

Asceticism Today

Today we are all ascetics. We deny humanity in the name of the truth. Any connection to the world of a personal nature is a distortion of what is there, independent and free of us. We preface our statements with "I think..." and feel that this thinking of us is a weak and insignificant image of being. An image can be distorted and so we emphasize, *I think*, and *instability*. We practice this attitude like a virtue. Self is equivalent to contamination. The self embellishes, the self distorts, the self sees things which are not present for everyone. The ultimate goal of the modern saint is a selfless repetition of what already is. The modern ascetic is the materialistic scientist. Those who follow the creative impulse of the human self become artists, become philosophers. They follow the temptations of the self and become entwined in the world of illusion. They all have in common the illusory comfort of their fancies. Often these indulgers of creativity feel that, at bottom, they are inferior to the practitioners of self negation. This attitude is so solid that we doubt anything, any force, any change of view could transform it. The conviction that truth is outside the self is harder than granite. This solidity is a great hindrance for us to see our time as it is. We are convinced of our sobriety and have accepted our fate as replicating surfaces of more or less cleanliness turned toward the complete and finished world. We feel like any movement from this view is a movement away from truth.

We do not believe in the human. The human has been proven not to exist in any substantial way. This is not only the case in our *view* of the essence of reality and the evolution of all phenomena but in the instincts which this view has led us to: reaction to ourselves as spiritual and emotional contamination in a physical world of indifference and purity (the material world). We have a hidden disrespect for ourselves, not unlike some older traditions which saw only sinfulness and aberration in the human being. There has been a shift from denying the pleasures of eating, sexuality and leisure to

denials of imagination and broad thinking, to an unwillingness to accept wisdom and virtue as primary forces of the world.

At this you might say: "Surely we cannot find disrespect for the great ideal of truth! To know things as they are is a deeply *human* longing." This is certainly so, yet to know something as it is, is to know it in itself, to know it from inside, from absolute identity with it. An image is of *something else*. It is outside the reflected. Contemplating this, it is with no disrespect for truth that the above situation is drawn out, but with a respect for it.

Yet we must stop before we are ensnared in abstractions, we will not seek answer to these dilemmas in metaphysics. Metaphysics tires us in America. *Ralph Waldo Emerson* said in 1871:

... young America is not fond of metaphysics. It is to the youth a manila full of pepper, and he wants only a teaspoonful a year. So he admires the Dutch who burnt half the harvest and enhanced the remainder beyond the value of the whole. ⁱ

Mysteries appear before the heart that remains open to life. It is not only the extreme desire for the object in modern science which offers no strength to wrestle with these riddles, it is also our popular contemporary spirituality. One example of this is the recently famous spiritual teacher *Eckhart Tolle*. I would like to dwell on his views not because I find him to be particularly significant, but because one finds in his views ways of looking at the world which are very common and, as I will show, problematic.

Tolle has published a number of books, *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth* being the most well known. One can have the distinct experience when reading him that as one passes over the pages one soon becomes confused. He does not structure his thoughts to lead to insights that mutually illumine each other, he disregards order and speaks in plain statements and pictures which are easy to access in

themselves. One soon understands why such confusion and lack of clear meaning streams from his work. He does not strive for clear thoughts and meaning because for Tolle, thinking leads away from the goal of humanity. In his eyes the pictures and signification, which the active self is engaged in, lead to suffering, aggression and illusion. People identify with their thoughts and this leads to suffering. They lose themselves in believing that what they think has pressing significance. The self, the I, becomes one with these moving forms. This identity of self and form he calls the ego.

Ego arises when your sense of beingness, of "I AM" gets mixed up with form; this is the meaning of identification. This is forgetfulness of being, the primary error, the illusion of absolute separateness that turns reality into a nightmare.ⁱⁱ

Eckhart Tolle guides us through a process which forms the foundation of his world view. He calls this process the arising of unconditioned consciousness out of conditioned consciousness (the ego described above), which is the equivalent of passing from insanity to enlightenment. He repeatedly points to the fact that the human being is the *one* aware of his body, feelings, thoughts, surroundings, indeed of everything. We are aware of them, *distinct* from them, they are not us in our true form. Then we can shift our awareness from the form *to the awareness* which holds this form. This is an experience of the true self of the human being, of the I AM. This is the fundamental experience which has inspired Buddha, Jesus and all the great teachers. Their various teachings have been misunderstood in so far as something else was seen in them than this differentiation, transition and teaching.

For Tolle the development of this unconditioned consciousness is the overcoming of dualism, of separation from reality.

