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Reply to Mercier: A Pathless Reality: The Central Theme in J. Krishnamurti

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IN HIS PAPER on *A Key to Krishnamurti's Thought*, Jean L. Mercier[1] offers a very sympathetic summary of some of the most important ideas of Krishnamurti on the "human condition" and the "authentic mode of living." He then draws a general comparison between these ideas and some of the doctrines of Theravada Buddhism, concluding that Krishnamurti provides a new understanding of "the old Buddhism in a modern way." But finally, rather surprisingly, he concludes that Krishnamurti's "authentic living" is unworkable and offers "another form of illusion and a more grievous one than the hope and despair he denounces."[2] He obviously does not find anything radically new in him, and this to my mind suggests the key to Mercier's misunderstanding of Krishnamurti. One would agree that there is not anything new in the doctrinal contents of Krishnamurti's thought; nor in his claim that freedom from the sorrowful human condition is both possible and desirable. His originality, however, lies in the "how" of what we think we can *do* to liberate ourselves.

The reality, the "what is," Truth, God or "whatever you may call it" is pathless. This central claim is the key to the understanding of Krishnamurti's spiritual philosophy. Krishnamurti is not an academic theoriser. Since he offers no systematic exposition of the nature of reality, his casual characterization of the human existence in terms of familiar Buddhist categories, and the resemblance of some of his views, as Mercier shows, with Theravada doctrines are not of much significance. In fact, it is in keeping with the Indian spiritual philosophy generally that Krishnamurti sees the human condition as essentially sorrowful. Everywhere man is struggling to free himself from domination by others, by Nature, by the society, and even by his own impulsive and conditioned nature. Thus all the religions of Indian origin propose spiritual freedom or release from the human condition as the ultimate goal of life, even though the "methods" they prescribe to attain it differ considerably. It is in this context that Krishnamurti's claim that reality is pathless becomes most significant. For not only does he offer no *method* for discovering the ultimate spiritual reality, but he also explains why there cannot be a method, and consequently a definite path, to it. It is in the logic of spiritual discovery that he provides the most powerful critique of religion in our times. For surely all religions, among other things, delineate a definite path,

[1]Jean L. Mercier, "A Key to Krishnamurti's Thought," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1988), 171–83.
[2]*Ibid.*, p. 182.

prescribe their respective methods, to the discovery of the ultimate spiritual reality which they identify as God.

The awareness of the ultimate spiritual reality constitutes the condition of human freedom. It is Krishnamurti's claim that no form of meditation or worship involving a method, effort, or will can produce the condition of freedom in man. Thus Krishnamurti gives none of the familiar criticisms of religion which are based on the arguments against the existence of God or the veracity of individual doctrines or the soteriological significance of rituals and practices. Unequivocally, he claims that in the matter of spiritual freedom any action of the will is self-defeating. To appreciate this point we need first to identify the element of bondage in the human condition and then to explain why it cannot be removed by any action of the will. Only then will we be in a position to respond to Mercier's question: is Krishnamurti's therapy to remove the ills of the human condition workable?[3]

The "inner" freedom with which Krishnamurti is concerned is primarily a freedom from one's own "conditioned" nature. The psychological self is identical with the total repertoire of this conditioned nature, which is structured in personal memories and experiences. From the very beginning of his life man is "conditioned" by his physical and social environment *to obey, to believe, and to follow* certain practices. All these may be "technically" necessary for human learning and well being; but in actual fact we find that they turn into psychological necessities, thus adding a completely new dimension to man's *being* in the world. For then, inwardly, we feel impelled to *use* our skills, our knowledge, and the creative energy not just for the love of life, but for the fulfillment of the psychological self, the "I" or the "me" which we believe to be a permanent entity, continuing to be the same throughout its constantly varying biography.

