

Five Essays on the Via Positiva

Mike King

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Essay One

Introduction to the *Via Positiva*

Do you love life? Are you passionate about the very existence of existence? Does the natural world as you encounter it directly and unmediated in meadows, mountains, forests, seas and skies inspire you to awe? Does the natural world as you grapple to understand it indirectly and mediated through the sciences of evolution, quantum theory, relativity and classical dynamics inspire a different yet just as profound awe? What about music, painting, dance, architecture, engineering marvels, medicine and astonishing feats of physical prowess in sportsmen and women? Do these, and the profundity of human justice achieved against all the odds, raise you to the heights? Do you see this inspiration and elevation as something bordering on the spiritual, or perhaps the very basis of human spirituality?

If so, you are on the *via positiva*.

Do you find spiritual-religious paths and teachings that are mute about the beauty of existence incomprehensible? Do you find spiritual-religious paths and teachings that declare this world “fallen,” or that we are born in original sin, repugnant?

If so, then this may be a natural reaction against the *via negativa*.

This series of essays will delve deep into the meaning of these two obscure Latin terms, which originate in 19th century theology, but which have enormous implications for 21st century spirituality. Between them they create a whole new way to understand the tremendous variety of the spiritual life, past, present and future.

So what do the terms *via positiva* and *via negativa* mean? In the first instance the *via positiva* is a certain kind of spiritual outlook, or path to Enlightenment, or way of understanding “God,” that is world-affirming and world-curious. The *via negativa* is a path that ignores the world, or, to be a little more precise, it ignores the world that is manifest and manifold, the world so immensely rich and varied in its detail and workings. The *via positiva* is an engaged spirituality while the *via negativa* is a renunciative spirituality, though we will find that such a black-and-white distinction is only a first approximation because of how intertwined the paths are.

The *via negativa* is also known as the negative theology, or apophatic theology, a tradition of mystical thought which approaches “God” through negation. As it stands this definition is too centred on Western religious notions, but in fact it has been applied to many traditions, including to Buddhism where the term “God” has no place. The *via negativa* is a concept easily adapted to cover many forms of spirituality, and my own usage is only a little removed from tradition. The *via negativa*, understood as the negative theology, has an appeal to Western intellectuals and theologians such as Derrida and John D. Caputo, perhaps because it helps shake off the image of “God” as a person. In contrast to the *via negativa*, the *via positiva* appears more mainstream. It is also known as cataphatic theology, and means to approach “God” through affirmative terms. My usage here rather departs from this,

and so does the usage adopted by theologian Matthew Fox (who I look at in one of the later essays).

My development of the concepts of *via positiva* and *via negativa* leaves “God” out of it in the first instance, to allow me to apply it to traditions beyond monotheism. Instead I like to think in terms of the essential spiritual work that an individual does in going beyond the narrow sense of self. On the *via negativa* the path is defined by progressively dis-identifying the self with the body, the mind, the family, the nation, the planet, and so on. The focus is towards detachment, emptiness, inwardness, silence and peace. In contrast the *via positiva* requires a progressive identification beyond the body and mind, starting with family, nation, the planet and eventually arriving at the whole of existence. The focus is on expansiveness, embraciveness, love, and engagement with the manifest world. The self becomes the world.

It is not too difficult to understand that the destination of both paths is in some sense the same. When the narrow identification with self is overcome, or putting it another way, when all constructs of a separate self are abandoned – on either of these paths – one enters the state of truth, liberation, *moksha*, nirvana, self-realization or whatever you want to call it; union with “God” if you please. More difficult however is the idea that one cannot really separate the two paths. Without detachment – or some kind of inner silence – the *via positiva* degenerates into rank materialism. Without engagement – or some kind of vitality – the *via negativa* degenerates into stupefying indifference. Yet the distinction between the two paths is a highly useful one for surveying the spiritual traditions of the world. We should not get too hung up on a rigid distinction here, but recognise instead that we can usefully enquire where the *balance* lies between these extremes.

Given that the two paths are deeply intertwined, I want to propose another term, this time “Via Positiva” in capital letters, to indicate a tradition where the balance lies in favour of the *via positiva*, but also acknowledges the central role of the *via negativa*. This is the real subject of these essays, and in particular a version of it I am going to call the “Western Via Positiva.” Perhaps controversially, I am going to suggest that the Western Via Positiva draws heavily on Neoplatonism, a tradition or set of traditions that I will describe more fully as we go along.

Contemporary “Engaged” Spirituality

Why should the Via Positiva matter today? The answer I think is all around us: because religions are getting “engaged.” Of course some religious traditions have a stronger historical engagement with the world of the arts, sciences and politics than others. Islam is historically a political religion while many traditions have extensive repertoires of sacred poetry, music, dance, and architecture. The early Christianity of St Paul is considered to have created the world’s first welfare system. But the term “engaged spirituality” covers something of a recent revolution in the world of religion, given that religion is more usually associated with withdrawal and simplicity. Two examples spring to mind: “Liberation Theology” in South America, in which the Catholic Church and Marxist politics join forces to fight poverty, and “engaged Buddhism” of various types, which attempts to bring a rather *via negativa* religion into engagement with the modern world.

However, in the rush to embrace “engaged spirituality” I detect a haste to abandon the *via negativa* altogether, which means that those spiritualities can become effectively secularised and lose contact with the sacred. It is because of this that I have defined a Via Positiva as one that never loses sight of the *via negativa*, but which

simply gives the *via positiva* a greater role than in many of the renunciative religions of the past.

In elaborating specifically on the Western Via Positiva I also want to demonstrate that the West has extraordinary resources for the spiritual life that have been rather ignored to date. To do this I first need to say something about the Via Positiva in the Eastern traditions.

The Via Positiva in the East

When C. G. Jung encountered the idea of nirvana in Buddhism he considered it to be an “amputation” – the loss of the embodied physicality he held central to his psychological system. I don’t think he is right of course, but the remark usefully highlights how Buddhism appears to the contemporary Western mind to have a strong bias towards the *via negativa*. It is a mistake however to think that all religions must have a *via negativa* emphasis, and we find in the East many spiritual paths which are strongly *via positiva*, including the texts of the Upanishads, the Tibetan Bon religion, Taoism, Shintoism, and all the varieties of Eastern animism-shamanism. To varying degrees these are *via positivas* of Nature, not so much curious of the world in an analytical scientific way, but more in a participatory fashion. To the extent that sciences developed at all in the East, they had a holistic natural feel to them, so that science and religion did not seem contradictory. In contrast the West turned its back on Nature as a site of the sacred, and so it was inevitable that the science it developed had a totally different and rather alienating character. When we see a Via Positiva that is open to science however, it is likely to be a science of the holistic sort.

The Lost Buddhas of the West

In triangulating the spiritual life across West and East we discover many useful concepts. A key import to the West from the East for example is the idea of a “buddha” – a category of spiritual person missing in the Western traditions. One of my radical propositions is that, although the term “buddha” might be missing in Western religious history, the person is not. But who are potential candidates to be thus described in Western history? This is where it gets interesting: very often they are hidden from us because they are otherwise categorised as writers, poets, philosophers and even theologians. Hence I have coined the term: “the lost buddhas of the West” to cover such individuals as Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plotinus, Eckhart, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, William Blake, and some of the German idealists. No doubt everyone has a different list. I would also include Jesus in mine, but that is not to everyone’s taste. What is important here is that these individuals become potential case studies for the balance between the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*. For example Heraclitus, Socrates and Eckhart favour the *via negativa*, while Pythagoras, Leibniz, and Blake favour the *via positiva*. However, more interesting still is just *how* the balance is struck in each case.

The Via Positiva as part of a toolkit for the spiritual life

Before we explore this question and that more generally of the Western Via Positiva, I want to point out that the spiritual life is far too interesting and varied to ever yield to an analysis based on a single dichotomy like that between *via negativa* and *via positiva*. In my books *Secularism* and *Postsecularism* I developed an extensive toolkit

for the spiritual life, which included a number of additional indicators. The most important of these are the distinction between a devotional and non-devotional spirituality (between *bhakti* and *jnani*), and between the esoteric and the transcendent. There is not space to go into any of this here, other than to say that the discussion in these essays confines itself to non-devotional transcendent traditions, making only passing reference to what remains as almost separate spiritual universes defined by combinations of the other terms. In other words these essays are not comprehensive of the spiritual life as a whole, but are concentrated on a single area.

The Via Positiva and Neoplatonism

What I am focusing on in these essays is a cluster of Western spiritual traditions that I broadly include under the label “Neoplatonism.” Scholars may well disagree with me, but I am using the term Neoplatonism as a catch-all for a range of spiritualities, including Platonism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism and Kabala, all of which have a family resemblance, and which were equally persecuted through Christian history. I am also effectively suggesting that Neoplatonism is the *counter-religion* of the West, and contains within it key ideas of the Western Via Positiva. More than that: many key thinkers – or better perhaps, practitioners – of Neoplatonism can be understood, I argue, as amongst the lost buddhas of the West. Indeed, without triangulating Neoplatonism against various spiritual ideas arising in the East we lose much purchase on it, though this is not to suggest that Neoplatonism derives from the East. It is as much a Western development as monotheism (taking the “East” for these purposes as countries east of Iran).