To be still is to be conscious without thought. You are never more essentially, more deeply yourself than when you are still. You are who you were before you temporarily assumed this physical and mental form called a person. You are also who you will be when this form dissolves. When you are still you are who you were before your existence: consciousness-unconditioned, formless, eternal.ⁱⁱⁱ

This shift also has a moral dimension according to Tolle. Shifting your I Am to your true self will lead to harmony between your actions and the interconnections of the greater world. There is a harmony and order which weaves everything together. For Tolle, the comprehension of the harmonies of the world is not within our grasp. This is interesting when one reflects that Tolle claims a solution to dualism. He offers formless eternity as the foundation of our daily experiences. With this all borders are seen as overcome, nothing is excluded, one has arrived at the ground of the world which is stillness and lack of form, It stretches into all directions of space, *it excludes nothing*. Within this state a person can *act* so that their actions have a place within a higher order and harmony. Humans cannot *know* this higher order, *they can only have a vague sense of it*.

Behind the sometimes seemingly random or even chaotic succession of events in our lives as well as in the whole world lies concealed the unfolding higher order and purpose. This is beautifully expressed in the saying "The snow falls each flake in its appropriate place." We can never understand this higher order through thinking about it because whatever we think is content; whereas the higher order emanates from the formless realm of consciousness, from universal intelligence.^{iv}

Here Tolle indicates a universal intelligence, and order and purpose, yet one which has no content. He sets the intelligence out of our reach and yet claims to overcome duality. Still he feels he has found the limitless self, the awareness which encloses everything, which excludes nothing, which is whole and complete in itself.

You become whole, you are not a fragment anymore, which is how the ego perceives itself. Your true nature emerges, which is one with the nature of God.^v

Anyone with a desire for harmony, for wholeness will notice the remaining abyss between the "eternal" human awareness and the cosmos (ordered whole). Tolle points toward the formless experience of the self and advises that we take our comfort in this, to pay no heed to the temptations to understand the interconnections of the greater world. His striving for greater insight and understanding

is stilled, where before he strove to grasp the harmony weaving through life, his striving is tamed and a “more benign and wondrous dream arises”.^{vi}

Tolle sees in his work the overcoming of a dualism going back to Descartes. Yet the overcoming of dualism which Tolle claims to have achieved can only be viewed as such by those who lack care. Tolle posits non specific consciousness as the ground of all phenomenal existence and declares thinking and ideation as a distancing from this ground of the world. Yet when I want to understand what is happening in my life I am excluded from such an understanding if I am constantly placing myself back into the formless experience of consciousness. The spatial relationships between the buildings in my neighborhood have a meaning and harmony within them which is not immediately accessible to me when they enter my field of vision. By recognizing right triangles, walking off two lengths and using the formula $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ and other essential relations inherent in triangles, I can discover otherwise unknown lengths. *I discover lawful spatial relations which were initially outside my awareness and would have remained so if I went from dualistic perception straight to Tolle’s “monism” of Formless consciousness.* The eternal Tolle is referring to is *within* the self. This is an observation. To seek the eternal in the world and in other selves is not a destination on the path Tolle suggests.

Tolle’s apparent humility and care become distasteful when we approach him closely. He dissolves the unique world of life and persons into formlessness. He addresses history, evolution and philosophy in his books but with almost no respect for their character and their complexities. This is most disheartening when he speaks of people. For Tolle humans are either insane creatures or eternal consciousness. He can draw no loving portrait of a character. His tale has no drama, no passion, no heart. In reaction to this we have to join *Robert Hamerling* who wrote:

He who cannot take joy in the green earth,

Who cannot love this bitter sweet existence,

Who, next to all the suffering of life,

Does not sense happiness as well,

Is not my brother, not my sister,

Not my friend or my trusted companion

On the bright path here below.

Whoever seeks me in dust, seeks me in mud,

Or, in the world beyond, out of this world,

And does not seek me on the solid green earth,

With only my soles touching the dust,

Nearing the clouds only with my head:

Such a person will never find me, (believe it),

And if he thinks he has found me,

He is only embracing a delusion he has made.

Whoever cannot see the divine in a Human Destiny,

See all that life brought as holy,

All of the joy and pain,

The Illusions and the weakness,

The battles and human qualities:

I can wonder at him but not trust him,

He can have compassion for me but he can never console me,

And we will never understand each other.

