

The McEvilley Bombshell

By Douglas Lockhart

... we are now in a better position to understand the ultimate meaning behind [samadhi's] apparently perverse techniques. It is a systematic conditioning of the body to conniving in its own destruction, at the command of the will, by a series of graduated stages - from the suspension of the vital breath, through the temporary suspension of consciousness, to the ultimate step.

Arthur Koestler
The Lotus and the Robot p. 130.

Plato, in many passages - including Phaedo 66-67, which has been called "the Magna Carta of western mysticism" - advises that the soul should withdraw itself from the senses, concentrate itself by itself, and, becoming still and unchanging, come to know that which is still and unchanging.

Thomas McEvilley
The Shape of Ancient Thought p. 179.

The Mutual Dilemma of West and East

I've been a fan of Arthur Koestler's writings for many years, but for some inexplicable reason had omitted to read *The Lotus and the Robot*, his exploration of Indian and Japanese religious ideas and practices published in 1960. The subject matter for this book was set by a previous book - *The Sleepwalkers* - in which the spotlight had been turned on the split between science and religion, a dilemma of the time which Koestler hoped to alleviate by questioning thinkers representing opposite ends of the Asian religious spectrum. What he discovered, however, was that neither religious system had much, if anything, that was useful to the West. Subjecting both religious systems to scientific scrutiny, he emerged from his travels convinced that the West's search for mystic enlightenment in the East was as much an anachronism as thinking of America as the Wild West, the East's contribution to spiritual matters not only affording no cure for the evils of western civilization,¹ but as fundamentally dangerous in terms of spiritual aspiration. Why so? Because in spite of its spiritual practices appearing to offer liberation for the mind, the reality was quite different: yoga and meditation did not lead to enlightenment, they were in fact a carefully constructed route to the

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mind's destruction. The highest meditational state - *Samadhi* - did not constitute liberation of the mind from evil; it was a contortionist act of mind and body leading to the mind's annihilation. And the Zen tradition of enlightenment fared no better in Koestler's opinion. Neither yoga, Zen, nor any other Asian form of mysticism had anything of significance to offer the West.²

In spite of the many positive things I've said about yoga and meditation in this book, and in others, I have to sympathise with Koestler's reaction; he is not correct in his assessment of these practices, but neither is he all wrong in criticising them. Similarly, his interpretation of yogic meditational texts is often bizarrely inaccurate, yet at the same time illuminating to the extent that he reveals the difficulties experienced by the Western mind in trying to accommodate the philosophical sophistication of such texts. Koestler set out on his journey of exploration and examination in the sincere hope of finding something spiritually useful in these so different cultures, but in the end was overcome with disappointment as those cultures revealed their inadequacies, the Indian spiritual tradition revealing a deeply ingrained naivety in the face of what was often blatant charlatanism. From claims of levitation to that of being able to stop the heart from beating, from being buried in pits without oxygen for hours or days to that of having special powers of mind (*siddhis*), yogins showed themselves to be either deceptive in their claims, or self-deceptive as to the strength of those claims. And the mystical aspect fared no better; mystical union begged the question as to what was actually being experienced, the claim of advanced yogins to have reached some ultimate state of bliss or super-consciousness highly suspect.³ It was all a mess of mystical pottage gulped down whole by non-discriminating western sympathisers and their too-willing-to-believe Indian counterparts. But Koestler did emerge with something unexpected, a sense of pride in being a European. Whatever failures the West had exhibited in its long and tortuous history, it had emerged with one enviable strength: a capacity for self-scrutiny that over-rode the stunting effect religion often had on the exercising of human intelligence.

Mystical Apprehension versus Intellectual Insight

Arthur Koestler's sour evaluation of the Indian spiritual tradition flies in the face of an Indian psychologists - Ulrich Mohrhoff - criticism of both the western academic conception of knowledge and the uncritical acceptance of western concepts and methodologies by Indian psychologists since 1905. Perceiving Indian psychological traditions concerning consciousness as belonging to a backward people, western psychology had, he argued, ignored their yoga-based conclusions and relegated influence by such traditions to the intellectual sidelines. Of all the major western disciplines, only philosophy had hesitated, there being some tantalising similarities of thought between the two philosophical systems. But there were problems, and they seemed insurmountable in that eastern philosophers viewed western philosophy as purely speculative, that is, as not leading to a spiritual perspective,⁴ whereas western philosophers saw the whole purpose of philosophy as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Philosophy had no practical religious goals in the western tradition; it was purely an intellectual pursuit good in itself due to being such a pursuit.⁵