The "I" thus serves as the center for a complex structure of personal motives which are reflexive in the sense that, although immediately directing consciousness towards an impersonal end, transversally they intend the fulfillment of the "I" itself. Thus when an artist uses his art, a musician uses his violin, *to become famous*, his motive in realizing his art is reflexive in the above sense. The "I" by its very nature tends to be self-seeking. "The activity of living" then turns out to be "the routine, with its struggle and conflict . . . the ache of loneliness . . . the ambition, the search for fulfillment, the success and the sorrow . . . gaining and loosing a battle, and the endless pursuit of pleasure."[4] This, then, is the element of the inner bondage: the felt necessity to fulfill oneself, centering around the I-consciousness—the striving to "become" a *so-and-so*. This extra dimension of self-seeking added to the expressed being of man is the whole source of sorrow. Thus freedom, for Krishnamurti, is freedom *from* the self and not a freedom for the self. It is freedom from "becoming" through the seeking of fulfillment.

THE PROBLEM OF METHOD

Can freedom-from-self be attained by a "method" involving effort or the action of the will? We have already noted that Krishnamurti's answer is in the negative. In his explanation of why it cannot be so, Krishnamurti appeals to the holistic

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 181.

[4]*The Second Penguin Krishnamurti Reader*, Ed. Mary Luytens (London: Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 53 (except when otherwise indicated all Krishnamurti references are to this work).

nature of consciousness: experience, knowledge, memory, thought, desire, and action are interlinked. My present action is rooted in the past experience; it presupposes certain beliefs which are connected with relevant desires. With knowledge we act to realise those desires. In particular the desire to "become," which we noted as the central sustaining feature of the "I," and the action of the will from the reflexive motives of self-fulfillment, are rooted in certain fundamental beliefs concerning the nature of the self, the world, and the relationship between the two.

Krishnamurti maintains that our beliefs concerning the nature of the self and its possibilities are generally false. He explains that in reality there is total impermanence. Outside, everything is in a state of constant flux. "Inside," the consciousness is aware (to use a Sartrean phrase) of the fatality of its own spontaneity. And, in introspection, the mind can discover no substantial "I." The mind thus feels terribly insecure and craves for permanence. It is to meet this demand for security that the mind invents a permanent self—an enduring individual ego which "owns" its constantly changing states of consciousness, which owns a past and has a future. The "I" clings to the past and hopes to become something in the future. This "clinging" and "becoming" are the actions of the will. Behind these actions lies the impelling force of the "past." Any action of the will to *attain* freedom must be a product of the same conditioned past, and it must therefore be prompted by the motive of self-fulfillment.

The pursuit of a method involving effort and will implies that the "I" desires to *become* free, and thus it is seeking fulfillment. But this is clearly paradoxical. For we have already seen that the desire to "become," anything whatsoever, itself constitutes human bondage. Any practice of a method, any exercise of the will, is inevitably condemned to seek self-fulfillment. How can this self-seeking that aims at strengthening the self and is itself a realization of human bondage deliver freedom-from-self? As Mercier realizes: "Only in spontaneity, can there be the discovery of what is. True learning has nothing to do with accumulation of knowledge or expansion of experiences. . . . Discipline, asceticism, renunciation, virtues are the very opposite of spontaneity; they prevent discovery and creativity. . . . Discipline and asceticism, which are forms of self-defence, compulsions, suppressions, can only breed further conflicts."[5] But, unfortunately, Mercier fails to see the significance of this view. In particular he fails to see that Krishnamurti's total rejection of "method" is a completely revolutionary idea, and shows him the way to a truly human approach to "the discovery of what is." On the contrary, he finds that: "Like Buddha, Krishnamurti aims at putting an end to man's miseries, but the remedy proposed is so radical as to suggest nothing less than man should renounce his humanity."[6] Let us then look at the remedy proposed by Krishnamurti before we judge that it involves a renunciation of man's humanity.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND "CHOICELESS AWARENESS"

The remedy is found in understanding ourselves—the expressed being of man. Since "we live in relationship to things, people, ideas . . . relationship is part of our human essence. To understand oneself is to understand oneself in relationship

