

Norms and Paradoxes in Spiritual Alchemy

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Metaphysical thought essentially presupposes intellection, or let us say intellectual intuition; the latter is not a matter of sentiment, of course, but of pure intelligence. Without this intuition, metaphysical speculation is reduced either to an opaque dogmatism or to an imprecise ratiocination; and quite evidently, speculative thought deprived of its intuitive foundation would be unable to prepare the ground for Gnosis: for direct, concrete and plenary Knowledge. Let us specify that the eventual gaps in the human mind are due, not to fortuitous causes, but to the very conditions of the "dark age," the kali-yuga, which has as an effect -- among other modes of decadence -- a progressive weakening of pure intellection and of the ascending tendencies of soul; whence the necessity of the religious Revelations, and whence also the problematical phenomenon of gratuitous and divergent philosophies. But man always remains man "made in the image of God"; nothing could prevent -- even in these millennia of darkness--the flowering of wisdoms pertaining to the Sophia Perennis: such as the Upanishads, the Brahma-Sûtras and the Advaita-Vedânta.

The content of the universal and primordial Doctrine is the following, expressed in Vedantic terms: "Brahma is Reality; the world is appearance; the soul is not other than Brahma." These are the three great theses of integral metaphysics; one positive, one negative, one unitive. Let us specify that in the second affirmation, it is important to understand that "appearance" gives rise to two complementary interpretations: according to the first, the world is illusion, nothingness; according to the second, it is Divine Manifestation; the first point of view is upheld by Shankara and Shivaism, and the second by Ramanuja and Vishnuism; roughly speaking, for there are compensations in both camps. The third of the fundamental affirmations in a way marks the passage from the "Truth" to the "Path," or let us say from the Doctrine to the Method; the soul not being "other than Brahma," its vocation is to transcend the world. In other words, since the human intellect has by definition the capacity to conceive and to realize the Absolute, this possibility is its Law; from speculative discernment results operative and unitive concentration. To theology is joined orison; "pray without ceasing."

But there is yet another dimension to be considered, and it is the moral -- in certain respects "aesthetic" -- climate of spiritual alchemy; this climate basically constitutes what has been called the "initiatory qualification." To the Truth and to the Path must be joined Virtue, namely the qualities of humility, charity, justice and dignity: rigorous knowledge

of oneself, benevolent understanding of others, impartial perception of the nature of things, inward and outward participation in the "Motionless Mover" -- in the immutable Archetype or the majesty of Being. There is no sâdhana without dharma; no spiritual alchemy without nobleness of character; "beauty is the splendor of the True."

The point of departure of the Path is the Doctrine; the origin of which is Revelation; man accepts Revelation through intellectual intuition or by that feeling for the True -- or the Real -- which is called faith. There is little likelihood of a man being born with knowledge of the integral Doctrine; but it is possible -- very exceptionally -- that he possess from birth the certitude of the Essential.

Intelligence, by which we comprehend the Doctrine, is either the intellect or reason; reason is the instrument of the intellect, it is through reason that man comprehends the natural phenomena around him and within himself, and it is through it that he is able to describe supernatural things -- parallel to the means of expression offered by symbolism by transposing intuitive knowledge into the order of language. The function of the rational faculty can be to provoke -- by means of a given concept -- a spiritual intuition; reason is then the flint which makes the spark spring forth. The limit of the Inexpressible varies according to mental structures: what is beyond all expression for some, may be easily expressible for others.

It is all too readily believed that a metaphysical text is a creation of reason because it has the form of a logical demonstration, whereas reason in this case is but the means of transmission. There are mystics who are disinterested in a text because it is logical, that is, because they believe it is necessary to transcend this plane; as if logic were a sign of ignorance or illusion, whereas it is a reflection within our mind of the universal Causality.