Not so, says Thomas McEvilley in *The Shape of Ancient Thought*; the Platonic philosophical perspective believed to underpin this view has been misunderstood due to Descartes' use of Platonic language in the context of his own rationalist agenda. Something "beyond the 'rational-theoretic' approach to philosophy"⁶ was going on in Plato's philosophical scheme, Descartes' rendering of that scheme's directives a distortion that had in turn distorted western philosophy's understanding of Plato's deeper motives and objectives. Through subtle twists of language, Descartes had managed to convey the notion that Plato's use of terms such as "the soul should withdraw itself from the senses" (see opening quote) meant only an intense involvement with discursive reasoning, when in fact it had meant quite the opposite. Plato's writings on meditation were actually embedded in a distinct mystical phraseology, his claim that meditation

makes the philosopher permanently perfect and virtuous a claim McEvilley considers utterly ridiculous in a Cartesian context.⁷ The word "meditation" as used by Plato is understood by modern western philosophers as an expert juggling of ideas by the conscious mind, but it ought to be understood in the Hindu/Buddhist sense of a mental disengagement from ideas. Descartes had so successfully imitated Plato's language that Plato, as noted earlier, had ended up sounding like a Cartesian rationalist.⁸ There is again a problem, however, for just as Greek philosophy was not wholly speculative, neither was Indian philosophy wholly religious/spiritual in orientation. There is, McEvilley argues, much evidence to the contrary, the claim by Indian philosophers of a spiritual constant on all occasions being a bit of a cliché.⁹ Quoting from an Indian counterperspective,¹⁰ McEvilley adds: "The claim [of spiritual content] is a generalised feature of every systematic study in India. Parishioners of any skill made the claim to be respectable . . . especially when their competitors were making the tallest claims for their own paths and pursuits."¹¹ Which of course takes us straight back to Koestler's observation that Indian spirituality was given to extravagance, it being not all it seemed to be to western eyes.

Putting Aristotle's notions of pure philosophy aside, McEvilley then develops an alternative approach to Greek philosophy, raising "powerful objections to the view that [Greek] philosophy was purely speculative."¹² The therapeutic Hellenistic schools were not speculative, he tells us; the stated aim of Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy was actually based on an avoidance of being reincarnated. The Pythagoreans were a private brotherhood who, over and above their interest in scientific experiment, medicine, acoustics and mathematics, also participated in cultic activities of a religious nature that incorporated a belief in rebirth,¹³ Pythagoras himself being associated with "a variety of mythical motifs that connect[ed] him with the realm of the shaman".¹⁴ Recognised by Empedocles as someone who could remember at least four of his past lives,

Pythagoras, as a released soul (enlightened?), was credited with having special powers, and of fulfilling the traditional role of initiatic teacher.¹⁵ Empedocles also claimed to remember his past lives, and, like Pythagoras, was believed capable of clairvoyance, clairaudience and telepathy.¹⁶ The Pythagorean-Platonic schools were therefore akin in their fundamental beliefs to that of the Indian schools - Upanisadic, Buddhist and Jain - and are known to have developed a distinct way of life in the Empedocles/Heraclitus style.¹⁷ Plato, like the Indian savant Patanjali, is recorded as advising the aspirant to withdraw the mind from attention to the body, the Phaedo recommending "the withdrawal of the self from involvement with external objects [as] a preliminary preparation for the unified knowledge which [would] lead to release from the wheel of reincarnations."¹⁸ Not at all the kind of thinking we generally associate with Greek philosophy due to the superimposition of Cartesian rationalism on Greek thought, but understandable, I suppose, in terms of those elements of Greek thinking that seemed to correspond to Descartes' rationalistic formula. So attractive did this habit become, however, that anything borderline rational was automatically viewed to be of non-Greek origin¹⁹ and classed as barbaric or shamanistic.²⁰

Associating Greek rational thought with the Greek language, the next step in a system of scholarly alienation was to link thinking capacity to language and pronounce those who did not think in Greek, linguistic primitives.²¹ Scholars such as E. R. Dodds, W. K. Guthrie, Sir William Jones and many another went along with such a view, their own active form of Cartesian thinking leading them to superimpose Greek rationalism on what they considered Indian extravagances of thought and conclude that the latter should not be taken seriously.²² When the facts of the situation are examined, however, superimposition becomes a dual imposition, that is, not only a dismissal of Asiatic thinking in general, but also an

unwillingness to properly accommodate, or situate, the shamanic backcloth of ancient Greek thought itself. MacEvilley sums up the situation thus:

Though it is especially associated with India, reincarnation was also a standard teaching of most Greek philosophers . . . This correspondence has been neglected by scholars. Despite its possible monumental importance, it has been deemed either insignificant or unprofitable, on various grounds: that reincarnation might be found in two places without inviting interpretation; that it might have entered Indian and Greek religion from various shamanic or tribal groups in their neighbourhoods; and that it is, fundamentally, a peripheral issue, even a red herring which threatens to lead beyond the bounds of Greek, and western, rationalism.²³

Problem is, the doctrine of reincarnation as found in both Greece and India was of a form not known to shamanic or tribal groups; in fact it did not exist anywhere else in the world except in places directly influenced by India or Greece.²⁴ This is McEvilley's opening volley on a situation which, if accurate in all respects, has surely to be reassessed for the sake of Greek scholarship in the future. Pythagoras may have been associated with shamanism, but not in the sense of having borrowed shamanistic ideas from elsewhere; more in the sense of having cultivated interior silence as a route to what he and other Greek philosophers thought of as a superior source of understanding. But a superior source of understanding in relation to what? In an Indian context this is an easy question to answer: Indian philosophy and religious ideas went hand-in-hand. In a Greek context it raises the question of what understanding is in itself, and forces us to consider how such inherently different methodologies as mysticism and analysis can be reconciled given that Greek philosophy is believed to fundamentally gainsay mysticism.

Mystical Thinking vs Philosophical Thinking

I've all but borrowed a sub-heading from Thomas McEvilley's book due to its sheer aptness at this point, the question of mysticism's efficacy in relation to critical analysis being the question on which much of importance hinges. For how is it possible, one has to ask, for Greek philosophy to be viewed as purely speculative when there is good evidence to suggest it had just as much mystical content as Indian philosophy? In his Remarks towards a Conclusion,²⁵ McEvilley examines western attitudes to Indian philosophy and concludes that the West's long rejection of Indian philosophy as philosophy proper is in dire need of adjustment. There is in fact little difference between the two philosophical schemes, the mystical elements of Indian thought are also to be found in Greek thought, the rational element in Greek thought fully extant in the Indian.²⁶ There had in fact been a "massive transfer of ideas or methods of thinking, first from India into Greece in the pre-Socratic period and again from Greece back into India in the Hellenistic".²⁷ This is McEvilley's considered conclusion, and his evidence for reaching such a conclusion is based on exhaustive research on numerous academic levels. In response to the startling conclusions of his book, Professor Christopher Chapple (Indologist) deems him to have systematically demonstrated that any serious study of ancient philosophy by necessity must include cross-cultural fluency and analysis and the interchange of ideas and mutual influence Greece and India had on one another, while Professor Katherine Harper (Indologist) considers McEvilley to have brought together complex and diverse data into a tightly organised, panoramic account that will become indispensable for any and all specialists on antiquity. As McEvilley's previous book - An Archeology of Yoga - was equally well received by the academic community, one has to assume diligence in such matters.

The colonial era viewed everything Indian as mystical, everything Greek as analytical, a simple dichotomy that overlooked their mutually "complex and multi-directional" nature, neither "mystical nor analytical intelligence [being]

limited to one side."²⁸ India was just as capable of producing analytical texts as Greece, its "accomplishments in geometry (the Sulva Sutras and other works), astronomy (the Jyotisha Vedanga and other works), cosmological mathematics, massive agricultural irrigation projects, medical theory and practice, siegecraft and warcraft, mechanical devices and automata"²⁹ being parallel exercises to anything produced in Greece. And neither were Indian thinkers averse to dialectical argument; their virtuosity in this area was, as McEvilley shows again and again just as well developed as in Greece. Which makes the West's twentieth century dismissal of Indian philosophy as less rigorous and systematic than Greek philosophy somewhat of a puzzle. Well, not really; the Cartesian school of thought had already written off Asiatic thinking as lacking "the methodologically ordered and progressive activity of reason [that had] first occurred among the Greeks."³⁰ Ancient philosophy was essentially Greek philosophy; philosophy spoke Greek and only Greek.³¹ Bertrand Russell, in this vein, might claim that philosophy had begun with Thales, but he had failed to notice, or neglected to register, that "Thales' basic insights seem to have been made earlier in the Upanisads".³²