Robert Hamerling^{vii}

The rich and complex feeling for existence which radiates from this poem is a feeling we do not meet as we read Tolle. The categories and concepts which Tolle uses to express himself are general and oversimplified. They lead us out of the complex and differentiated world, they take us out of the freshness of life in a search for the spirit. He thinks he has accessed the world through disengaging with it. Here we do not have the trouble that the image and that which is reproduced are separate, as in the popular scientific idea of knowledge which sees the human as a mirror of essence, but that the imaging consciousness turns toward itself and finds satisfaction in its own emptiness.

These two tendencies can be viewed qualitatively. We feel we have to either pay for sobriety by giving up our humanity, severely limiting the creative activity of our *thoughts* and *hearts*; empirical asceticism; or pay for eternal peaceful consciousness by giving up our integration with the differentiated, solid and clear natural *order*, by giving up thinking and exploration of the world. Both of these deals have in common, each in their own way, that they encourage an asceticism of inner creativity and life, both see the self as a corrupting condition.

The thinking self either leads us away from the otherwise perfect image of the forever external object (science), or it leads us away from the complete and whole self into the ephemeral life of identification with the forms of the world and the ego (spirituality). The human heart demands a path which can perform the marriage of world and self without sacrificing either.

Those with the strength to look beyond these popular and dogmatic tendencies of our time can find examples of this future culture. I will point toward some of these examples for those people that might explore further on their own.

In 2000 a young student of philosophy published an article under the title *Death and Life in Modern Thinking*. This article is written in a way that is very precise and concentrated, you will find nothing ornamental within it. I will not be trying to summarize it. I am only hinting at the significance it has within our present inquiry.

In this article *Jonael Schickler*, the young philosopher, begins by sketching out a phenomenology of the concept developed by *Herbert Witzgenmann*. He describes four kinds of thinking which we can experience in ourselves and in our fellow human beings. He uses the four titles Inherence, Metamorphosis, Intentionality and Actuality to distinguish these four unique areas of existence. He looks into the inner life of his contemporaries and himself with a wakeful, and yet subtle, attention. He does not feel the forces he meets in the thinking human to be irrelevant to the "outer world", rather, he looks into plants, into history and cultural development and finds relationships which were initially hidden. One has the feeling that for every relationship he articulates he is divining many more.

He reads the signs of his time by looking out at his contemporaries and their thinking. On one hand he sees a flexible, moving and subtle thinking primarily engaged in artistic and literary theory and sees that this thinking has a relationship with the growth and constant transformation that we find in plants. He hints at the possibility of a new level of science which could be born if this thinking (metamorphosis of the concept) were brought into the study of nature and rooted in sense perception. He senses that the different thinking in people is essentially connected to the different parts of the greater world. He points out that current scientific practices (Inherence of the concept) cannot grasp

huge portions of the world as it excludes certain forms of thinking and that the fruit of these particular, severely limited practices must lead to nihilism. He sees in the thinking self the link between the greater world and the human, a thinking self which is not recognized in current scientific thought or postmodernism.

So long as natural scientific realism is culturally dominant, the idea of finding in the thinking self that vital link between man(microcosm) and the world(macrocsm) is for most unthinkable. Hence the recoil within much of academic philosophy to an anaemic and often pedantic reflection on the problems of onlooker consciousness.^{viii}

The essential observation I want to make is the attitude of acknowledgment in Jonael Schickler which sees the experiences of the inner human being as a part of the essence of nature, and thus a primal part of nature and the processes we call knowledge, while on the other hand doing justice to the demand that perception through the senses makes on us.

We find another alternative to empirical asceticism in the work of *Craig Holdrege*, the Director of the Nature Institute in upstate New York. He published a book in 2005 called, *The Giraffe's Long Neck, From Evolutionary Fable to Whole Organism*. In this book he offers many observations of the giraffe. He spends time pointing out the characteristic features of its skeleton, of its circulatory system, the environment it lives in and its diet. He observes how the size of the neck, the front limbs and back limbs of the giraffe relate. He observes these relations and points to different examples which he finds in the giraffe family. He compares the giraffe family to other families. He sketches the history of evolutionary theory and opens questions which never should have been closed. He does this in relationship to his particular and specific area of inquiry, the giraffe. At the end of this small book the reader is given two small concluding paragraphs which appear like a fruit of what preceded. Through this paragraph the many observations have become so many supports holding open a window into the giraffe. The essential in the giraffe appears, but not to the senses, it appears in the human who lets sense observations develop themselves in a cognitive process, like the one Craig Holdrege

demonstrates. This essence does not have the shadow character of an abstraction or a stereotype, but of an independent and living being with as much objective independence as a color which is seen with the eye. He once spoke of this process with the words:

Nature requires us to see in and through the immediately given physical object – the particular form of leg bone or spine, locomotion or grooming- and consider what is entire, what lives and moves as the result of a unique, qualitative, and adaptive shaping power working through the whole organism, adjusting part to part.

