

Traditions and Thrall by Mervyn Sprung

In India the orthodox Vedantists and the unorthodox Buddhists share the presumption of the behavioural nature of all vivial sense. And the falsity of abstract knowledge. Virtually the same for the Taoists. But the search for sense in classical Greece, which still persists among us, if tottering, stands on its head when put alongside classical Indian and Chinese thought, as this does put alongside Western thinking. Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, whatever their differences, are one in the presumption of the supremacy of the intellect, their *nous*. They establish disciplines for the movement of thought from concept to concept, accepting the ability of words to guide the process and express the truth that emerges. They take only one kind of sense seriously: a theory expressed in abstract concepts. Reason is captain of the human soul and the compass of all theory.

The striking difference between the presumptions of Greek-European thought and those of classical India and China justifies the word "tradition". Logical positivism and Aristotle are in the same tradition: sense is given in theory. Twentieth century Vedanta is as Indian as the Upanishads. Japanese Zen is as Buddhist as Nagarjuna: sense is given in behaviour. In each case differences between schools in the same tradition can be understood within the same enabling presumptions. Some things strike you between the eyes.

Whatever might be the external causes of vivial groupings- traditions-persisting through millennia, they wouldn't touch the unacknowledged presumptions underlying each. What of our latest demon, technology? Can it help? Not obviously. Traditions persist through the most powerful technological revolutions: fourth century B.C. Aristotle and twentieth century Bertrand Russell! And within one technological age great variances of thought are possible: the hard realist Aristotle and the cynic Diogenes! There's more to it than that. And the way technologies shape our sense of things needs the most intense study. But thrall seems to lie deeper, though not immune to influence.

What could be offered as the origin of a cast of mind lying so far below awareness that it determines not only the kind of vivial sense pursued but what will be accepted as an answer? How account for the strange fact that vivial presumptions are not acknowledged as such by those proceeding from them? For a Vedantist the oneness of the cosmic truth/being with one's own being is not a presumption but the way one lives. For Descartes rationality as the substance of the human is just as much given. As is a benevolent god. How is it that we don't recognize our natural beliefs as enabling presumptions on which all further thought depends? How account for the enduring authority of presumptions in a tradition? Mustn't confuse presumptions with presuppositions. A presupposition must be true if the conclusion based on it is to be

true. The two parts are separate, and the relationship is inferential. This is obviously not so for vivial presumptions. Sense of the way of things is not inferential to anything. Its presumptions are not separate from it. They permeate every experience that tests it and they are still present in the life sense itself. No less true for presumptions that favor theory than for those that favor a thought-feeling-value life sense.

This will baffle those who believe that vivial presumptions must be part of a conceptual system. Still more baffling will be the evident fact that each set of presumptions has the power of a spell over all search for vivial sense-theory or not -within them. A spell holds one captive. And can't be broken except by an impetus from outside. I believe each spell validates its own kind of sense of the way of things. That's a disturbing thought to bring close to traditional philosophy. It speaks of a power that is of another origin than the rational mind. And yet is the decisive element in each tradition. There is no gainsaying it. It descends like a thrall, from no source known to us.

Thrall. At last it comes to word and can throw its light on the strange behaviour of traditions. It's been missing from the beginning.

There's no explanation for thrall. How could there be? Thrall is the ultimate "explanation". Better, it offers as much sense as we can expect to find. Thrall is an ultimate surd. From nowhere to the shaping force in history. The rational historian is outraged. But why should human history not be a surd, when each individual life must be? Why lock the mystery away in our computers? Let's free it, to be our revered habitat.

Thrall. A profound enlightenment that holds captive. But who, or what, is enthralled? It's clear that it makes no sense to say that it is the ur-need. The ur-need must remain outside of historical limitations. Or human existence will become not merely a mysterious surd, but irredeemably corrupted, a causal chain. Again, it can't be the individual answer to the ur-need that is in thrall. Everyone's best sense of the way of things determined from the beginning by a hidden power? That would reduce the pursuit of life sense to a mockery. Unthinkable. There remains only what lies between the universal ur-need and individual sense of things: the way an individual pursues the sense of things, and the kind of sense that an individual will accept. The difference between Socrates and Buddha. That completes the circle: it is the tradition that is in thrall, that introduces direction, prejudice, and enlightenment to the individual attempt to fulfill the ur-need. There are no arguments for that. It's just that no other account makes acceptable sense.

Thrall is enabling presumption but not a mere starting nudge. It accompanies and permeates all judgments of sense that arise within it. It is inescapable. The lifelong pursuit of the sense of things is enthralled in two senses of the word. It is captive,

though unaware of its captivity; and it moves with sovereign confidence through all conundrums. If one's sense of the way of life binds all experience -non-sense, truth, fury, creative passion, stupidity, cruelty, boredom, rapture, whatever there is -together in a livable way, then thrall is the shape and the bond of that way.

That says that thrall is the possibility of meaningful living. Without thrall one would never know how to set about making sense of life. Thrall shapes the pursuit of sense and guides its adventures. There has to be something like thrall--call it by any name--that can enable the personal human adventure to commence and that bears it along throughout its career. Thrall would be mistaken as ideology, or superstition, or religious dogma, or philosophy. Thrall is what enables each of these to make sense--to those espousing them. It is the hidden horizon from which vivial sense returns as echo. Thrall is not a fault to be removed. It's the source of whatever light may rest on one's sense of the way of things. It is itself never grounded, yet it is the unspoken ground of the sense that it enables within itself. If we acknowledged vivial circles thrall would be the paradigm of such.

Yet, thralls aren't forever. They lose their power and dissolve in time. They may encounter other, incompatible thralls equally powerful, each forcing the others to disclose themselves as what they have been all along. That's what the classical thralls of two or three millennia are doing to each other right now. The Indians and Chinese are already more open than we, but the encounter is just beginning. We are at that time in the span of a thrall when the cultures dependent on it are in decline and vivial exploration, now aware of other traditions, is freed to penetrate to the roots of the breakdown. As a thrall is laboriously brought out into the light it must lose its power: to grasp a thrall as an ungrounded presumption is to destroy it. It's sure we're moving into a time when the Western enthrallment to theory--science now--is surfacing because life within that enthrallment is beginning to destroy itself.

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