So what of Indian mysticism, and, for that matter, Greek mysticism? In relation to Indian thought, the prejudicial term "mysticism" was used by western thinkers to disable, or make invisible, India's capacity for rational thought,³³ the mysticism of Greece rendered conveniently invisible through attention being focused on Greek rationality alone. And this tendency started early; Diogenes Larertius had decided in 1431 that Asia had not had philosophy per se, a notion which immediately "exerted enormous influence."³⁴ With the Hellenocentric view established,³⁵ refined and integrated into all levels of learning, colonial expansion ensued, its rightness explained, or excused, on the basis of it being an obvious truth. The stirrings of an Oriental Renaissance during the Romantic era

would momentarily weaken an otherwise solid wall of scholarly rejection,³⁶ but it would fail to mature as attention was transferred from Greece and focused on Egypt as the presumed source of everything.³⁷ A partially perceived linguistic relationship between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin would be usurped by the fantasy that Egypt was the Mother of All Civilisation, the Greek Miracle momentarily shelved prior to its resuscitation as the nineteenth century advanced.³⁸ Hence the philosopher Martin Heidegger's apparent belief that modernity and westernisation were one and the same thing, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that concepts "coined by the Greeks, alter the essence of what is foreign."³⁹

Timelessness, Critical Analysis and Wisdom

The difference between Indian mystical thinking and Greek philosophical thinking is, at one level of interpretation, the difference between history and timelessness, critical analysis and wisdom. Indian thought was perceived as ahistorical and grounded in nature, western thought as historical and grounded in culture.⁴⁰

This perception stemmed from India's doctrine of reality as an illusion (Maya) pitted against the eventual Greek interpretation of reality via Descartes as *the data of experience*. I say "eventual" in that that is how Greek philosophy ended up, but it is not how Greek philosophical thinking either got underway, or developed over many, many hundreds of years prior to "data of experience" becoming the governing concept. Indian and Greek thinkers had been concerned, from the very beginning, with the same basic problem: how to explain the nature of reality and how that reality had arisen. Propounding a doctrine that McEvilley believes to have stemmed from an Indian source, Plato argued for an Empedocles-Pythagoras-based explanation where the world of separate forms - Reality as it is perceived - was conjectured to have arisen from a fundamental Oneness that in itself did not change. Which was of course an outlook with a religious dimension, although not one that can be associated with, say, the Jewish

and later Christian idea of an unchanging God. The Jewish-Christian God may be said to be unchanging, but he is also an overt creator; He makes the world and everything in it in six days, and declares it all pretty good on the seventh. Plato's postulated "Oneness" is not such a being, in fact it is not a being at all; it is, in some sense beyond comprehension, the source of all being without succumbing to the limitations that being imposes on individual forms. In light of this basic argument, Indian and Greek thinkers began to work out the pros and cons of how the Many (the world of objects) could have arisen from what they termed the One (the fundamental source), when that One was not an object, and in not being an object was, as already stated, indivisible. How could you get the world of objects (plurals) out of a singular when the singular One wasn't even singular? If only the One was real, how then should we define the rest of perceived reality?

Indian thinkers answered this question in the negative: the world and everything in it was unreal; only the One was real. Greek thinkers such as Plato attempted the impossible and suggested a gradation of forms between the real and the unreal eventuating in what W. G. Runciman described as some things existing more than others.⁴¹ This approach was eventually taken up on two distinct, but fundamentally related, levels, Aristotle emphasising Plato's graduated move towards pluralism, Neoplatonists such as Plotinus emphasising Plato's acceptance of an indivisible Oneness at the heart of reality.⁴² In spite of inherent conceptual problems, the notion of Oneness at the heart of reality persisted throughout the thousand-year history of Greek philosophy in various forms,⁴³ the problem of preserving and explaining the sensible world,⁴⁴ culminating in the Cartesian method of interpreting reality by way of the data of experience alone. Not experience in terms of being intercepted by the Oneness Plato sensed to underlie reality; just experience as data, as information, as a means to control reality. The hidden Oneness of reality was now completely hidden from view; Cartesian rationalism had successfully concealed it beyond even its own natural tendency for concealment.

Question: How can some things exist more than others? What must the state of something be for it to exist more than others? McEvilley inadvertently hints at what this might mean when he speaks of Plato's preference being to divulge his real doctrines only orally and in private, his distrust of written philosophy linked to his belief that knowledge should pass from teacher to student like flame from a leaping spark.⁴⁵ In this statement McEvilley can hear "a distant resonance of the idea of the shamanic lineage - the necessity of learning a tradition from one who directly incarnates it."⁴⁶ Real doctrines? Before delving into the question of what existing more than others might mean in experiential terms, I think it necessary to recap quickly on how the early Greek philosophers comported themselves prior to the notion of their being conduits for philosophical ideas and naught else. As noted earlier, Pythagoras was associated with the realm of shamanism, as was Empedocles and others. Through an expanded notion of the self resulting in god-like abilities, protophilosophers such as Empedocles and Pythagoras made claims no different from their philosophical counterparts in India, their belief in reincarnation and special powers of mind linking them into an archaic form of perception and belief which, with the assistance of Parmenides, eventually transitioned from shamanic form into philosophical form. But not entirely; the shamanic form did not disappear; it remained hidden in terms of expression, Plato's reference to his "real" teachings indicative of its ongoing presence during oral instruction. The assumption today, of course, is that Greek rationalism was alone responsible for the deepest aspects of Greek thinking, but that is a quite mistaken projection of our own time in relation to a methodology being allowed to usurp the place of what sparked off such brilliance in the first place. And more than that, even, for that same methodology also underpinned, as McEvilley points out, the ravages of Modernism - colonialism, patriarchalism, racism, world war, holocaust, environmental pollution, and the hegemony of international corporations⁴⁷ - and now supports the relativistic pronouncements of postmodernism. Second-stage, science-usurped Humanism was up and running, and it still had a long way to go.