So what is the essence of Neoplatonism? It is broadly speaking a non-theist spirituality that places mind or intellect at the centre of its path, where both of these terms imply something rather different to modern secular usage. It is not a love religion, and that is exactly why Augustine rejected it when he went “shopping” for a religion to replace the Manichaeism he had become disappointed with. The goal in Neoplatonism is for the mind or intellect to directly know ultimate truth, a process usually referred to as “gnosis.” Gnosis is not confined to Gnosticism however, it being simply the Greek word for knowing.

Neoplatonism in the broad sense I am using it is not necessarily biased towards the *via positiva* however, though it is much more inclined to it than the three Western monotheisms. In particular, its emphasis on gnosis or knowing means that it aligns itself with systems of knowledge that we call variously – and confusingly – philosophy, science and the occult. In its very essence there is a spirit of enquiry, which can easily become world-curious, or even world-affirming. Hermeticism is more so than Gnosticism to be sure, but the point remains: a spiritual path of knowledge is sympathetic to learning, or at the very least unlikely to dismiss learning as St Paul did. Even Augustine, a great intellectual himself, was adamant that lack of learning was no obstacle in the Christian religion, and so helped shape its anti-intellectual core.

The very term Neoplatonism implies that the thought of Plato must be central to it, and it may be confusing to claim that Hermes (perhaps) and Pythagoras (definitely), who both predate Plato, are early contributors to the tradition. In fact the greatest of the Neoplatonists to my mind is Plotinus, who comes after Plato, but who I won't deal with in these essays because, although he counts as one of my lost Western buddhas, his emphasis on the *via positiva* is not as great as that of Pythagoras.

Neoplatonism and the world

If we are going to look at how Neoplatonism contributes to what I am calling the Western Via Positiva, then we must ask how it relates to the arts, science and politics, or indeed just generally how it relates to manifest existence. As I mentioned, there are plenty of *via negativa* strands within it, for instance the Gnostics considered the world a fallen place, and Plato himself was pretty hostile to both science and the arts, and even became bitter about democracy because it was Athenian democracy that sentenced his beloved Socrates to death. Despite these currents, *via positiva* elements dominate Neoplatonism in its widespread enthusiasm for such things as sacred geometry – which inform art and architecture – and the “music of the spheres” which relates music to the planets and mathematics. But the essential core of Neoplatonism – gnosis – represents an enquiry into the nature of things, the cosmos, and self, and so it can’t help being world-curious. This gnosis works two ways however: not only do we need to know the cosmos, *but the cosmos also needs to be known through us*. This places not just an emphasis on knowing itself, but almost an obligation on the human mind to know – deeply and yet more deeply. That is, in essence, the evolution of the human mind as pursued in Neoplatonism. Another way to put it is in this imperative: *creation must know itself*. But, as we will see, modern analytical science isn’t properly constructed to assist us in doing that. Neoplatonism is inclined to science, but not science as we know it today. Certainly the Neoplatonist impulse – and hence the Western Via Positiva – resonates with the analytical scientific impulse to know the world, to read the “book of Nature” as Aquinas put it. But one of the purposes of these essays is to show how the two impulses are not the same, and, by confusing them, the distinct worlds of spirituality and science are muddled together, to the detriment of both.

As a world-curious spirituality, the Western Via Positiva also recognizes the inherent creativity of the universe, and so finds in the creative fields a celebration of existence and the spiritual life. But, just as with science, the *via positiva* as a spiritual impulse must not be confused with human creativity as merely a path of personal expression. Muddying the two together, or attempting to pursue an intensely creative path without the anchor of spirituality, can lead to disaster.

In spiritual movements like the Advaita, Buddhism, or Gnosticism, an essential insight realised early on is that the self is identical with the Ground of Being. But to the extent that Advaita, Buddhism, or Gnosticism are *via negativa* paths they miss the next essential realisation: that self is also coterminous with all that is manifest and is hence coterminous with the cosmos itself. In some essential way the self is at the same time the unmanifest source of all that is, and also the manifest, manifold exuberance that is existence itself. Hence to know the cosmos is to know oneself – in the *via positiva* traditions, that is. This insight is not lacking in the East of course, but the unique Western contribution lies in an idea that came to epitomise Renaissance spirituality: “man as microcosm,” or “as above, so below.” Human beings, in other words, *recapitulate* the entire universe within themselves.

The Dance of VP and VN

Crucial to my exploration of the Western Via Positiva is the idea that it remains a balance between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. The overall sensibility of it is world-embracing rather than world-denying, but the *via negativa* – the deliberate inclusion of detachment, emptiness, inwardness, silence and peace through some kind

of spiritual practice – is strongly present. The question then becomes: how are the two aspects negotiated while still retaining a deep love of existence? How does an active engagement with the world, through the arts, science, politics, sport, career, raising kids, and all the usual things, retain the spiritual quality of the *via negativa*, that inner silence?

A clue comes from two traditions that I regard as intensely *via negativa*, at least in their origins: Buddhism and Judaism. One can search in vain through the Pali Canon – the most extensive early Buddhist texts – for a remark by the Buddha that would betray any interest in the world as such: in the beauties of Nature, or in the creative works of humanity. And, despite earnest Western Buddhists who wish to find in this early Buddhist literature a man who was set on social reform, there is no evidence of it at all. This is *disengaged* spirituality, *disengaged* religion. But, it is utterly beautiful if one understands it properly, and understands how its own *via positiva* and the *via negativa* are intertwined: the Buddha's key *via positiva* engagement was with his spiritual community, his *sangha*.

Judaism in its origins is equally disinterested in the arts and science. Jewish friends are often puzzled when I say that Judaism is a renunciative religion, one that has turned its back on Nature, and Jewish writers like the anthropologist David Abram are sensitive to this, seeing in it an accusation. But I don't see it like that at all. All religions engage in a curious dance between the *via negative* impulse and the *via positiva* impulse, and in Judaism its *via positiva* impulse is turned away from non-human Nature, that is all. Instead it focuses intensely on the *family*, which is why the Jewish people have avoided assimilation and have managed to retain their unique and wonderful culture over the ages.

If Judaism's *via positiva* energies went into the family, what about Christianity and Buddhism? In Christianity the long early emphasis on the *via negativa* was partnered with a *via positiva* preoccupation with community – it pioneered the world's first welfare system, commented on by the worried Roman Emperor Julian who saw Christianity gain popularity over the old Roman gods. In Buddhism the original manifestation of the *via positiva* – deriving entirely from the Buddha's personality – was the *sangha*, or spiritual community. But, as Buddhism was spread by the Emperor Ashoka on the strict understanding that it respect local religious customs, it quickly absorbed the *via positiva* impulses of the animist-shamanic religions it encountered. In its encounter with Taoism, leading to the Chan and Zen Buddhist traditions, it gained a *via positiva* passion for Nature: hence all those beautiful Zen gardens.

If the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* are intertwined and anyway land up at the same place – a complete transcendence of personal self – then it is still true that in the beginning they *feel* very different. I would also add that a spiritual path where the *via negativa* dominates is hard in the beginning and easy in the end, while a spiritual path where the *via positiva* dominates – such as in the Western Via Positiva – is easy in the beginning and hard in the end. At this point in our collective history, where material ease is either already available or offered as a goal of our effort, it is very hard to make the leap into a renunciative way of life. Abandon material comforts? Abandon the delights of artistic creativity? Abandon the chance – so seductively offered and even insisted upon – to “make a difference” in the world? This seems hard. But if a purely *via negativa* path is chosen then the spiritual “muscle” is built up, as it were, to take the leap into infinity where the self is finally recognized to be an illusion. In contrast a path that requires only a minimum of disciplined silent spiritual practice while pursuing the arts, sciences, politics or whatever is very attractive. More than that, worldly success is made more likely by the little exposure to the *via*

negativa practices of such a path, thus making things harder in the end: am I to disown the fruits of my success? This very utterance already has two mistaken words in it: “I” and “my.” And, using a term coined by C. G. Jung, the risk here is of *inflation*, a self-aggrandisement that is even worse than normal ego, because one’s spiritual practice has not only given one the resources to succeed in the world, but gives one a false sense of sanctity. As we will see in one of the later essays this risk of Jungian inflation is also accompanied by the risk of total burn-out, as one becomes a conduit for the cosmic energies of creativity. Any true Via Positiva must therefore contain strong *via negativa* elements as correctives for these dangers – and the path advocated by Jung himself did not contain them, I would add.

Negotiating the potential contradictions of the *via positiva* and *via negativa* remains one of the great challenges of the spiritual life. In the Western Via Positiva we find a particular set of solutions, mostly lost to us because Neoplatonism and its constituent traditions are historically buried under ignorance and prejudice directed at them from both the Christian and secular worlds. It is time to rediscover this great resource!

