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Rediscovering Anarcho-Perennialism

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An email I received after posting the quotations from Jung the other day has given me some cause for thought.

In that short blog update I referred to the 'perennialist' tradition and this, I now realise, needs some clarification.

I had fondly imagined that the Anarchangels booklet explained more or less what it was and how it fitted in with anarchism, but on re-reading it, I am not so sure.

I did attempt a more explicit explanation in my talk at the London Anarchist Bookfair in October, so I have gone back to those notes to try and provide the ideological context that is perhaps rather elusive in the pamphlet itself.

One reason why Anarchangels is a little impressionistic is that I am horribly aware of the provisional nature of everything that I write.

Having been immobilised for many years by what now looks like a very blinkered sense of certainty as to what I believed, or didn't believe, my thoughts have recently been pouring out in all sorts of intellectual directions like floodwaters released by a breached dam.

I know that anything I write today may not be what I would want to write tomorrow and thus do not want to set in stone any specific arrangement of ideas that happens to appeal to me at the moment.

Thanks to some interesting correspondence in recent weeks, I have also become aware of others working in very much the same areas of contemplation, from whom I realise I have potentially much to learn.

While I make no apologies for the personal nature of the road to philosophical exploration that I set out here and in the booklets (one can only really ever know something that one has discovered oneself), I should point out again that I claim no expertise (in anything!), no particular credentials and certainly no merit in presenting ideas and connections between ideas that, inevitably, have already been examined, and in much greater depth, by so many others over the years.

The starting point of my own foray into this particular forest of thought was a sense of negativity – or rather, the refusal of a sense of negativity.

Others were keen to point out to me that I always seemed to be against everything. Political discussions invariably ended with me concluding that there was no way of fixing the situation, that the whole lot would have to go. The screensaver on my computer declared: “The system is fucked. Fuck the system!”

For a brief moment, I began to wonder if these people weren't right. Were my conclusions about the state of the modern world really no more than manifestations of some kind of malevolent inner essence? Was I nothing more than a human black hole, sucking away other people's vital energies by my overwhelming negativity?

Fortunately, it did not take me long to realise that the answer was 'no'. I knew that at the root of everything I possessed a love for life. Not necessarily my particular life, as it was then, but the life force itself. Was Richard Jefferies

(1848-1887), that spiritual worshipper of eternal nature, not my long-time favourite writer?

Did I not yearn for truth, authenticity, connection with the cosmos? That didn't sound negative to me.

Moving up from that foundation into the political realm, it struck me that the reason why I seemed to always be 'anti' everything was that I was following a powerful personal moral compass.

If I think something is bad, it's because it doesn't match up to how I think things should be; it doesn't correspond to my values.

There's nothing negative about feeling animosity towards bankers or arms dealers if you strongly feel it's wrong to rip people off or make money out of killing them.

It's not negative to hate advertising and shopping if you can see that consumerist craving is an addiction that eats away at people's souls.

It's not negative to hate the whole capitalist system and to want it to fall apart as soon as possible if you know that it's destroying the planet and you happen to value the planet you live on.

One of the main characteristics of any anarchist, I would say, is having this strong sense of right and wrong, of being firmly committed to a set of values – even if those values are the opposite of those laid down by the prevailing culture.

And, I realised, the alternative values we espouse didn't emerge out of thin air, or a workshop at the 1888 London Anarchist Bookfair.

Instead, they have arisen from thousands of years of human culture. A love of nature, an aversion to egotism, to selfishness, to materialism, to greed, to murder – these are all traditional values, which surface in cultures and religions all over the world.

Of course, there is an apparent contradiction here, as conventional thinking tends to have it that 'traditional values' are something conservative or right-wing .

But this is just a façade, designed to deceive. If you strip down the generally held notion of 'tradition', particularly in this country, all you will find is a lot of pompous flag-waving, adherence to self-serving authoritarian religious organisations and nostalgia for some period of the recent past – You've Never Had It So Good, the Dunkirk Spirit, Victorian Family Values and so on.

And behind all this window dressing, you will find that these modern 'traditionalists' in fact believe in an amoral world, of every man or woman for themselves, of pragmatism and short-term material advantage.

The quest for real values takes us much deeper, into the pursuit of the ancient wisdom that can be found at the heart of the world's religions, no matter how corrupted their current forms have become.

Perennialism is a search for these hidden values in every corner of human culture – such as in Hinduisim, Sufi Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Jewish Kabala, alchemy, indigenous spirituality or the gnostic scriptures of early Christianity.

It sees there a universal human philosophy which reaches back to time immemorial but from which we in the modern West have now been completely cut off.

At the heart of it all is the sense of oneness, of connection to the organic Whole, which I described in *Antibodies*. Sometimes this Whole is described using the word 'God' and sometimes it isn't. Sometimes people who worship 'God' mean this all-inclusive Whole and sometimes they don't.

I personally stumbled across perennialism when a helpful friend pointed out to me a copy of René Guénon's *The Crisis of the Modern World* in a secondhand bookshop here in Worthing.

welding two traditions together as of rejoining two halves of broken ideological bone.

This theoretical healing can, I believe, restore depth and strength to a contemporary anarchism that sometimes seems a little sterile and superficial in comparison with its philosophical heyday 100 years or more ago.