Silence and Secrecy

Pythagoras expected his students to remain quietly in rooms underneath the earth, silence having meant a great deal more to him than secrecy about doctrine: silence was that through which the gods spoke, secrecy no more than a safeguarding of what the gods had communicated. Silence was either the gods speaking as inner rumination, or a cultivation of meaning not involving language.⁴⁸ That leaves us with thinking on two levels: (1) thought in its creatively inspired mode; and (2) thought functioning beyond the strictures of language, learning and memory. Question: Is all this talk of talking gods (and goddesses) among the Greek and Indian philosophers the interstices point between one form of consciousness and another? If so, it raises the question of why the re-establishing of such an archaic state resulted in superior forms of philosophical understanding for a select few? Why should reaching back into a so-called primitive, undifferentiated state of consciousness produce philosophical insight and a tendency towards a more disciplined and ethical form of living? Could a former state of undifferentiated consciousness be only half of the story, the other half having to do with the by then emerged principle of differentiation being taken back into psyche in such a fashion as to create a whole new psychic configuration?

Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras were, as we saw earlier, also initiatic teachers, their experience of what they perceived to be the gods speaking in deep states of induced interiority a process that transformed them into a shamanic caste due to their finding the means to re-establish a timeless, non-intrusive, or frozen, state of mind in the place of critical analysis alone. Freed from constant ego association and assessment, these inner adventurers "registered" rather than "thought" their discoveries into existence, resorting afterwards to critical analysis and the still evolving dialectical method. This suggests to me two extraordinary possibilities: (1) that the supposed problem of the One and the Many had already been solved in relation to perceptual differentiation; and (2) that awareness in terms of psyche as a whole was already experientially different

from what it had been prior to the development of an ego complex. This tells us that a more advanced state of awareness was available *in potentia*, a form of awareness corresponding to a state *beyond* both differentiated and undifferentiated consciousness. Mystical apprehension in this advanced, experiential Greek and Indian sense was then not an irrational state, or a mystical state in the sense of religious beliefs projected, or a return to a primitive, undifferentiated state of mind; it was, rather, a sophisticated form of conscious awareness known to and developed by individuals not only then, but in every age since the first glimmers of conscious awakening began to register. The neuronal substrate of consciousness may then be said to harbour a deal more than biochemical processes merrily processing; it may also harbour an obscured echelon of mind capable of functioning (speaking?) in relation to alternative measures, orders and dimensions of reality. At this juncture such a statement is difficult to justify, but we have some way to go yet.

W. G. Runciman's curious notion that some things can exist more than others may actually be an accurate description of what transpires between the One and the Many if one of the many is a human being with a capacity to elevate their level of awareness beyond that of social, cultural and intellectual norms. For unless someone's level of knowing shifts from a thing's differentiating qualities of existence to that of its undifferentiated "presence", then the knowers knowing cannot be classed as fundamental: the "two" must become "one" for the transaction between self and other to be authentic, and that means in turn that the knower must register *as a presence to him or herself* over against the presence of the object in question. Ordinary knowing is that which alienates us from what we know because it reduces what we know to a category of thought, whereas knowing the self as "presence" opens us up to world as "presence", and in being opened up, or unconcealed to ourselves, we come to know what we know beyond the closing down effect of categorisation. So also with the self. The self ceases to be a "me" with a name and a personality and becomes a living being. The quality of our knowing is then not a quality in relation to a thing's parts, or attributes, it is a quality in strict relation to a things *being in existence* over against our own being in existence which, by its very nature, annuls sense of

time and introduces a new dimension of conscious awareness free from the wheel of everyday existence. Well, momentarily free from the wheel of everyday existence in that we will again and again return to, or fall back into, our ordinary level of awareness. Or, if you like, be *reborn* back into our everyday existence in what may be a parallel notion to that of reincarnation in that it, too, is a falling back into the limitations of space and time.