The Essays to Come

In the four following essays I will explore the theme of the Western Via Positiva from different angles. In Essay Two I look at the spirituality of the Renaissance, a time when Neoplatonism emerged from its hiding place to be at the centre of a spiritual and cultural flowering. In Essay Three I look at the spirituality of the Enlightenment period, dominated as it was by the rise of modern science and attempted application of scientific rationality to all of human thought. In Essay Four I look in detail at the issue of spirituality and creativity, while in Essay Five I compare the Western Via Positiva to the teachings on Evolutionary Enlightenment developed by American guru Andrew Cohen. In this last essay I also describe a discovery of my own, made as I researched the Western Via Positiva: that the idea of spiritual “recapitulation” can inform our idea of spiritual “evolution.”

Essay Two

The Renaissance and the Western *Via Positiva*

In this essay I am going to explore the Renaissance period as a flowering of spiritual genius, a uniquely Western one, a *Via Positiva*. We all know about Renaissance painting, sculpture and architecture, and we learn about the philosophy of the period, its debt to Greek thought – via the Islamic world – and of the first stirrings of modern science begun in that time, particularly in the work of the ultimate Renaissance man, Leonardo da Vinci. But, as usual, the spiritual genius of the time is forgotten for two reasons: firstly it did not fit with Christianity, and secondly the secular world and its scholars mostly reject spirituality in the first place (Bertrand Russell called Renaissance spirituality “antique nonsense”). As a first approximation I am going to characterise Renaissance spirituality as a form of Neoplatonism, a broad tradition of spiritualities that lay outside the Christian mainstream and have some debt to Greek thought, but also include Hermetic, Gnostic and Kabbalist sources. Hence I will begin by examining Pythagoras and his legacy and then consider the Christian context in which Neoplatonism always struggled for validation. Thomas Aquinas plays a key role in the Christian tradition for allowing it to re-absorb some of the Greek spiritual tradition: you could say that he made the Renaissance possible. I then make a detour to consider the work of contemporary theologian Matthew Fox – deeply influenced by Aquinas and presenter of a “*via positiva*” of his own – before turning to the great spiritual masters of the Renaissance: Marsilio Ficino and Pico Della Mirandola. The difficulties under which they presented their Neoplatonist vision are then used to illustrate what I call “The Spiritual Wounds of the West” – the key trauma in the collective unconscious of the Western mind that has made it turn away from religion and spirituality. I end by suggesting that the extraordinary contribution of Renaissance spirituality to the world was the idea of “man as microcosm” – that the human being recapitulates the entire universe within the human mind. This, I believe, is the essence of the Western *Via Positiva*.

Pythagoras and his legacy: the monad

The idea of a world-curious and world-engaged spirituality has a much longer history in the West than perhaps the Christian world realizes, going back to the amazing personality of Pythagoras, and no doubt to his unknown antecedents, possibly including Hermes Trismegistus. In Pythagoras was combined art, science and the spiritual, and it is not surprising to find those who consider that the West took a wrong turn in not adopting him as its prime avatar. Hermes (Egyptian name Thoth) is another possible candidate, but his identity is so obscure as to make Pythagoras the better choice for now.

Pythagoras had a considerable following during his lifetime and the survival of “Pythagoreans” as a sect and as an influence through the ancient world speaks of a remarkable personality. As far as we know from the various references made to

Pythagoras by other ancient Greeks he pursued research into mathematics and music alongside a practice of the spiritual life. His school in Croton (southern Italy) was a religious society centred around the Muses, the goddesses of learning and culture, and their leader Apollo. The existing material on Pythagoras is fragmented and somewhat inconclusive in its individual parts, but taken together there is a compelling account of a spiritual teacher of with a strong *via positiva* bias. The Neoplatonist scholar Joscelyn Godwin writes:

If Western civilisation has taken, as it seems, not one but several wrong turnings between the time of Pythagoras and the present, it is because it has been unfaithful to him who should by rights have been its tutelary genius. . . . If he failed as the avatar of the passing age, perhaps he is coming into his own as a new one dawns.

Pythagoras was an approximate contemporary of the Buddha, though would have known nothing of him. But I regard Pythagoras as a key early “lost buddha of the West” – a Western figure whose teachings resemble those of all the Eastern buddhas (remember the term just means “enlightened one”), lost to our secular world as a man pursuing secular interests such as philosophy, music and mathematics in a probably “archaic” fashion. Okay, we acknowledge the theorem about triangles, and then move on. But we shouldn’t: the fragments we know paint a picture of an enlightened spiritual teacher of the calibre of the Buddha, a “sangha” – spiritual community – every bit as vibrant as the Buddha’s, and, in a reversal of the Buddha’s stance, a passion for the arts and sciences of the day. As Godwin suggests, Pythagoras therefore becomes for us the first avatar of Western civilisation, and for me the first avatar of the Western Via Positiva.

Although the ancient Greeks were inclined to the arts and sciences in a way that the ancient Hebrews were not, there were strong *via negativa* elements in their religious thought as well. Both Plato and Heraclitus were scornful of Pythagoras’ research, which demonstrates the preference of those thinkers for the *via negativa*.

Pythagoras it seems believed in that uniquely Renaissance idea: that of man as microcosm, also expressed in the image of “as above, so below.” An early biography of Pythagoras tells us this: “Pythagoras said that man was a microcosm, which means a compendium of the universe. . . because he contains all the powers of the cosmos. For the universe contains gods, the four elements, animals and plants. All of these powers are contained within man.” These ideas may well have come from the Hermetic tradition of course, but we can only speculate on Pythagoras’s sources.

Another key term introduced by Pythagoras to the Western tradition was “monad” – the idea of an entity, whether rock, plant, animal, or human as a manifest whole. It is, in essence, the Eastern ideal of the non-dual expressed in a manifest physical entity. Western science evolved in such a way as to entirely discredit any understanding of such a holistic way of understanding the world, as we will see in the next essay. Pythagoras may well have learnt some of his ideas from the Egyptian Hermetic tradition, but we can be sure of one thing: that he lived in an era surrounded by Nature religions, where animist and shamanic practices lived on, all of which were based on the idea that humans can enter empathetically at a very deep level into the existence of other non-human beings.

The Christian *via negativa* and its counter-religion Neoplatonism

The early Christian world partly defined itself through a total rejection of two features of the spiritual life of the Mediterranean world: Greek thought and Nature religions. Its hostility to everything Greek was summed up in Tertullian's famous saying: "What then has Athens to do with Jerusalem, the Academy to do with the Church, the heretics to do with the Christians?" Earlier St. Paul had made clear his rejection of Greek learning in his dismissive comment: "knowledge puffeth up a man." St. Augustine also makes clear why he rejected the religion of the Platonists: it was a religion of the intellect, not the heart. And Christianity's hostility to the Nature religions was summed up in two terms of contempt: "pagan" and "heathen," both meaning "from the countryside." But early Christianity was setting out on a radical and beautiful experiment in the spiritual life, with a deep emphasis on the *via negativa*, a renunciation of the world and of knowledge of the world – that was too Greek – and a focus on religious love – caritas, agape – and the expression of that love as welfare for the sick, old and needy. This care for the community was its *via positiva*, and derived from the Jewish tradition. Christianity's balance between *via positiva* and *via negativa* was simply different to the Greek tradition, but to the modern mind it looks a renunciation of all learning and the arts.

There is an austere beauty to the Christian *via negativa*, even though it became perhaps misunderstood or corrupted as a doctrine of "accept suffering here for rewards in heaven." The mystics of the Christian world generally taught a practice of detachment, exemplified in the "divine darkness" of Dionysius and reaching a peak in the works of Meister Eckhart and in the astonishing medieval work *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Whatever the genuine and radical innovations that Christian religiosity brought, there is no doubt also that the combination of monotheism and Roman militarism created an absolutist mentality that was far from the tolerant religious pluralism normal to the polytheistic Mediterranean world. Because of this intolerance the tradition going back to Pythagoras – which I am calling Neoplatonism here – was relentlessly persecuted. Two brutal killings book-end this persecution: the murder of the beautiful Platonist scholar Hypatia by a Christian mob in 415 and the burning of Giordano Bruno by the Inquisition in 1600. Religious persecution in the Western world did not end there of course, but it was gradually extinguished by modern secular tolerance.

Neoplatonism still lives today. I don't know about America, but in the UK the Temenos Academy – founded by Blake scholar and poet Kathleen Raine, and with Prince Charles as its patron – keeps its tradition alive. One of its most insightful Fellows, a scholar called Joseph Milne, was my tutor at the University of Kent.

Aquinas, Fox, and Creation Spirituality

All religious movements are experiments, and all of them in some sense explore extremes of the spiritual life. Where there is religious pluralism this can work well as individuals seek out amongst the sects whatever their spiritual impulse is drawn to. But when one mainstream religion relentlessly declares it to be the only true path and persecutes the others, the entire population under its sway inevitably exerts a pluralistic pressure from within, however difficult that might be. This pressure to include apparently conflicting elements worked on Buddhism for example to add the elements of "puja" (ritual) and Nature-veneration quite alien to the Buddha himself, while the real pressure on Christianity came from Neoplatonism, a learned tradition

that grated against the Christian rejection of the intellect. The long-suppressed Nature religions of the European countryside, which never mastered the theological language necessary to introduce change, exerted much less influence, though they lived on secretly in remote areas across the region.