These are two examples from the last decade but they do not stand alone, this work is not totally new either. If we look back to *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, that person who gave expression to the attitude of self reliance, characteristic of America, we find this tendency and striving toward balance alive and well. Emerson was a person able to maintain his feeling of sober connection with the world while at the same time seeing personhood, virtue and justice within it. He was a lover of nature and the human, and through these two areas he saw the world.

...the veil which hid all things from him is really transparent, transparent everywhere to pure eyes, *and the heart of trust which every perception fortifies*, -renew life for him. He finds that events spring from the same root as persons; the universe understands itself, and all the parts play with a sure harmony.^{ix}

He took experience as a true empiricist, with a trusting heart. He trusted perception and experience. He felt that each moment in life provided a stone which life was built with. For him inner human experience had as much reality as outer experience. He did not want to deny the human person, of the subject, out of a lack of trust in the harmony of the many sided universe. He sensed a unity weaving through the multiplicity and the best way to it was to practice open acceptance of life, even of human creativity and thought. He strove to practice an expanded empiricism. He strove to deny no person, no experience, no riddle. This striving is the root of his essay experience.

Emerson is one example of a person who was able to maintain freshness of immediate life and yet not deny humanity fundamental existence. As I pointed out earlier our empirical ascetic instincts lead us to sacrifice the latter to the former today. Human spirituality is practiced only with the loss of wakeful sobriety and realism, while wakeful realism seems to exclude any meaningful place for the human spirit.

Anyone who knows his work will recognize this tendency in Emerson, no convoluted interpretation is necessary to perceive it. He was deeply connected to nature and yet did not find that it led him to feel alienated in his humanity. He accepted the human being, personhood and truth as real, as “natural”, yet he did not lose touch with the solid ground of the green earth. Indeed, it has been pointed out (Cabot, Rick Spaulding) that his highest aspiration in life was to write a Natural History of Intellect, to approach Intellect and inner creativity with the same sobriety as a mineral, or a plant. He never completed this project but his attempts testify to what he divined as possible. He spoke like a prophet of a future when a sober and earth friendly spirituality would be born in the west when he ended an address at Cambridge in 1838 with the words:

I look for the hour when the supreme Beauty which ravished the souls of those eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the west also. The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures contain immortal sentences, that have been bread of life to millions. But they have no epical integrity; are fragmentary; are not shown in their order to the intellect. I look for the new Teacher that shall follow so far those shining laws that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science with Beauty, and with Joy.^x

Emerson looked forward to a future where religious truth and science would find a harmony together. The anticipation of a science full of spirituality and a spirituality which is grounded and clear is alive for him. This marriage was celebrated decades after Emerson’s death in Europe with the development of anthroposophy by *Rudolf Steiner*.

What is anthroposophy? One can sense that if it is indeed the marriage proposed, that it defies definition and invites exploration. This is so as we cannot claim this marriage in any given category of experience today. We could not justly call it religion, philosophy, psychology, science, anthropology or history. Obviously what is put forward would be no metaphysics while at the same time it would reach beyond natural science^{xi} into science of the spirit. Anthroposophy shows the way that the image, which otherwise excludes the knower, reveals its interior, while showing on the other hand the person reveals great natural/spiritual cosmic forces^{xii}. These two steps are what we need to satisfy the *whole* human.

Self knowledge is rooted in knowledge of the world;

Knowledge of the world sprouts from self knowledge.^{xiii}

Rudolf Steiner

ⁱ From page 7, *Natural History Of Intellect And Other Papers* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, ©2008 Wrightwood Press

ⁱⁱ From page 54, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* by Eckhart Tolle, ©2006 Plume Books

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., page 256

^{iv} Ibid., page 194

^v Ibid., page 184

^{vi} Ibid., page 210

^{vii} *Hamerlings Werke* vol. III page 426, NW translation

^{viii} page 72, Golden Blade 53rd edition

^{ix} 1893 *Natural History of Intellect* p89, italics mine

^x *Emersons Complete Writings* vol. I p151, ©1926 WM H Wise and co

^{xi} *Reincarnation and Karma, Concepts Compelled by the Modern Scientific Point of View*, by R Steiner, translated by L. Monges, © 1962 Anthroposophic Press

^{xii} *Philosophy and Anthroposophy*, By Rudolf Steiner translated by H. Jurgens, ©1988 Mercury Press

^{xiii} *WahrSpruchWorte*, p262, by Rudolf Steiner, R. Steiner Verlag, NW translation