Dueling Philosophers

The shamanic aspect exhibited in the thinking and behaviour of pre-Socratic and post-Socratic Greek philosophers carries the stamp of altered states of consciousness in relation to speaking gods and goddesses, their primordial utterances incongruously underpinning some of the most abstract thinking about self, other and world ever perceived and developed by the human mind. And that is a huge giveaway in terms of the two kinds of philosophy that eventually developed in Greece, two philosophies with two distinct signatures: that of Parmenides and Heraclitus. Which makes Plato's description of Parmenides and Heraclitus as the "father" and "mother" of philosophy particularly apt, for these thinkers were indicative of a split in the Greek conception of reality that would reverberate into our own time with devastating consequences. This need not have been the case, however, for the conceptions of philosophy developed by Parmenides and Heraclitus were actually complementary methodologies, bifurcation or forkings of thought into conceptions of reality that again and again collided, coincided and collapsed back into one another even as they separated and contradicted one another. It was (and still is) a dizzying game of now you see it, now you don't, a perfect example of what hides, or is concealed, within the reality we think we know so well.

The problem, in a nut shell, was that Parmenides' doctrine "left the world of phenomena unconnected with the realm of Being";⁴⁹ their was either absolute Being or absolute non-Being', there being no intermediate state of existence between those ontological absolutes. This left Parmenides with the rather ticklish problem of explaining what the world of things was in itself if it did not actually

exist. His solution was to postulate a paradox: reality both existed and did not exist simultaneously: there was no there-ness between the One and the Many; it just looked as if there were.⁵⁰ Asked to explain his explanation, he said that reality was a trick, a deceit of the senses, an illusion that could not be penetrated beyond postulating the fact of the paradox's existence. Fooled by what we perceived to be real, we had fashioned a false impression of reality and fallen into dire error. All was illusion; we were in receipt of a perceptual lie that only appeared to be a truth. Heraclitus rejected Parmenides' logic in favour of the world of sense being real, but in such a state of constant flux, or agitation, that it could not be known.⁵¹ Reality could only be known in relation to its unchangeable essence, or Being; there was an unchanging beingness at the heart of all things that could be known if our own unchanging essence could be tapped into.⁵² The surface flux of reality constituted our own not knowing, or ignorance, the unchangeable essence of reality in relation to our own unchanging essence our ability to know in an essential manner. For Parmenides, perceptual reality existed and did not exist simultaneously; it was an illusion beyond which there was nothing, a truth that only conceptual thought could glimpse. For Heraclitus, human beings could either exist or not exist depending on how they approached reality's disorienting flux, there being a hidden unchangeableness or there-ness about the self that could penetrate the flux of reality and reveal a corresponding there-ness in all things. Interestingly, Plato unites these apparently diametrically opposed positions by perceiving both to be in motion, and both to be at rest.

The Heidegger Connection

The philosopher Martin Heidegger seems to attribute the divine voice heard by Parmenides (the goddess of "Truth") to a hypostatized "inner voice", or "device" implemented by later antiquity to represent abstract thought.⁵³ Heidegger's acquiescence in this formula was however a device designed to highlight an attitude then prevalent among psychologists and philosophers, namely, that the

later Cartesian formula for reasoning proper had, in essence, been formulated by Parmenides. Other gods and goddesses had been unequivocally delineated as "divine persons" in the ancient texts, but not the Goddess of Truth; she alone had stood out as representing an abstract principle among a conglomerate of mythological imaginings. No mythical experience could be associated with this goddess; the use of "of" in her description was in fact a misrepresentation of her abstract quality, she being not the goddess *of* Truth, just the goddess Truth personified by Parmenides to represent his own thoughts.⁵⁴ There were possible remnants of mythological input in the association, but only in a poetic sense; dissociation of reason from myth had, post Parmenides, rendered mythological imagining all but inoperative.

The transition from myth to reason is one thing, the nature of that transition quite another. Heidegger presents what he terms the prevalent view⁵⁵ that "Western thought is accomplished with the Greeks", a claim confirming academic opinion as evinced by McEvilley, but he is not altogether satisfied with the outcome of that opinion in terms of Cartesian reasoning being linked to the reasoning of Parmenides. Similar they certainly were; identical they were not. Logos would finally displace mythos, thinkers be capable of recognising their own meditations as the source of their thoughts,⁵⁶ but was that the whole story?