This all helps us understand the crucial role played by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century in re-introducing Greek thought into the Christian mainstream. His key dictum says it all: “Revelation comes in two volumes – that of Nature and that of the Bible.” We might find it hard to comprehend the revolution that this represents, but Aquinas was declared a heretic to start with for such radical propositions. Of course, when he said that Nature was also a source of revelation he did not mean the Nature religions: animism, shamanism, paganism, heathenism and so on. He meant Nature as investigated by Greek logic and science. Aquinas opened up what the early Church Fathers had shut down: the Greek influence.

Without Aquinas there would be no Renaissance, but before turning to that period I just want to say a little about a key Aquinas scholar of our time, Matthew Fox. He founded the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality based on the ideas in his published books, but, in the mid 1980s the Vatican investigated his institute and ordered him to silence. He is best known for his “Creation Spirituality” which is a strongly *via positiva* Christianity, based in part on the revolutionary ideas of Aquinas. Just as I have done here, Fox has taken the terms *via positiva* and *via negativa* in theology and slightly redefined them. His short definition of the Via Positiva is “experiencing the God of delight and joy,” and the Via Negativa is “experiencing the God of darkness, letting go, and suffering.” (The capitalization of these terms is his, by the way.) These are radically different from the way I define them. “Darkness” and “letting go” may well be parts of the *via negativa* for me, but “suffering” is not. For me there is far more suffering on the *via positiva*, because engagement with the world necessarily has to include engagement with limitations, frustration and suffering.

It is clear that Fox is nervous of what he defines as the Via Negativa, and falls perhaps into a linguistic trap of associating negative emotions with it. The tradition, as so beautifully expressed by St John of the Cross, has nothing to do with negative emotions, but to do with stripping away the created world, until in the “Dark Night” (or the “Cloud of Unknowing” to use the metaphor of another medieval mystic), he is utterly alone with “God,” the object of his spiritual love. His emotions of the *via negativa* are entirely positive, and of a spiritual kind, whereas his negative emotions derive only from the *struggle* to attain to the “divine darkness.” From the perspective of those truly on the *via negativa*, suffering is born precisely out of the manifest world: the Buddha gives an entire lecture for example on the theme: “suffering is born from those we hold dear.” Hence for the Buddha and for Catherine of Sienna for example the negative emotions arise on the *via positiva*, not the *via negativa*. Or at the very least they could not ascribe them solely to the *via negativa* as Fox does. I highly recommend his work, but be clear on this: our Via Positivas are very different!

The Renaissance, Ficino and Mirandola

Turning now to the Renaissance we find the *via positiva* of Pythagoras emerging in a new flowering, particularly in the Florentine Academy of Marsilio Ficino. The relevance of his school and its pupils to the engaged spirituality of today is astonishing. The great Renaissance artists, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Dürer, and many others were directly inspired by Ficino. He founded his Academy in

1462 as a direct successor to Plato's Academy, and it survived his death until the year 1522. In turn the Temenos Academy can be thought of as the third in the series.

Although Ficino modelled himself and the Academy on Plato's thought, the greater emphasis on music and the visual arts meant that the Florentine Academy was more Pythagorean than Platonic, that it ultimately owed more to Croton than to Athens. (And going back further still perhaps its real debt is to Hermes Trismegistus.) Plato was sceptical of music and the visual arts, and it was rather the Pythagorean idea of the "music of the spheres" that entered the ethos of the Italian Renaissance. Ficino's vision was deeply spiritual, and he translated not only the whole of Plato into the contemporary Latin, but also the works of the Hermetic tradition and the *Enneads* of Plotinus. He stands like Pythagoras and Plotinus in the West as founder of a spiritual community or *sangha*, comparable to that of the Buddha's but with one radical difference: in our terminology Ficino's community was profoundly *via positiva*. The central metaphor of this spiritual teaching was, as mentioned earlier, "as above, so below," or man as microcosm.

The idea that the human being is a mirror of the universe, or that it in some way recapitulates or contains the cosmos, is deeply spiritual because it speaks of a fundamental identity of self with the world, a fundamental connectedness. In the reductionist, materialist worldview, where there is only "extended stuff," the human body is its own limit and boundary, irrevocably separate from other bodies, the planet and the universe. Hence the Renaissance vision is incommensurable with the modern scientific world view, leading for example the great biologist Stephen Jay Gould to lambast Leonardo for believing in "man as microcosm." The secular mind cannot square this religious concept with the modern scientific impulse that also lived in Leonardo. The Neoplatonist or rather Neopythagorean vision of Ficino's Academy (which lives on in the New Age) is a holistic vision prior to the scientific alienation of the modern mind, and so Leonardo had no difficulty encompassing such apparent contradictions.

Ficino was a spiritual teacher, as Pythagoras and the Buddha were, and his informal Academy can be understood as a *sangha* or spiritual community. He taught *contemplation* and the spiritual bond between fellow seekers, a bond of love. He viewed the cosmos as a hierarchy of forms: a classic version of the Great Chain of Being. The human being has a unique place in this because "by thinking and loving an object, the soul establishes a kind of unity with it." Man has an "infinite capacity of thinking and willing, knowing and loving, of identifying itself with all other things." What this meant for Ficino was astonishing: it meant that while the human being occupied a place in the Great Chain of Being, in one sense the human being is also outside of it, outside of everything, and so capable of unity with anything under contemplation, whether low or high in the Chain. This was the meaning of knowledge for Ficino.

Pico Della Mirandola

Ficino's Academy attracted possibly the most daring of Renaissance thinkers, Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494), who at the age of 23 published his *Oration On the Dignity Of Man*, a pamphlet that has summed up the essence of the Renaissance for generations, possibly its best "manifesto." Pico defines the dignity of man in a way that would be strange to us, as a creature with no "visage" of his own:

At last, the Supreme Maker decreed that this creature, to whom He could give nothing wholly his own, should have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature. Taking man, therefore, this creature of indeterminate image, He set him in the middle of the world and thus spoke to him:

“We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very centre of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.”

This *mutability* of man is a strange idea to us, but expressive of the medieval view of “man as microcosm,” that in some way the human spirit contained within it as a reflection all of existence, and that we can *choose* whatever part of it we wish to engage with. But this mutability was also a new optimism that people were not shackled by the existing order, and could achieve things for self or humanity through their own efforts. In this sense it anticipated the humanist and democratic advances of the Enlightenment. However Pico’s oration is not humanist in the modern sense because it is *entirely* religious. It was in fact the Introduction to his extraordinary call to the Renaissance world to radically shift its religious thinking. Pico is understood as a quintessentially Neoplatonist thinker, but that does not do justice to the range of his religious receptivity. He constructed a challenge to debate 900 theses from pretty much all the known religious and spiritual sources of the time, many provided by Ficino’s translations. The idea was not well received by the Church authorities of the day.

The Spiritual Wounds of the West

Although Aquinas had to some extent paved the way for the Renaissance, Ficino’s Academy went too far, too fast, and had little impact on the religious mainstream. Ficino’s interest in astrology – which was then not properly separated from astronomy – landed him in trouble with the Catholic Church and he had to answer accusations of the practice of magic: a very sobering experience. Mirandola’s treatment was worse: after a Papal investigation of his “theses” led to accusations of heresy he fled to France, where he was arrested and imprisoned. Both men knew another key religious thinker of the period, a Dominican friar called Savonarola, who is famous for his “Bonfires of the Vanities” in which he would burn what he thought were frivolous luxuries such as musical instruments and paintings. He wanted an intensely *via negativa* Renaissance, one in which the Church would be purged of its corruption and materialism, while Ficino and Mirandola were clearly of a more *via positiva*

temperament. The historical irony is that it was Savonarola who was condemned to death, his body burnt where his own “Bonfire of the Vanities” had been lit. The establishment made this thing oddly clear in this act: the *via negativa* was more of a threat to the State than the *via positiva*.

The treatment of Ficino, Mirandola and Savonarola by the religious authorities of the day was typical of a long history ended only by the Enlightenment and its scientific humanism. But I believe religious violence to be a uniquely Western phenomenon, taking place mostly in the lands under the sway of monotheism, and largely absent east of Iran. This is not to say that those countries were less violent, just that violence rarely had a religious cause. In examining the history of Western religious violence I came to the conclusion that it has left an indelible scar on the collective unconscious of the West, one I like to call “the spiritual wounds of the West.” Furthermore I believe that the difficulties of the wider acceptance of spirituality in the West even today derives from these wounds, the legacy of religious violence. Hence while the New Age borrows freely from the East and borrows cautiously from Western mystics, who mostly suffered religious persecution, it is mostly inclined to shut its ears to the religious history of the West. This is quite understandable, but has led firstly to the shallowness of the New Age, and secondly to the loss of the true Western spiritual heritage.