[5]Mercier, pp. 176–77.
[6]*Ibid.*, p. 181.

and that means to understand our reactions to things, people. . . . In a way, our reactions are our Selves."[7] The way this understanding comes about is by "choiceless awareness" of the total phenomenon of self-seeking activity. The use of the term "choiceless" signifies first, the fact that Krishnamurti is not supplying a method. And second, since choice itself is rooted in desire and therefore in the conditioned "past," choiceless awareness is spontaneous. Thus any attempt to conceptualize "what is" inevitably obstructs understanding. The choiceless awareness is not an activity of thought. Nor is it "observation" in the sense of "reflection" which follows upon an event after it is over. Rather, like the Sartrean "pre-reflective consciousness," it is immediate and non-cognitive, simultaneously and silently watchful of the total movement of the self in its relationship. "Awareness is not a commitment to something. Awareness is an observation, both outer and inner, in which direction has stopped. You are aware, but the thing of which you are aware is not being encouraged or nourished. Awareness is not concentration on something. It is not an action of the will choosing what it will be aware of, and analysing it to bring about a certain result."[8]

It seems extraordinary to find in this approach, as Mercier does, a denial of the humanity of man. On the contrary, the whole beauty of this approach lies in the fact that it does away completely with the "brutality" that religious belief condones, and the "violence" that religious practices admit by allowing physical and mental self-torture in the wake of "discipline," albeit self-imposed. "The austerity of the priest and the monk is harsh. They deny certain of their appetites but not others which custom has condoned. . . . Austerity is generally identified with self-denial through the brutality of discipline, drill and conformity. . . . To see this is intelligence. . . . Intelligence is the sensitivity which understands, and therefore avoids, the extremes. But it is not the prudent mediocrity of remaining half-way between the two."[9]

It is surprising then that Mercier sees in this gentle approach a demand to "suppress human desires and aspirations."[10] In Krishnamurti, there is no question of *suppressing* desires, nor is there any question of encouraging any particular type of desire. There is only the *understanding* of Desire in alert, choiceless awareness of the "whole." Such creative understanding, unlike mere intellectual understanding, is not a matter of accepting or rejecting any *conclusions*. Rather, it is a discovery, a "seeing," of the truth in the structure of one's consciousness, spontaneously. Such "seeing *is* the acting" which is not tethered to the past. "And the seeing is always new and so the acting is always new. Therefore the seeing of the everyday response brings out the new, which is what we call spontaneity. At the very moment of anger there is no recognition of it as anger. The recognition takes place a few seconds later as 'being angry.' Is this seeing of that anger a choiceless awareness of that anger, or is it again choice based on the old? If it is based on the old, then all the responses to that anger—repression, control, indulgence and so on—are the traditional activity. But when the seeing is choiceless, there is only the new."[11] Thus seeing or understanding being always

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 172.
[8]Krishnamurti, pp. 206–207.
[9]*Ibid.*, p. 224.
[10]Mercier, p. 183.
[11]Krishnamurti, p. 140.

new signifies creativity and being spontaneous signifies freedom. It is Krishnamurti's claim that such understanding is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of spiritual freedom.

FREEDOM AND THE HUMANITY OF MAN

Does the "seeing," the understanding, restore the essential humanity of man, or, rather, does it destroy it? We have already noted that for Mercier it demands "nothing less than man should renounce his humanity." This is because Mercier finds the essential humanity of man in his "temporality." But the precise significance of temporality in the present context is left unexplored. Following Heidegger, Mercier says: "The understanding of the humanity of man, of the essence which makes him what he is, implies inevitably a reference to his temporality. . . . Man is the unity of past, present and future. What constitutes the concrete man here and now is inclusive of all his past facticities as well as his future possibilities, death included. It is not enough to say that he is in time; he is time. . . . Authentic living demands that man be constantly aware of his status of 'being-for-death'. . . ."[12] But for Krishnamurti all the miseries of life "are caused by his temporality" which must be "surmounted." And to Mercier's mind it suggests that Krishnamurti is asking for the impossible. In asking for the death of temporality, Krishnamurti is asking man to surrender his essential humanity. But, before we pass this judgment, let us explore what significance temporality has for an authentic human existence.