Heidegger admits to a mode of thought being developed by Parmenides that eventually took hold in the thinking of the West, but he at the same time disallows the West's Cartesian-dominated form of thinking as an "aberrant consequence", not a natural off-shoot of the Parmidean dialectic.⁵⁷ With philosophical daring he progressively leads us away from the very thing he seems to be advocating, namely, that dialectical reasoning is the only route to a proper understanding of self, other and world, and ends with a definition of "Truth" that reveals it to be conflictual in its essential nature, not conducive to "certainty" as presumed in the thinking of the Christian-dominated West. He is in fact driving at something altogether different from what one might suppose, and that "something" has to do with *how* we think in contrast to *what* we think. As is

always the case with Heidegger, this difference is not laid out in neat logical steps; it is mostly embedded in a form of language resistant to easy comprehension, but worthy of any time spent in decipherment. And that, I think, is the whole point of the exercise; there is a dimension of self-opening in his text that entices one towards an unexpected appreciation of what is being articulated. For what Heidegger seems to be saying is that what we think is not thinking *per se*; it is merely the content of what has been thought. Thought in itself is of a completely different order to what we think, the quality of what we think being dependent on whether our thinking is the result of Cartesian, rationalist methodology, or the result of a deep attentiveness in relation to the primary question of our being in existence. This is not to suggest that the primary question of our being in existence must always appear in our thinking; just that it ought to inform us in how to think as we think. Shorn of that question we are, as McEvilley suggests in relation to modernism's devastating effect on society and culture, a real and present danger to everything and everyone we come in contact with. Then comes a further subtlety that again seems to uphold the premise Heidegger has just gainsaid:

Thinkers do not proclaim "revelations" from a god. They do not report the inspirations of a goddess. They state their own insights. What then are we to make of a goddess in this "didactic poem" [of Parmenides] which brings to words the thoughts of a thinking whose purity and rigor have never recurred since.

Well and good, and what one would expect. But he adds:

But even if Parmenides' thinking did arise out of a ground as yet hidden to us and therefore stood in a relation to the goddess "Truth," we would nonetheless still be lacking the immediate appearance of a divine figure such as we are familiar with in the Greek world. Athena, Aphrodite, Artemis,

and Demeter appear as unequivocally delineated "divine persons". The goddess "truth" on the other hand, is largely abstract.⁵⁸

A ground as yet hidden to us lacking the appearance of a divine figure, yet still related to the goddess "Truth" in spite of her being an abstraction? Heidegger offers a hypothetical explanation in alignment with Cartesian reasoning: Parmenides may just have been adding a bit of colour to alleviate the sheer starkness of his poem's abstract sentiments. But he isn't serious; he's playing us on the hook of our own rationalistic tendencies, our entrenched belief that how we have come to think is entirely natural. Then comes the big question: What if the thinking of Parmenides and Heraclitus wasn't of this kind; what if their ancient form of thought was altogether different? What then? Well, from there on in it's a whole new ball game in relation to what thinking is in itself, and to what a thought is in itself: the relation of thinking to its thought is, it seems, a little more complicated than we may have supposed - primordial thinking isn't just old, it's unique on two distinct levels.

In ending this chapter I'm going to move rapidly through the labyrinth of Heidegger's conception of "primordial thinking" and attempt what is in fact impossible, but which has to be attempted to prove that the thing I wish to convey cannot be conveyed except by way of failure in the attempt - a capacity to indicate is all I have at my disposal. Does that make sense? Perhaps not, but only in terms of it being an apparently pointless exercise, which in fact it is not. And that, I think, is exactly what Heidegger is up to in his often convoluted prose; he is leading us towards what cannot be grasped by ordinary mind, that is, through the process of ordinary thinking. Ordinary thinking is cognitively practical, he tells us; it is involved in technical-practical, moral-practical mastery whether scientific, prescientific or unscientific.⁵⁹ But alongside this form of thinking lies non-ordinary thinking (my term, not Heidegger's), a form of thinking that attempts to think the Being of beings; or, if you care, attempts to understand what it means to exist beyond the existential how of existence. How we exist, or how we have come

to exist, is of no consequence in relation to thinking the Being of beings; we are in the presence of a question that transcends the metaphysics of questioning itself, but which can nevertheless be posed, and has to be posed for that fact to be appreciated. Ordinary thinking steers clear of this question; non-ordinary thinking, in spite of being non-ordinary, thinks the Being of beings, but cannot actualise what it thinks - it must needs retreat from Being even as it advances in the direction of Being. We are now in the presence of a question that teeters on the edge of what Heidegger terms "primordial thinking", and he detects this kind of thinking in the thinking of Parmenides and Heraclitus. But what is primordial thinking if it is not ordinary thinking, or not even non-ordinary thinking? Indeed, is it thinking at all? Or is it something beyond thought in terms of content? Is it perhaps a form of thinking that altogether sidesteps thoughts as content and ends up reflecting something of Gottlob Frege's notion that "Thoughts . . . must be in an ontological dimension of their own", and that they should be "distinguished from ideas, the latter defined as inseparable from the minds which have them."⁶⁰