Man as Microcosm: Human Recapitulation of the Universe

I mentioned earlier that the Neoplatonist tradition is kept alive in the UK through the Temenos Academy. One of its Fellows, Joseph Milne, has recently published *Metaphysics and the Cosmic Order* in which he places the Neoplatonist tradition in a modern context. It is a small book but distills the essence of a complex tradition for the modern reader. At its heart is the recognition of “man as microcosm” or as I prefer it: the human recapitulation of the universe, as taught by Hermes, Pythagoras, Ficino and Mirandola. Milne is effectively saying that *Creation must know itself*, a key imperative of the *via positiva*. What Milne does for our age is to carefully restore an older meaning of the word “know” by rescuing it from science. He says for example: “In some mysterious way the cosmos is served and gathered into itself through being known.” This is not the scientific form of knowing however, which is analytical, but a holistic knowing discovered through the practice of contemplation, as Ficino insisted upon. This form of knowledge does not “puff up a man” because it is not the kind of thing that can be accumulated in books, libraries and universities. Milne regards an essential aspect of being human the capacity to “know” in this sense, and insists that the cosmos is served by it. He sums up his own approach, derived from extensive study of the Neoplatonist and Christian traditions in four propositions:

1. mind or consciousness is already connected with everything
2. all things are in communion with each other
3. all things disclose their nature as an act of being
4. man is called to bear witness to the truth of things.

Milne’s book – with a thoughtful introduction by Prince Charles – is a treasure of modern Neoplatonism. It has much in it that is relevant to the Western *Via Positiva* as I define it here, but I would also add that there are also quite different spiritual paths which it leaves out and which must be honoured for a properly pluralistic society. These include the devotional and animist for example.

Renaissance and Shamanic Recapitulation: the Shape Shifter

I suspect that an animist or shaman would have no problem with Milne's four propositions, knowing well that all things are in communion with each other and that the "trance flight" of the shaman is a version of Ficino's contemplation focussed specifically on plant and animal entities. Shamans know that they recapitulate within themselves all beings in the Great Chain, and that to actively project the human mind into that of a bird or animal is to know the universe afresh, and also to reaffirm the natural order and harmony of the cosmos. It is the place of the human – the creature with "no visage of its own" – to put on the face of all other beings in turn, to know the meaning of those beings and to allow creation to know itself.

It is here that I think much new research is needed: to discover how the thought of Hermes, Pythagoras and the Neoplatonists actually grow out of much older Nature religions, moderated in the move from hunter-gatherer cultures to those of city dwellers. Shamanism and Neoplatonism are different spiritual universes however and to conflate them is a mistake. But the common ground is intriguing: that of *recapitulation*.

Recapitulation as a Spiritual Gift and Path

I want to conclude this brief visit to Renaissance spirituality by suggesting that the idea of the human recapitulation of the universe is a uniquely *Western* contribution to our understanding of the spiritual life and of enlightenment. Of course shamanic cultures understood it, and the traditions like Buddhism, Taoism and Shinto understand it, but the Western *Via Positiva*, especially in Neoplatonism, has taken the idea to new heights. More than any other spiritual path that I know of, Neoplatonism – in the broad sense at least – opens the doors for spirituality to engage with science, the arts and politics.

Essay Three

The *Via Positiva*, the Enlightenment, and Science

We can understand the Western Enlightenment – the period of intellectual, scientific and political advances of the 17th and 18th centuries – as the second attempt to bring about a kind of Neoplatonist revolution, this time on the back of the revelations ushered in by Galileo, Kepler and Newton. Science emerged in its modern form for the first time on this planet, and it is no exaggeration to say that it changed *everything*. However its very success, I would suggest, completely occluded the spiritual nature of the Enlightenment.

The great spiritual revolution of the Renaissance was a turn from *via negativa* to *via positiva*, based on the turn from the Hebrew tradition to the Neoplatonist counter-religion. It is mostly lost to us today, partly because the Catholic Church could not shift its spiritual centre of gravity so quickly, and therefore clamped down on the Greek revival (even though it eventually adopted Aristotle as its “first philosopher”), and partly because the secular history now taught in schools and universities in the West overlooks the intensely spiritual nature of movements like Ficino’s Academy.

The spirituality of the Enlightenment period is even more lost to us. In my book *Secularism* I show how, while we are generally taught that the Enlightenment was a successful secular revolution giving rise to modern science and democracy, it can also be considered a *spiritual* revolution that came perhaps at the wrong time to grip the imagination of the West. Out of some fifty key Enlightenment thinkers I have only found two or three who were committed to a materialistic atheistic project, the rest in fact revelling in the possibilities of new spiritual and religious thought. This spiritual revolution has disappeared from view as “Deism” and its role in underpinning the thinking of America’s Founding Fathers quite forgotten. And what was the essential spiritual quality of their thought? Why, the *via positiva*.

Two forms of Science

For Ficino, the start of knowledge is contemplation. But with Galileo, Kepler and Newton the scientific method in its modern form was born, and with it both the wonder of the modern era – its capacity to generate undreamt of wealth and leisure – and its misery: an alienating soulless reductionism. Ficino had the privileged patronage of the de Medici family, and so had the time and resources for learning and contemplation denied the vast majority of the people of that time. Modern industrialized societies now give the bulk of their citizens such opportunities – though of course not everyone seizes them. And within this scientific world of democratic abundance there lurks the anxiety that it might be nothing more than an arid secular playground. Poor Newton usually gets the blame – along with Descartes, as we will see – for creating this anxiety. The “Newtonian” mechanical universe turns the cosmos, and us, into machines. But Newton himself, like all the scientists of the Enlightenment, was a deeply committed spiritual-religious thinker. In fact, the

commitment of these scientists to religion was often greater than their commitment to science, and this was certainly true of Newton.

The *legacy* of Newton and the others is very different however, and I find it useful to turn again to the work of Joseph Milne to explore this. I find that Milne, despite a lack of training in the hard sciences, has a keen grasp of what a discipline like modern physics means, an understanding that eludes most New Age thinkers. He says for example, quite simply: “Science cannot investigate the *meaning* of science or the nature of knowing.” Science for Milne goes wrong when it emphasises the mastery over things. We saw in the last essay that for Milne the human capacity to know the cosmos – or recapitulate it – is what is essential to both humans and the cosmos. He says: “This means that the knowledge in things is what attracts human intelligence, rather than the will to gain mastery over things.” As his fourth proposition states: “man is called to bear witness to the truth of things.” He goes on to imply that Western philosophy has taken a wrong turn in the Enlightenment. I agree: in some ways philosophy was wrong-footed by the sudden arrival of modern science. Milne says: “Consequently the scientific discoveries of the mechanics of things have been taken to be the *meaning* of things.” Again, I agree with him: all the bluster from the apologists for modern science, such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, protesting that science is full of meaning, is simply mistaken. The meaning arises elsewhere and is *read into* the science. Science in the modern sense is *only* about mechanics. And this deadens the heart and soul.

But the scientists of the Enlightenment had mostly not yet gone astray like this. And although the emphasis on reason and the fascination for the emerging science characterised the period – Newton’s *Principia* circulating in Catholic France as a banned book of enormous “cult” appeal for example – there was also a tremendous burst of new spiritual thought. I will turn now to a cluster of three great innovators in this field, my personal spiritual heroes of the period.

My Spiritual Heroes of the Enlightenment

My research into the spirituality of the Enlightenment period led me to discover that the greatest spiritual insights of the time were to be found pretty much where you would least expect them: within the so-called “Continental Rationalists”: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. Of the three I think Descartes is the most misunderstood, while Spinoza is more often recognized as a spiritual genius. Leibniz, while regarded as possibly the greatest philosopher of the period, is somewhat derided today.

Turning to Descartes first, I have to say: poor Descartes! Both the world of philosophy and the world of the New Age blame him for all our ills. He is the author, variously, of the “Cartesian Split,” “Cartesian Dualism,” “The Cartesian Reduction,” and so on. If all his critics were to be believed he is the sole source of all our contemporary schizophrenia. But a short period reading Descartes himself – instead of the mountain of commentators – reveals an astonishing thing: he was a deeply spiritual thinker approaching the calibre of the Buddha. His critics all get it wrong at the first hurdle, with Descartes’ famous “cogito” – “I think therefore I am.” The mistake lies in the way the word “think” is taken, without letting Descartes get a word in edgeways as to what he meant by the term. In two separate major works he spells it out for us:

What is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands (conceives), affirms, denies, wills, refuses, that imagines also and perceives. (*Meditations*)

By the word thought, I understand all that which so takes place in us that we of ourselves are immediately conscious of it; and, accordingly, not only to understand (*intelligere, entendre*), to will (*velle*), to imagine (*imaginari*), but even to perceive (*sentire, sentir*), are here the same as to think (*cogitare, penses*). (*Principles of Philosophy*)

The key word here is “perceive” – his list is meant to cover the entire content of consciousness. In other words he was saying whatever else we may doubt as illusion, or fleeting impression of a shifting so-called “material” world, the one thing we can always know is consciousness itself.

