which will always find there reward in a future life—the *origin* of every evil whether small or great is in human [nature] action, in man whose intelligence makes him the one free agent in Nature. It is not nature that creates diseases, but man. The latter's [vision] mission and destiny in the economy of nature is to die his natural death brought by old age; save accident, neither a savage nor a wild (free) animal dies of disease. Food, sexual relations, drink, are all natural necessities of life; yet excess in them brings on disease, misery, suffering, mental and physical, and the latter are transmitted as the greatest evils to future generations, the progeny of the culprits. Ambition, the desire of securing happiness and comfort for those we love, by obtaining honours and riches, are praiseworthy natural feelings, but when they transform man into an ambitious cruel tyrant, a miser, a selfish egotist they bring untold misery to those around him; on nations as well as on individuals. All this then—food, wealth, ambition, and a thousand other things we have to leave unmentioned, becomes the source and cause of evil whether in its abundance or through its absence. Become a glutton, a debauchee, a tyrant, and you become the originator of diseases, of human suffering and misery. Lack all this and you starve, you are despised as a *nobody*, and the majority of the herd, your fellow men, make of you a sufferer your whole life. Therefore it is neither nature nor an imaginary Deity that has to be blamed, but human nature made vile by *selfishness*. Think well over these few words; work out every cause of evil you can think of and trace it to its origin and you will have solved *one-third* of the problem of evil. And now, after making due allowance for evils that are natural and cannot be avoided,—and so few are they that I challenge the whole host of Western metaphysicians to call them evils or to trace them directly to an independent cause—I will point out the greatest, the chief cause of nearly two thirds of the evils that pursue humanity ever since that cause became a power. It is religion under whatever form and in whatever nation. It is the sacerdotal caste, the priesthood and the churches; it is in those illusions than man looks upon as sacred, that he has to search out the source of that multitude of evils which is the great curse of humanity and that almost overwhelms mankind. Ignorance created Gods and cunning took advantage of the opportunity. Look at India and look at Christendom and Islam, at Judaism and Fetichism, it is priestly imposture that rendered these Gods so terrible to man; it is religion that makes of him the selfish bigot, the fanatic that hates all mankind out of his own sect without rendering him any better or more moral for it. It is belief in God and Gods that makes two-thirds of humanity the slaves of a handful of those who deceive them under the false pretense of saving them. Is not man ever ready to commit any kind of evil if told that his God or Gods demand the crime—voluntary victim of an illusionary God, the abject slave of his crafty ministers? The Irish, Italian and Slovonian peasant will starve himself and see his family starving and naked to feed and cloth his padre

> and pope. For two thousand years India groaned under the weight of caste, Brahmins alone feeding on the fat of the land, and to-day the followers of Christ and those of Mahomet are cutting each other's throats in the names of and for the greater glory of their respective myths. Remember the sum of human misery will never be diminished unto that day when the better portion of humanity destroys in the name of Truth, morality, and universal charity, the altars of their false gods.
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> If it is objected that we too have temples, we too have priests and that our lamas also live on charity . . . let them know that the objects above named have in common with their Western equivalents, but the name. Thus in our temples there is neither a god nor gods worshipped, only the thrice sacred memory of the greatest as the holiest man that ever lived. If our lamas to honour the fraternity of the *Bhikkhus* established by our blessed master himself, go out to fed by the laity, the latter often to the number of 5 to 25,000 is fed and taken care of by the *Samgha*, (the fraternity of lamaic monks), the lamassery providing for the wants of the poor, the sick, the afflicted. Our lamas accept food, never money, and it is in those temples that the origin of evil is preached and impressed upon the people. There they are taught the four noble truths—*ariya* sacca, and the chain of causation, (the twelve nidanas) gives them a solution of the problem of the origin and destruction of suffering.[2]

As one studies the general trend of this quotation it is evident that the position here assumed is what we would classify as naturalistic and phenomenalistic with an avoidance of any metaphysical component. This is in conformity with the general trend of the Buddhistic *sutras*. You will remember how Buddha avoided answering metaphysical questions. He did not say explicitly that there was not a metaphysical reality, but avoided producing any judgment concerning such reality. There is reason to believe that he avoided such statements for the reason that they would involve elements that could not be grasped by an unillumined consciousness and that he was essentially a purist in his use of language. What we derive is the implication that man, as the only free agent in nature, is the source of evil but also the source of good. That is the other side of the picture. Without man and only the un-free creatures in nature there would only be the expression of law, which could be called neither good nor evil.