This curious notion suggests, unless I'm very much mistaken, that thinking and mind are not the same thing, and that thinking in the ordinary, everyday sense of that word, only surfaces when the grammar of language is imposed on thought. But as Jean Curthoys points out, that "presupposes that they [thoughts] are the kind of thing that can have their form imposed on them in that way."⁶¹ Which takes us back to Frege's definition of thought as "non-sensible somethings",⁶² a notion that even Fregean-influenced philosophers reject as his myth of a third realm.⁶³ But something similar seems to be going on in Heidegger, his separation of ordinary thinking from primordial thinking being a case in point. But being Heidegger he pushes further still, his conception of "truth" in relation to the "goddess truth" indicative that primordial thinking carries not just an ontological dimension as Frege suggested (in the Fregean sense all thinking is fundamentally ontological), but that primordial thinking can also be an ontologically-driven experience that transcends both ordinary and non-ordinary

thinking in relation to the Being of beings. In this sense the goddess "Truth" is neither a mythical experience nor a mere personification of the self's own thoughts; she is rather an experiential dimension related to primordial thinking, but not in itself primordial, a radical form of creative thought post the emergence of language that transcend language in the sense of going *beyond* language. *Beyond* language is not merely a resuscitation of the our once pristine primordial state prior to the development of language, it is our next great adventure in relation to *presencing* ourselves alongside self, other and world.

References and Notes:

- 1) Koestler, Arthur, *The Lotus and the Robot*, Hutchinson, London 1960. p. 162.
- 2) Ibid, p. 282.
- 3) Ibid, p. 126.
- 4) McEvilley, Thomas, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, Allworth Press, New York 2002. p. 177.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Ibid, p. 180.
- 7) Ibid, p. 181.
- 8) Ibid.
- 9) Ibid, p. 178.
- 10) Ibid.
- 11) Ibid.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) Ibid, p. 45.
- 14) Ibid, p. 46.
- 15) bid, p. 102.
- 16) Ibid, p. 103.
- 17) Ibid, p. 178.
- 18) Ibid, p. 179.
- 19) Ibid, pp. xix-xx. According to Bernard d'Espagnat (*On Physics and Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 2006), p.14) Descartes spoke of the physical world by way of "figures" and "motions", Newton of "material points", idealised grains and specks, familiar concepts that led to a mechanistic world-view in spite of human beings being able to think outside of the framework of familiar things. The idea of the world as a gigantic machine seemed plausible, and was brilliantly successful, but it was an overstatement: physics would yield a quite different message.
- 20) Ibid, p. xxv.
- 21) Ibid.
- 22) Ibid, xx.
- 23) Ibid, p. 98.
- 24) Ibid.
- 25) bid, p. 642.
- 26) Ibid, p. 643.
- 27) Ibid, p. 642.
- 28) Ibid, p. 649.
- 29) Ibid.

- 30) Ibid, p. 651.
- 31) Ibid, p. 650.
- 32) Ibid.
- 33) Ibid.
- 34) Ibid, p. 651.
- 35) Ibid.
- 36) Ibid, pp. xxii-xxiii.
- 37) Ibid, p. xxiii.
- 38) Ibid.
- 39) *Grubdriss der allgemeinen Geschte der Philosophie*, Frankfurt Klosatermann, 1949, p. 18, 653.
- 40) McEvilley, Thomas, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, (see above) p. 650.
- 41) Ibid, p. 157 See also W.G. Runciman's *Plato's Later Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. 66
- 42) Ibid, p. 157.
- 43) Ibid.
- 44) Ibid.
- 45) bid, p. 158.
- 46)l bid.
- 47) Ibid, p. 648.
- 48) Ibid, p. 178.
- 49) Ibid, p. 159.
- 50) Ibid, p. 54.
- 51) Ibid, p. 158.
- 52) Ibid. See also Heidegger's *Plato's Sophist*, Indiana University Press, 2003. p. 338-340 for further elucidation on the problem of balancing the views of Parmenides with those of Heraclitus.
- 53) Heidegger, Martin, *Parmenides*, Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 5.
- 54) Ibid.
- 55) Ibid, p. 6.
- 56) Ibid, p. 5.
- 57) Ibid, p. 6.
- 58) Ibid, p. 5.
- 59) Ibid, p. 7.
- 60) Curthoys, Jean, Victor Dudman's *Grammar and Semantics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. p. 57.
- 61) Ibid, p. 55.
- 62) Ibid.
- 63) Ibid.