First, it is important to realize that for Krishnamurti the temporality in question is constituted by the "psychological time." And second, this temporality does not belong to the essence of the humanity of man. Rather it is identical with the structure of the ego, the self which is only a psychological "construct." The "I," considered as an enduring self, is simply an illusion, sitting at the center of all other illusions which are embodied in one's ideological beliefs. Thus the life of the "I," the "me," in so far as it is characterized by its self-seeking desire to "become" can also be nothing but an illusion. In reality there is no one to *become* anyone. Thus it would be quite extraordinary if the chasing of illusions was thought to be of the essence of the humanity of man.

Indeed the ordinary man does not perceive the Heideggerian absurdity of man's being-for-death. But for Krishnamurti, there is not only that familiar, *one*, physical death bringing an end to each man's becoming. In reality there simply is no continuing of the being of the individual self. Death (and thus creation) is a moment to moment affair. For Krishnamurti, "living is dying. . . . Living means that every day you are abandoning everything that you are attached to."[13] The absurdity of man's existence consists in the fact that he does not see the true nature of his *being-for-continuous-creation*. Or, what amounts to the same thing, he does not see that the psychologically "enduring" self is nothing but an illusion, and, consequently, the whole idea of self-advancement, of "becoming," through fulfillment of desires, is nothing but a meaningless project.

[12]Mercier, p. 181.

[13]*Krishnamurti Foundation Bulletin* (London: Krishnamurti Foundation and Trust, Ltd., 1986), p. 11.

WHAT IS "PSYCHOLOGICAL TIME"?

It is important to distinguish clearly between psychological time and objective time. The latter is chronological, is measured by our instruments. And Krishnamurti is under no illusion that one has to keep an eye on one's watch if, for example, one has to catch a train. All the processes of change and decay, both physical and mental, take place in objective time. In that sense time is an essential feature not only of man but of the whole of Existence. But there is the other time, psychological time, which consists of the very belief that the "I" *literally has a future and a past*. In reality there is no "past," or else it will be existing now. Nor is there a "future," or else it would not be in future. In reality every thing is in the "now." Yet memory has created a personal expanse of time, from a personal past to a projected personal future. Thus the very belief that temporality is the essence of human reality constitutes psychological time. Thus the whole endeavor of the "I" to "attain" and to "become" (a famous man, a saint, an authority, etc.) is a movement in psychological time. Hope, despair, and ambition constitute psychological time. The death of the "I," then, is the dissolution of psychological time. In it there is freedom from the "past" and freedom from (not suppression of) the desire to chase pleasures for the endurement of the illusory self.

Does the death of the psychological time amount to the death of the humanity of man? We have seen that for Krishnamurti living is a movement in relationship. But when "relationship is tethered to the past, to memory, its movement is limited and becomes agonizing."[14] And that is how it is when life is guided by the motive of "becoming." A self-seeking activity can only breed mischief and violence, illusions, anxiety and strife, none of which can be counted as belonging to the essential humanity of man. Thus, the "me" and its "becoming," the psychological temporality of man, cannot be considered to be central to the essence that makes man what he is. And, it will be sheer prejudice to think that the dissolution of the illusion of "becoming" amounts to a surrender of the humanity in question. The essential humanity of man (his innocence, understanding, courage, compassion, etc.) must be found in the original unity of the non-egological consciousness which lies beyond "becoming." Man can *live* his humanity only when the egocentric distortion of the creative process of *being* has ceased to function. Only then can he manifest that love "which seeketh not its own." Only in the absence of the "me," the psychological structure of time, can human relationship be free of mutual exploitations, and can man live like an artist of Life, rejoicing in the spontaneity of *being* in moment to moment creation.

[14]Krishnamurti, p. 139.