But there is not space here to rehabilitate poor Descartes. I simply want to point out that he is an original spiritual thinker and that when you examine his thinking alongside that of the Buddha, or for example Meister Eckhart or Socrates, you find astonishing similarities – all covered up of course by the originality (and obscurity) of his prose. What is important, regardless of whether you come to agree with me on this, is that he is clearly the first great Western thinker to reflect on the epoch-changing emergence of modern science and acknowledge that the world-view and religion of his day was challenged to the core by it. We may not like his response – the separation of matter and mind into “extended stuff” and “thinking stuff” with utterly different characteristics – but we should at least acknowledge that he was the first to both span these two worlds, and secondly at least propose some kind of framework for dealing with their incommensurability.

As I have just suggested, Descartes was at the same time both deeply spiritual and deeply engaged in science. However he seemed to have little feel for the arts, or indeed the entire world of feeling and emotion, and that has to be taken into account in assessing his legacy. But, far from being “schizoid” Descartes is very sane, very humble, and committed to simplicity in his everyday life. His balance between a *via negativa* spirituality and a *via positiva* engagement with the stuff of the universe is not “schizoid” but exemplary, even though his formal contributions to science were minute compared to his arch-rival Newton. Was he a fully rounded human being? Probably not, but that is rare.

Both Spinoza and Leibniz lived in the shadow of the “great teacher” Descartes and his system, but history has been much kinder to Spinoza than the other two. During his lifetime he was reviled as an “atheist” and pursued a material simplicity, giving up part of his inheritance to his brother and making a living grinding lenses for the hi-tech revolution of his time: microscopes and telescopes. Fame and fortune were not his (he was early on excommunicated from his Jewish community), and neither did he gather many pupils around him: he was simply too controversial.

Like Descartes he lived a balance between the *via negativa* of spiritual detachment, and a *via positiva* curious of science and of politics and society. More than that, he recognised that to live a modest life which positively celebrated music, dance, food and all the material pleasures in moderation was in itself a spiritual affirmation of creation. There is *far* more to say about Spinoza than is possible here: his spiritual genius is yet to be fully acknowledged. But when Dawkins rather bizarrely says that Einstein’s “God” is trivially true (as opposed to the “God” of

mainstream religion which Dawkins rejects), he is talking about the spiritual vision of Spinoza that Einstein was inspired by. And there is nothing trivial in it: only truth.

Leibniz is the joker in this pack of three and was greatly influenced by the other two. Although in his inner life he attempted a similar balance of simultaneous detachment and engagement, he appears to us as the great *hustler* of the age. Endlessly criss-crossing Europe, he was endlessly whispering into the ears of princes, and endlessly backing grandiose schemes, whether versions of the Royal Academy in Russia, France, Germany and Austria, or working for the complete reconciliation of Catholicism with Protestantism along scientific lines – a hopeless project it turned out. He is important to us for two things however: firstly for his invention of the “theodicy” – which is a theological argument for the goodness of the universe despite universal suffering – and for his magnificent summary of the Western tradition of “man as microcosm” in his last work *The Monadology*. As we saw, “monad” is the term for “The One” going back to Pythagoras, and is the closest Western equivalent to the Indian “Advaita” meaning “not-two.” Leibniz effectively, and in the most original and daring of terms, distilled the essence of Neoplatonism going back to Pythagoras in this condensed and difficult work. The key idea in the whole thing is this: that each monad is “a perpetual living mirror of the universe.” This is a reframing of the idea of “man as microcosm,” or “as above so below,” and allows each monad, at whatever level of complexity, to participate fully in the universe. More than that, the world is a plenum in which each monad perceives distinctly what is close to it, but is also “mediately affected by bodies adjoining those with which it itself is in immediate contact. Wherefore it follows that this inter-communication of things extends to any distance, however great. And consequently every body feels the effect of all that takes place in the universe ...” In this Leibniz anticipates some of the findings of quantum theory (quantum entanglement), making the *Monadology* astonishingly prescient. Or perhaps, as quantum theory says nothing about how bodies “feel”, we should just listen more carefully to Leibniz.

Although Leibniz doesn’t use the term, his *Monadology* presents a version of the “Great Chain of Being,” where the simplest monads, like a rock, have rudimentary “apperceptions” of their surroundings; plants more so; animals even more; and humans to a high degree. For Leibniz the ultimate monad is “God,” but I prefer the idea that it is the enlightened human being. For me, an enlightened man or woman is a perfect mirror of the entire universe, or recapitulates it fully. In other words it is only when I triangulate the *Monadology* against the wisdom traditions of the East does it fully make sense. But Leibniz still astonishes at every turn, for example he is confident that “every body feels the effect of all that takes place in the universe.” I would suggest that only an enlightened person can be so confident of that. Is Leibniz – along with Descartes and Spinoza – amongst my “lost buddhas of the West?” I think so.

Returning to the monads as entities that have consciousness ranging from the most rudimentary to the most highly evolved, we can call this a form of panpsychism: the idea that all of existence is imbued with consciousness. Christian de Quincey (former editor of the *Institute of Noetic Science Review*) considers that this idea goes back to Pythagoras and beyond, to the Egyptians, and to shamanic practitioners in much earlier times. He also sees Leibniz’s *Monadology* as a key work going beyond monism or dualism, and which restates the Renaissance ideal. In Quincey’s own detailed account of panpsychism he sees this lineage of thought then extending into the New Age via Arthur Koestler’s “holons” and Ken Wilber’s reworking of that idea in his “four quadrants” scheme.

The Spiritual Legacy of the Enlightenment

We saw, from a spiritual point of view, that the Renaissance included a flowering of spirituality of a broadly Neoplatonist kind, which was quickly smothered by mainstream Christianity. Mirandola's hopes for spiritual tolerance and pluralism came much too early in Western history, though of course it had always been a simple feature of Indian religious life for example. The Enlightenment, whose great thinkers witnessed the worst of religious persecution between Protestants and Catholics, left a legacy much later of precisely the religious tolerance that Mirandola had hoped for. But the Enlightenment also left a legacy of *disbelief*. The Enlightenment – in my own understanding – is therefore at the same time a successful secular revolution in which democratic freedoms were established, and a failed spiritual revolution in which bold spiritual innovations were lost. The astonishing spiritual inventiveness and radical new experiments in spiritual thought – as we have seen in Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, and which very often built on European Neoplatonism – became lost as mere “philosophy” and so the bulk of Western intellectuals turned their back on spirituality and religion, devoting themselves instead to the liberating disciplines of science, the arts, and politics. Christianity won a hollow victory over the great counter-religion of the West, what I am broadly calling Neoplatonism, and retreated into a cultural ghetto, more or less safe from the great minds of the modern world, which only occasionally bothered to deride it. What emerged is what I call “the great ignorance pact” between the world of Western religion and the secular world, only interrupted recently – and to little useful end – by the New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins. Religion and intelligence parted company in the Enlightenment, a betrayal of those great avatars of Western spirituality: Hermes, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plotinus, Eckhart, Ficino, Mirandola, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. And this list doesn't begin to exhaust the history of intelligent religion in the West prior to the modern era.

The anti-scientific revolution

As the Industrial Revolution took off on the back of science, and the Enlightenment period saw great advances in the political sphere eventually leading to universal franchise (one man one vote) and the end of aristocratic privilege, there also grew an awareness that the great material advances in people's lives risked the loss of spiritual values. The downside of the Enlightenment – what William Blake called the “dark Satanic mills” – provoked a counter-Enlightenment revolution that we now broadly label as Romantic. I'll discuss its own failure as a spiritual revolution in the next essay, but here I am interested to show how some Enlightenment thinkers anticipated the deadening grip that science would come to have over the popular imagination: not the science itself, but what we often now call “scientism” – the reduction of all human spheres of experience to the explanations of science. The etymology of “explanation” is to flatten, and it is this flattening of human experience by science – “the mere touch of cold philosophy” as Yeats put it – that turns our universe cold and “unweaves the rainbow.” The Germans called it “disenchantment,” but a host of other terms came to be used, for example: alienation, the “sickness unto death,” anomie, angst, and “iron in the soul.”

William Blake's most telling phrase in regard to science is this: “the bounded is loathed by its possessor.” If we imagine a child receiving a toy that has a handle which you crank to make something go round via some gears, then initially it delights. But after a while the machine – for that is what it is – is tired of, because its behaviour

is mechanical, that is to say, bounded. The same input always gives the same output. But a child will not tire of a dog, or other animal, because the animal is a *being*, an unbounded, unmechanical entity. The same input for the animal, on different days, gives a different output. This depends of course on a mutual empathy developing between child and animal, and here is the alarming prospect for a technological society like ours: the child is now in danger of preferring the mechanical toy, as society as a whole grows more “autistic” and less capable of empathy for beings, including human beings. This is the danger of the “mastery over things” granted by science, that the unexpected becomes so terrifying that we want guaranteed outputs for all inputs. A society moving in this direction risks what I call cultural autism: a society so defended against emotion, feeling, and the unknown that it doesn’t even notice its own autism.