The desire to transcend the plane of logic is combined, in a certain sectarianism hostile to discursive expression, with the desire to transcend the "scission" between the subject and the object; now this complementary opposition does not prevent the known -- whatever the situation of the knower -- from being of the loftiest order. The subject and the object are not adversaries; they unite in a fusion that -- according to the content of the perception -- can have an interiorizing and liberating virtue, of which aesthetic enjoyment and the union of love are the foremost examples. In Atmâ, the triad Sat, Chit, Ananda -- "Being, Consciousness, Beatitude" -- is not a factor of scission; similarly, on earth, the dimensions of physical space do not prevent space from being one, so that we perceive no fissure in it.

What we blame in those who are contemptuous of "metaphysical ratiocination" and the "subject-object opposition" is not so much a given perspective as the exaggeration resulting from it or nourished by it. Excess is in the nature of man; pious exaggeration is inevitable on the whole, as is the sectarian mentality. We do not remember who said "all that is excessive is insignificant"; this is quite true, but let us not lose sight of the fact that on the religious plane, hyperbole veils an intention that in the end is merciful; it is then a question of upâya, of a "saving stratagem". Doubtless, the voices of wisdom that esoterically either condemn or justify "holy absurdities" may appear "heretical" from the

standpoint of a given literalistic orthodoxy, but "God knoweth His own"; the Divine Intellect is not limited by a given theology or a given morality. According to the norm, that which is true saves; according to Grace, that which saves is true.

Unquestionably, the partisans of a symbolist and anti-intellectual intuitionism make a mistake in reproaching speculative intelligence for not being Knowledge as such -- which it does not claim to be -- and in concluding that it is an obstacle in the Path, whereas, quite evidently, theoretical knowledge is an indispensable stage of the pilgrimage towards total Knowledge. Man is a thinking being, and he cannot evade thought; and "in the beginning was the Word."

There is the perspective of Transcendence and there is the perspective of Immanence; each must be found in the other, as is shown in its own way by the Taoist Yin-Yang. There is a subjective Transcendence as there is an objective Immanence: the intellect is transcendent in relation to the individual, as the Creator is immanent in created things.

But here also -- in the face of these two Mysteries -- there are the divergent options of those who make of every complementarity an alternative: some believe that everything has to fall from Heaven; others believe that everything can and must come from our own efforts. Now human intelligence, being theomorphic, possesses in principle a supernatural power; but whatever be the prerogatives of our nature, we can do nothing without God's help: for it is He who causes us to participate in the Knowledge He has of Himself.

In Japanese Buddhism, one distinguishes between "self-power," *jiriki*, and "Other-power," *tariki*; the first refers to Immanence and the second to Transcendence. The first means that everything, in the Path, depends on our own strength and initiative; the second means that everything depends on celestial Grace. In reality, even if one of the viewpoints predominates, both viewpoints have to be combined; for on the one hand, we cannot save ourselves by relying entirely on our own strength, and on the other hand, Heaven will not help us if we, who are created intelligent and free, do not collaborate in our own salvation.

We have seen above that the practice of unitive concentration proceeds from a speculative discernment that justifies and even requires it; now the supports of this concentration are infinitely diverse by reason of the complexity of man, distant reflection of the Infinitude of God.

The modes are not always intelligible at first sight; for example, one might wonder what the relevance is of a discipline such as the Tea Ceremony, which combines asceticism with art, while being materially based on manipulations that seem a priori unimportant, but are ennobled by their sacralization. First of all, one must take into account the fact that in the Far Easterner, sensorial intuition is more developed than the speculative gift; also, that the practical sense and the aesthetic sense, as well as the taste for symbolism are at the basis of his spiritual temperament. In the Tea Ceremony, the symbolic and morally

correct act -- the "profound" act if one will -- is supposed to bring about a sort of Platonic anamnesis or a unitive consciousness, whereas with the white man of the East and the West it is the Idea that is supposed to lead to correct and virtuous acts. The man of the yellow race goes from sensorial experience to intellection, roughly speaking, whereas with the white man, it is the converse that takes place: in starting out from concepts, or from habitual mental images, he understands and classifies phenomena, without, however, feeling the need to consciously integrate them into his spiritual life, except incidentally or when it is a question of traditionally accepted symbols.