Concerning the statement of there being no diseases among wild animals and primitive peoples, there are questions that arise in my mind. Our biologists and pathologists have determined that certain wild animals are carriers of rabies, that others carry yellow fever, malaria, and other insect-carried diseases. And it was determined that the flea that carries the bubonic plague has existed among our squirrels which were wild animals. And also during the time of hoof and mouth disease here in California, it was found present among deer in certain regions and these had to be exterminated. And we also know that in the war with the primitives of this country, certain of the generals ordered the distribution of blankets that had been employed by people who had small pox resulting in the decimation of the Indians themselves. So there are some questions that

[2] A. T. Barker, ed., *The Mahatma Letters* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1923), 56-58.

arise in my mind here, for instance, do the wild animals carry disease that has no effect upon themselves but which would have effect upon human beings and domestic animals, or do those wild animals themselves suffer from the diseases which they carry. There are points here that need a greater clarification.

Another point, granting that the evil in the evils or pains imposed in pre-human nature does not imply the existence of a force of evil that is independent, nonetheless it may be viewed as involving something that imposed suffering; and in so far as suffering may be regarded as an evil, we have abundant evidence that entirely apart from the presence of man there is suffering imposed upon the creatures in nature, as, for instance, when herbivora come to a water hole in Africa when the water hole itself is the only source of water in dry seasons, they come in a state of near panic because of carnivora that may be lurking in the vicinity and that the simple act of taking a drink of water is a perilous hazard. We have seen on television in recent years many pictures of wildlife, and it would appear that none of the creatures which are food for carnivora have any enjoyment whatsoever in being eaten. They show every inclination to avoid this and live in a state that certainly from my point of view would be a most horrible hell-like kind of existence. I am not too satisfied about the innocence of nature where the rule applies that creatures higher up on the food chain survive only by eating the creatures that lie below them. And as to the little bird that is eaten by an animal, he becomes that animal—incidentally this sounds a bit like the materialism of Moleschott who said man is what he eats—then the little bird is said to become that animal and thus raise in the scale, the question would arise in my mind, I could grant that if the little bird is eaten by a placenta mammal it could be raised in the scale, but suppose it is eaten by a reptile, would it thus be lowered in the scale?

But the main cause of evil that is shown in this quotation comes from religion. Now, there is a question here in the use of the word ‘religion’, for the author employs the term in such a way that Buddhism is not classed as one of the religions. The word ‘religion’ is restricted to those forms of religion that are oriented to a divinity. This is a usage different from my own. I employ the term ‘religion’ in what may be called the psychological sense, as involving all of those actions and attitudes that render possible Realization or Enlightenment; and certainly this is a part of Buddhism. The attitudes in question being that of the sacrifice, the self-surrender, and the acceptance of the mystic death, a spirit of self-giving to a something that is much more comprehensive and is not restricted to that form of attitude which posits the existence of an extra-cosmic divine being. I do not posit such an existence myself, yet, nonetheless, I regard the orientation to the breaking through to this function called Realization and Enlightenment as the very heart of religion itself. So, here we have a use of terms that has to be differentiated.

As a final point, I’d like to note the fact that the author of this letter is also probably the one individual who is most responsible for the Theosophical movement of the last quarter of the last century and was also one and perhaps the chief author, though not the writer, of *The Secret Doctrine* which most certainly does have material that is metaphysical in character; specifically, I would refer your attention to the First Fundamental in the Proem and the discussion that follows it. This material I would class as not only metaphysical, but the very highest form of metaphysics, namely, ontological metaphysics. And we must note the fact, too, that included in the recommended sources of the Theosophical movement is the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* represents

Krishna as an *avataral* incarnation of the ultimate divine; and that in this conception of the divine, we have not simply and exclusively the immanent divine of pantheism, but also the divine in a transcendental sense, as is evidenced by referring to the words of Krishna where he says, "I produce this universe from an infinitesimal part of myself and yet remain apart."[3] This position is known technically as panentheism. So it may well be that all that Koot Hoomi is discussing in this particular quotation is the form of religiosity which is oriented to an extra-cosmic divinity, which is not the form of divinity implied in the *Bhagavad Gita*. There are many questions that arise from even this brief quotation, but this I think is all we can handle at the present time.

[3] *The Bhagavad-Gita (The Book of Devotion) Dialogue between Krishna, Lord of Devotion, and Arjuna, Prince of India*, trans. William Q, Judge (Los Angeles: The Theosophy Company, 1947), 76: "I established this whole universe with a single portion of myself, and remain separate."