In one of Richard Dawkins’ books he is saddened to find that the great Romantic thinkers were hostile to science, given that he admires their poetry so much and even wishes he could write it. But when Dawkins wrings his hands over Blake’s comparison of science to “an iron scourge over Albion / Reasonings like vast Serpents Infold around my limbs ...” he entirely misses the point. “Reasonings” are well visualised as serpents infolding around one’s limbs because they remove the self from the immediate presence of emotion, feeling, and the unknown in one’s encounter with existence and propel one into the mental cage of ungrounded thinking. Dawkins truly believes that he finds awe, majesty and poetry in science, but I think he is mistaken as to the source of those feelings, and that in the Neoplatonist tradition and the writings of contemporary thinker Joseph Milne we find a much deeper understanding of human nature and its relationship to the cosmos.

While Leibniz may have shared with Descartes an insufficient balance between thinking and feeling, he was as acute as Blake in spotting the pitfalls of science, and much more informed of course. He saw, like Joseph Milne, that *meaning* could not be found in a cause-and-effect chain of the type so marvellously laid bare by the new empirical sciences. The atoms of modern science are not for him at all: his monads are the true “atoms” – meaning indivisible fundamental entities – and no two are alike. Everything in other words has *character*: “there is nothing fallow, nothing sterile, nothing dead in the universe, no chaos, no confusion, save in appearance,” he says, a stark contrast to the mechanistic view of particles, atoms, and molecules of modern science, each one of which are identical and without personality, without *meaning*. Although he loves science, Leibniz is under no illusion: a chain of physical cause and effect going from atoms up to galaxies yields only mechanical explanations that are potentially endless. This extract sums up his approach, though its language might be a little obscure to those not trained in philosophy: “And as all this detail involves other prior or more detailed contingent things, each of which still needs a similar analysis to yield its reasons, we are no further forward: and the sufficient or final reason must be outside of the sequence or series of particular contingent things, however infinite this series may be.”

“We are no further forward...” he says. However sublime and grand modern science may be – perhaps even as an aesthetic – it takes us not a jot closer to *meaning*. (Or to love or to human warmth, or to spiritual illumination, or to *moksha*, nirvana, self-realization or liberation.)

The Enlightenment Legacy

We saw that Christianity as a religion has as its first instinct a *via negativa* emphasis. If Aquinas was the first major Christian theologian to embrace a *via positiva* element directed at “Nature”, and the Renaissance saw a Neoplatonist flowering of it (all too soon stifled by the Catholic Church) then what of the Enlightenment? As I have hinted, this period saw the first real potential for spiritual pluralism in the Western world, but this became possible only alongside the rise of science and an over-emphasis on rationality. Spiritual innovation reaching to the pitch of spiritual genius was everywhere at hand during the Enlightenment, but was lost in the rush to secularism amongst those of great intellect and energy, leaving a wounded Christian world to retreat into a defensive position in which Protestantism often became an immensely conservative force – particularly in America. Another factor prevented the great spiritual innovations of the Enlightenment era – often with a basis in the Neoplatonist tradition going back to Pythagoras – from entering the mainstream: they were carefully hidden in obscure prose. This was a historical accident: those writers were often active in the early part of the period when religious intolerance was still at a peak. Take Descartes: he was hounded out of France and then even out of the relatively tolerant Netherlands. He was forced to write in an obscure, guarded fashion. Another prime example of an immensely beautiful and spiritual text almost completely smothered by a bizarre formal style is Spinoza’s *The Ethics*. This led to the major spiritual works of the period being mostly lost to us as “philosophy.”

It is for this reason I think that the New Age is so stubbornly anti-historical. New Age spiritual thinkers look back to the Enlightenment as, in fact, utterly dark of spiritual inspiration, and that kind of shuts the door to going further back, to the Renaissance – particularly when that period is taught in schools and universities from an entirely secular standpoint – and also because the Protestant world retains its distaste for anything vaguely Neoplatonist: to many Christians it is still “pagan.”

In my books *Secularism* and *Postsecularism* I argued that out of around fifty key Enlightenment thinkers only two were atheist materialists in the modern sense, and that by far the bulk of these great writers were making arguments, not *against* religion and spirituality, but *within* them. And by far the bulk of these arguments were effectively visions of the *via positiva*, in many and varied forms.

I rate Spinoza and Leibniz amongst the greatest of the Enlightenment spiritual geniuses who were focussed on a *via positiva* of the sciences and politics, while Blake the greatest of those focussed on the *via positiva* of the arts. There are dozens more important figures of course (I would include Bishop Berkeley and many of the German Idealists), but they are either lost as philosophers – posing speculative systems of thought – or are lost through the linguistic camouflage they adopted in order to avoid the authorities.

Descartes is accused by the modern world of introducing proofs of the existence of “God” into his writings in order to avoid imprisonment. But a careful reading of his works shows something else: that he uses the word “God” to indicate what all the great mystics refer to in various terms, for instance “The One” in the writings of the non-Christian Plotinus, or “the non-dual” in Eastern thought, or the “ultimate monad” in Neoplatonism. The Scottish philosopher David Hume accused Spinoza of being an atheist – it was simply necessary to do that to gain access to the salons of Europe at the time – and Hume in turn is understood as an atheist, but he too wrote thoughtfully about the spiritual life, and didn’t see why the term “Mind” shouldn’t be used instead of “God.” What they all objected to was “God” as a

supreme being who intervened directly in human affairs and preferred any one race over another: in other words an anthropomorphic “God.” But the prejudice they faced in such spiritual creativity meant that their ideas are lost or misunderstood to us now. Descartes’ reviled distinction between matter and mind, between extended stuff and thinking stuff, when examined closely, better resembles that simple distinction made by all the mystics and esoteric traditions between the unchanging unmanifest, potential “pleroma,” and the manifest, material manifold exuberance of the flux of existence.

The Enlightenment Spiritually Reworked for the Via Positiva

While the revolutionary spiritual essence of the Renaissance – Neoplatonism – was crushed by forces outside itself, the revolutionary spiritual essence of the Enlightenment was crushed from within as well as without. Scientific reductionism won out over spiritual innovation. But there is nothing to stop a total re-evaluation of the Enlightenment from a proper spiritual perspective, one which would liberate both Neoplatonism to claim such thinkers as Leibniz, and Protestant Christianity to claim its philosophical genius in the tradition rather lost as “Deism.” Such a project might even rehabilitate Descartes!

What though would such a project mean for the Via Positiva? Nothing short of a completely new way for science and spirituality to relate to each other. In the next essay I will consider the arts and their relationship to the Via Positiva: a relationship I consider fruitful and relatively unproblematic. But science and the Via Positiva: that’s much more difficult, despite – or perhaps because of – the veritable publishing industry on, for example, mysticism and quantum physics. Joseph Milne sees this “marriage” as a mistake – and so do I. One can project onto a mystery like quantum theory anything one likes, but that doesn’t make for a science that is meaningful in spiritual terms. Can there really be a holistic kind of science that can fill this gap? For sure, a person engaged on the Western Via Positiva may well enjoy modern science or even work as a scientist. There is no contradiction in it. But the real common ground lies in gnosis, and it is in the Western Via Positiva that the real tradition of gnosis still lies, waiting to be explored.

Essay Four

The *Via Positiva* and the Arts

In this essay I complete the picture of the *Via Positiva* by examining the creative arts in more detail. The modern world places great store on human creativity, often finding in it and its productions a mystery of almost religious dimensions. It is obvious indeed that the creativity of not just artists but also scientists, engineers, and all the other disciplines that contribute to a modern democratic world, is to be highly regarded. And, despite the postmodern efforts to discredit the idea of creative genius, contemporary society lavishes praise on creative individuals, in obvious ways through celebrity culture, and in quieter ways through the judgement of history and the often posthumous recognition of outstanding talent in all fields of endeavour. I will concentrate in this essay on artists and their creativity, a creativity which we all recognise to have something akin, in its heights, to spiritual ecstasy. In the Neoplatonist Renaissance vision of the Florentine Academy, such creativity had its source in proper contemplation, and its productions spoke of spiritual truths.

Creative and Spiritual “Highs”

The Christian *via negativa* tradition emphasised the erasing of personal preferences, history, and individuality in a “Cloud of Unknowing,” a path of detachment and renunciation. But the Neoplatonist counter-religion, despite the many *via negativa* currents that flowed into its broad banks, helped engender individualism of a constructive kind, as shown in the life and work of Ficino. Great artists like Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Dürer were influenced by his school, though Leonardo Da Vinci struck out in a new direction, favouring direct experience over the writings of the Greeks and other figures from antiquity, leading to his emphasis on the empirical, the basis of the scientific revolution to come. What Ficino insisted upon however was that artistic creativity be underpinned by the basic elements of the *via negativa*, including contemplation and brotherly love, which act as correctives to the unbridled self-absorption that artists are prone to.