The self-discipline of spiritual focus is also of enormous benefit to all human beings, among whom anarchists can, of course, be numbered.

The traditional alchemical inner process of self-purification, dissolution into the Whole and then condensation into the material plane is an ideal way for any activist to rid themselves of the constraints of their ego and return to the 'real world' refreshed and ready to act out their part in our collective history, unafraid even of death.

This is the very process I described in *Antibodies* without fully realising its antiquity.

As paradoxical as it may seem to some, we only achieve self-fulfilment through self-sacrifice. Says the Sufi mystic Rumi (1207-1273): "When you give up everything, everything is yours."

I didn't buy it on the spot, as I seemed a bit expensive for its size, but awoke the next morning filled with the necessity of returning to the shop and bringing it home to read.

Some internet surfing on Guénon's ideas and connections subsequently led me to a book by Mark Sedgwick called *Against the Modern World – Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*.

As the second part of title perhaps suggests, this can be a little sensationalist and over-egged at times and occasionally constructs some rather desperate 'connections' between completely disparate thinkers.

But, for all its faults, it does provide some useful information about the development of the perennialist 'movement' which I can use to further my explanation.

According to Sedgwick, perennialism was originated by 15th century Italian Renaissance thinker Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who suggested this single perennial, or primordial, origin behind all religions which had since diversified into apparently separate forms.

The philosophy became popular for a couple of hundred years, then drifted out of favour in the early 17th century to be revived in a slightly different form in the 19th and early 20th century.

It was popularised by Guénon (1886-1951), who sought universal truth first in Hinduism and then, when he found it difficult to become a Hindu, in Sufi Islam. He moved from France to Egypt, where he married an Egyptian woman, had children and lived out the rest of his life.

Guénon himself rejected the political level of action and was certainly no anarchist, but Sedgwick's book reveals that anarchists did play a key role in the early development of perennialism.

There was Ananda Coomaraswamy (1887-1947), for instance, who was a keen student of the work of both William Blake and William Morris.

Alan Antliff writes: “The anarchism of Coomaraswamy represents a compelling instance of cross-cultural intermingling in which a European critique of industrial capitalism founded on the arts-and-crafts was turned to anti-colonial ends in a campaign against Eurocentric cultural imperialism and its material corollary, industrial capitalism.” (From the essay *Revolutionary Seer for Post-Industrial Age*, included in *I Am Not A Man, I Am Dynamite – Friedrich Nietzsche and The Anarchist Tradition*, ed John Moore).

Another key figure was Swedish artist Ivan Aguéli (1869-1917) who, with his lover and anarchist comrade Marie Huot, was involved in the perennialist and animal rights movements.

His particular claim to fame is that in 1900 he shot a matador in a protest against the proposed introduction of Spanish-style fatal bullfighting to France.

Aguéli also lived in Cairo for a while and worked with another anarchist by the name of Enrico Insabato.

Not only were the two movements – perennialism and anarchism – intertwined at that stage, but there is a broader overlap of ideas as well.

Kropotkin’s admiration for the values of the Middle Ages is echoed by Guénon and even Bakunin’s idea of Natural Law is not so far away from the perennialists’ concept of fundamental values (despite his fervent atheism).

Perennialism particularly chimes with the thinking of the anarchist Gustav Landauer (1870-1919), who explored the idea of a universal psyche and wrote: “We have been satisfied until now to transform the universe into the human spirit, or better, into the human intellect; let us now transform ourselves into the universal spirit”.

There is also a strong connection between perennialism and the growth of the modern environmentalist movement (which, of course, in turn, feeds back into contemporary anarchism).

Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), another of Guénon’s disciples, left Europe to live in the USA where he was adopted into the

Sioux tribe, was heavily involved in the promotion of Native American studies in the USA and influenced American ‘New Age’ thinking.

Perennialism also has the merit of being a profoundly internationalist philosophy. By appreciating the uniting truth behind different faiths, it overcomes religious divides by rising to a higher level.

Like anarchism, it is thus totally irreconcilable with nationalism. As Guénon himself said: “All nationalism is essentially opposed to the traditional outlook”.

I cannot avoid the fact, however, that perennialist philosophy is sometimes given a bad name by association with the fascist writer Julius Evola (1898-1974), whose elitist and militarist ‘Traditionalism’ was a bastardised offshoot from the movement.

He really does not sit easily with the perennialist tradition. The anti-industrialist ethic is at the root of Guénon’s, Coomaraswamy’s and Schuon’s philosophy, and yet Evola was happy to hob-nob with right-wing German industrialists and glorifying the conveyor-belt mass slaughter of 20th century warfare.

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), in his book *The Perennial Philosophy*, explains that fascist and other totalitarian ideas are in fact the complete opposite of perennialism and the values and state of mind it promotes.

He writes: “Excessive privilege and power are standing temptations to pride, greed, vanity and cruelty; oppression results in fear and envy; war breeds misery and despair. All such negative emotions are fatal to the spiritual life.”

This same contradiction does not exist between the perennial philosophy and anarchy, as we have seen.

So a combination of the two, an anarcho-perennialism (a specifically anti-fascist anarcho-perennialism, to finally lay to rest the malevolent ghost of Evola) is not so much a case of