Men are different; some like to express themselves by subtle allusions, for fear of limiting the real, while others prefer direct and analytical expression, for fear of remaining imprecise -- it takes all kinds to make a world -- but all the possibilities can be combined, man not being a closed system. Besides, one cannot help defining things, but care must be taken not to limit them too much in defining them; and if discursive expression is a double-edged sword, it is because reality presents a thousand facets.

The Tea Ceremony signifies that we ought to perform all the activities and manipulations of daily life according to primordial perfections, which is pure symbolism, pure consciousness of the Essential, perfect beauty and self-mastery. The intention is basically the same in the craft initiations of the West -- including Islam -- but the formal foundation is then the production of useful objects and not the symbolism of gestures; this being so, the stone mason intends, parallel to his work, to fashion his soul in view of union with God. And thus there is to be found in all the crafts and all the arts a spiritual model that, in the Muslim world, often refers to one of the prophets mentioned in the Koran; any professional or homemaking activity is a kind of revelation. As for the adherents of Zen, they readily seek their inspiration in "ordinary life," not because it is trivial, to be sure, but because -- inasmuch as it is woven of symbolisms -- it mysteriously implies the "Buddha nature."

All this evokes the question of the Symbol and of symbolism; what is the role of the Symbol in the economy of spiritual life? We have just shown that the object of concentration is not necessarily an Idea, but that it can also be a symbolic sign, a sound, an image or an activity: the monosyllable Om, mystical diagrams-- mandalas -- and images of the Divinities are in their way vehicles of consciousness of the Absolute, without the intervention of a doctrinal element; the "contemplation of the naked Lady," in certain circles of the troubadours or the Fideli d'Amore, suggests a vision of the Infinite and of Pure Being-- not a seduction, but a catharsis. The pre-eminence either of the Idea or of the Symbol is a question of opportuneness rather than of principle; by the nature of things, the modes of the Path are as diverse as men are, and as complex as the human soul. But whatever be our points of departure -- Idea or Symbol or their combination -- there is also, and essentially, concentration on the Void, concentration made of certitude and serenity; as Shankara said: "That which is the ceasing of mental agitation and the supreme Peacefulness that is the true Benares, and that is what I am."

For a certain mysticism met with in all traditional climates, only sentiment -- not intelligence -- offers the solution to the main problem of our existence, namely the meaning of life; eschatology then takes on the function of metaphysics. In this promotion of feeling, the word "truth" is still used, but it means that which liberates us while granting us a happiness that we experience as being fundamental and lasting; truth is then no longer a principle comprising the most diverse contents, it is simply a given content dogmatized; it is forgotten that the true is the nature of things, and that nothing can take precedence over this in the vision of the real. Still within this mental and moral climate, intelligence -- presented as "analytical" and "separative" -- is opposed to sentiment viewed according to its synthetic and unitive aspect; and what is constructed is a deformed image of man, as if he were the victim of a deceptive intelligence, and liberated by some sentimental solution.

This is not to say that sentiment could not, for its part, be a mode of knowledge as well, for to love something worthy of being loved is to "know" it in a certain way; but this is no reason for believing that sentiment, because of its spontaneous, unarticulated and quasi-magical character, is the only mode of knowledge possible, or the loftiest mode.

A fact that seems to justify the sentimental intuitionists in question -- but the real bearing of which they hardly suspect -- is the following, and it is incontestable: a phenomenon of beauty can be more suddenly and more profoundly convincing than a logical explanation, whence this maxim: "The Buddhas save not by their preaching alone, but also by their superhuman beauty." Also, the Platonic opinion that "Beauty is the splendor of the True" expresses without equivocation the profound, intimate, ontological relationship between the Real and the Beautiful, or between Being and Harmony; a relationship that implies -- as we have just said -- that Beauty is sometimes a more striking and transforming argument than a discursive proof; not logically more adequate, but humanly more miraculous.

To say Beauty is to say Love; and it is known how important this idea of Love is in all religions and all spiritual alchemies. The reason for this is that Love is the tendency towards Union: this tendency can be a movement, either towards the Immutable, the Absolute, or towards the Limitless, the Infinite; on the plane of human relations, a particular love is the support for Love as such; and the love of man for woman can be compared to the liberating tendency towards the Divine Infinitude -- woman personifying All-Possibility -- whereas the love of woman for man is comparable to the stabilizing tendency towards the Divine Center, which offers all certitude and all security; however, each partner participates in the other's position, given that each is a human being and that in this respect the sexual scission is secondary. As regards sexuality in itself, the Sufi Ibn Arabi deems sexual union to be, in the natural order, the most adequate image of Supreme Knowledge: of Extinction in Allâh of the "Knower through Allâh."

The initiatory journey comprises an Enlightenment that is produced either gradually, or at one single time, or again at the moment of death, when the psychosomatic drama favors this irruption of Light. It is, at one degree or another, Moksha, Bodhi, Satori; ecstasy is an

analogous mode, but of a different order, for of itself it does not produce a lasting station. Enlightenment -- which moreover presupposes persevering efforts and quite often severe trials -- has often been presented as a mystery of Love, precisely because it is a question of an integral and quasi-existential reality that transcends the mental play of conjectures and conclusions; l'Amore che muove il sole e l'altre stelle.

The initiatory journey presents two moral dimensions of primary importance, one exclusive and ascetical and the other inclusive and symbolist or aesthetic, if one may say so. Among aspirants to Liberation, there are first of all those who, in the name of Truth, withdraw from the world, such as monks or sannyâsîs; then there are those who, in the name of the same Truth, remain in the world and seek to transmute into gold the lead the world offers a priori, such as the adepts of the knightly and craft initiations. If Shankara recommended the ascetical path, that is because it is the surest, given human weakness; but he specified in one of his writings that the "one delivered in this life," the jivan-mukta, can harmoniously and victoriously adapt himself to any social situation conforming to universal Dharma, as is shown at the highest level by the example of Krishna. On the one hand, one must see God in Himself, beyond the world, in the Emptiness of Transcendence; on the other hand and ipso facto, one must see God everywhere: first of all in the miraculous existence of things and then in their positive and theomorphic qualities; once Transcendence is understood, Immanence reveals itself of itself.

In the Buddhist as well as the Hindu climate, one encounters a mystical altruism that protests against "seeking a selfish salvation": one should not wish to save oneself, it seems, one should at the same time wish to save others, indeed everyone, at least according to one's intention. Now a selfish salvation is a contradiction in terms; an egoist does not obtain salvation, there is no place in Heaven for the miser. Altruists do not see that in the Path, the distinction between "I" and "others" disappears: any salvatory realization is so to speak realization as such, and this being so, a realization obtained by a given person always has an invisible radiance that blesses the ambience. There is no need for a sentimentalism that intends to come to the rescue of Truth; for with Truth, Love is already given, the circle closes with a transpersonal and infinitely generous Beatitude. Love of the Creator implies Love of creatures; and true charity implies Love of God -- of Divine Reality, whatever be its Name.

The Advaitic Doctrine comprises the crucial idea of hierarchized Truth: first of all there is the one and absolute Truth, but this latter does not exclude the diverse and relative truths; on the contrary, it supports them, since they offer to common mortals all they are able to understand and all that can save them. On the one hand, what is true saves ipso facto; on the other hand, that is true which possesses a saving power.

This is what must not be lost sight of when considering the perplexing diversity of liberating Paths -- not just any sects, but the intrinsically orthodox Paths, whatever the demerits of the men who represent them. Doubtless there are demanding doctrines that

cannot satisfy every need for causal explanations; but there are truths all men must acknowledge, actions all must perform, beauties all must realize; which is to say that there is a Message for the least of mortals. Truth, Prayer and Virtue; everything is there.