Centuries later, the artists of the Romantic period, throwing off the yoke of both the Christian renunciative tradition and the emerging industrial wage-slavery, pursued individualism to its heights. Central to that was the creative expression of the individual, in poetry, literature, painting and other arts, and its experience as a *high*. I would argue that creativity itself is a core feature of Creation, a core feature of human experience which has an ecstatic quality about it. But the creative “high” is always followed by a “low” – if for no more reason than ordinary exhaustion. And the problem is greatly magnified if that high is elevated over all other human experience and becomes effectively a form of addiction. In other words, while that high naturally belongs to *via positiva* experience in spiritual terms, in the absence of the balancing *via negativa* it has the potential to be a destructive force. In contrast it is clear from the Buddha’s own accounts that his own “high” – which he calls bliss – is something he can access for an hour at a time, a day at a time, months at a time or even years at a time, a feature of the enlightened state he points out that not even the wealth of

princes and kings can confer. I would say that the Buddha's "high" comes from his permanent identification with the unmanifest – in other words it is a bliss that arises when all sense of a separate self is ended. Artists mostly cling to a "high" which is a direct outcome of a heightened sense of individualism and separation – one which always hurls them back into a pit of dissatisfaction once their creative periods are spent. This "divine dissatisfaction" may well be the spur to all genuine creativity, but it is also the source of great human tragedy as well. The sheer intensity of peak creativity is a kind of high voltage, and in many cases the individual does not have the essential *via negativa* resources to cope, and burns out or commits suicide.

Before turning to the plight of such creative artists I first look at three great poets of the Via Positiva who certainly did have such *via negativa* reserves, despite the undoubted intensity of their creative outpourings.

Three Poets of the Via Positiva

One of the best ways to understand the issue of creativity in the Western Via Positiva is to examine the writings of what I call "the three poets of the via positiva": Thomas Traherne (1636–1674), William Blake (1757–1827), and Walt Whitman (1819–1892). These poets, respectively of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, all wrote prose as well as poetry, but may seem remote to us because of their era. Although Whitman would have known the works of Blake, neither Whitman nor Blake would have known the works of Traherne, as his key writings were not discovered until the 1960s.

Richard Maurice Bucke wrote the well-known book *Cosmic Consciousness*, and was a disciple – in a real, religious sense – of Walt Whitman. He says something very interesting about Whitman's major work *Leaves of Grass*. It grew on him slowly, he says, initially leaving no mark, but on subsequent reading displaying small pockets of light, until the whole lit up for him. This captures well, I find, the way that all the texts I am discussing here work, and the more so the further back in time we reach. *Initially*, these older expressions of spiritual insight may leave no mark: they are old-fashioned to our sensibilities, and it is hard to get a feel of the author, so shaped by a period in history that will at first feel like a foreign country, even if it is geographically one's own. But, as any traveller will know, if one suspends the prejudices of one's own homeland for any length of time, one can eventually enter into the spirit of the initially foreign country, and even in time "go native." That is what Bucke means when he says that eventually a work like *Leaves of Grass* is lit up for him in its entirety. The works of Blake and Traherne are no different, though the journey to the earlier centuries is harder, let alone the effort to enter the time of Ficino or way back to Pythagoras. The works of these great spiritual thinkers can "light up" for us if we work at it a bit, and my belief is that their spiritual insights can be very helpful in the construction or evolution of contemporary spiritualities.

Turning now to Thomas Traherne, I have chosen one of his poems to introduce the visionary nature of his thought. Here are the first two verses of "The Salutation," the opening poem of the Dobell collection (all selections from the Penguin edition):

1

These little limbs,
These eyes and hands which here I find,
These rosy cheeks wherewith my life begins,
Where have ye been? Behind
What curtain were ye from me hid so long!
Where was, in what abyss, my speaking tongue?

2

When silent I,
So many thousand years,
Beneath the dust did in a chaos lie,
How could I smiles or tears,
Or lips or hands or eyes or ears perceive?
Welcome, ye treasures which I now receive.

To start with it is difficult to appreciate what lies behind such apparently decorative poetic verses. The language is old-fashioned, the rhyming artificial and the sentiment – well, the sentiment might appear sentimental. But Traherne is neither ornamental nor sentimental in his intention. He is talking about the fundamental *via positiva* approach to life, one which welcomes the *very coming into being* of self, a human self. This makes his philosophy completely at odds to the Christian doctrine of original sin. He has the sense that he has waited – perhaps for thousands of years – to come into being as a human being, gifted with limbs and hands, a full sensory apparatus, and the humanity to know smiles from tears. In the following two verses he begins to elaborate on this theme:

3

I that so long
Was nothing from eternity,
Did little think such joys as ear or tongue,
To celebrate or see:
Such sounds to hear, such hands to feel, such feet,
Beneath the skies, on such a ground to meet.

4

New burnish'd joys!
Which yellow gold and pearl excel!
Such sacred treasures are the limbs in boys,
In which a soul doth dwell;
Their organized joints, and azure veins
More wealth include, than all the world contains.

Traherne does not of course mean that little girls are any less than little boys, and we believe that a major element of his prose work, *The Centuries of Meditations*, was intended as a spiritual guide to a young woman, perhaps his niece. He is repeating in these verses the sense that perhaps he had waited, not just a few thousand years, but all eternity to come into being in a human body, to live under the skies of planet Earth and to have such feet as to walk on its soil. A child for him is not born into sin, but as a sacred treasure. In other poetic passages he reminds us that childhood is a period of

wonder in which simple pebbles are greater than silver spoons or golden goblets, and that other human beings are majestic whole universes. He finishes the poem with this verse:

A stranger here
Strange things doth meet, strange glories see;
Strange treasures lodg'd in this fair world appear;
Strange all, and new to me.
But that they mine should be, who nothing was,
That strangest is of all, yet brought to pass.

He is celebrating again, and above all else, that this manifest world is strange and glorious, and nothing is more strange and glorious that they should be his, intensely, passionately *his*, “who nothing was.” He feels a sense of ownership over the whole of existence, *this* existence. Elsewhere he talks about being insatiable for *this* existence. Not a heaven to come. How strange for a seventeenth century Christian chaplain! It is no wonder that his works that meditate on such themes were not published in his lifetime. We do know however that he had links with the Cambridge Platonists of the period, and hence a likely empathy with Neoplatonism. It is this which may well account for the *via positiva* element so glorious in his work.

William Blake’s work is a good example of the avant-garde which is reviled in its day and then adopted by the establishment a generation or so later. He was a revolutionary in every sense, but one of his poems was to become the basis for the anthem “Jerusalem,” considered to be England’s most popular patriotic song in the early 20th century, almost becoming a second national anthem. You can’t get more “establishment” than that!

When I first started reading Blake, I found it left no mark, just as *Leaves of Grass* was to Bucke, but gradually his work lit up for me in pockets here and there, and eventually convinced me that Blake was a highly advanced spiritual thinker. I only have space here to comment on a few lines from him, little extracts that are astonishing summaries of the *via positiva* spiritual path. The first is almost a throw-away line:

“Eternity is in love with the productions of time.”

I love this line! I actually can’t think of a better way to sum up the *via positiva*, and it’s relation to the *via negativa*. The latter advises us, in the words of Spinoza, to see everything under the aspect of eternity – in other words to perfect a kind of detachment from the world. But Blake is saying, fine, you need to know eternity as a direct inner experience (or, to use words from other traditions, the infinite, the imperishable, the stainless, the unmanifest), but you also need to recognize that *everything* thrown up in the manifest world is cherished by that same eternity, and needs to be known and to be celebrated. “Eternity” is still the key word however, because it suggests the right perspective. If that anchoring in eternity, or infinity or the imperishable, or “God,” or however you want to put it is not there, then the productions of time – fashioned from the material substrate of the physical universe – are only understood as meaningless confluences of lifeless matter.

These four lines from Blake’s poem “Auguries of Innocence” suggest both this love of the productions of time and, in the same breath, the essential requirement that eternity and infinity be central to one’s preoccupations.

To see the world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

Blake was a mystic of the highest order, whose intense creativity was an adjunct to that mysticism, and also an expression of it. His love of existence is manifest in all his works, but it never descends into materialism: he led the simplest of lifestyles you can imagine.

When Blake talks about seeing the world in a grain of sand, he is also referencing the entire Neoplatonist and Renaissance tradition of the microcosm. This is a perception that is not just beyond thinking, but one that actively requires the suspension of it in favour of the immediate, unmediated, perception of the whole. Such perception steps outside of time and location, hence Blake's instinctive use of the terms "infinity" and "eternity." And, as Blake says, the bounded is loathed by its possessor.

In Richard Maurice Bucke's biography of Walt Whitman he says "Perhaps, indeed, no man has ever lived who liked so many things and disliked so few as Walt Whitman." This is a good quality for the *via positiva*! Whitman is celebrated of course as the great poet of America, specifically, we could say, of the *expansiveness* that lies at the heart of the US national character. But only a few people have ever understood Whitman as a great mystic, or discovered that he had pupils in every sense like disciples to a guru: Bucke being one of them. The following verses from his poem "Starting from Paumanok" is, I believe, good evidence for Whitman's nature as a spiritual teacher, in an era where the word "guru" had barely made its appearance from India:

For your life adhere to me,
(I may have to be persuaded many times before I consent to give myself really
to you, but what of that?
Must not Nature be persuaded many times?)

No dainty dolce affettuoso I,
Bearded, sun-burnt, gray-neck'd, forbidding, I have arrived,
To be wrestled with as I pass for the solid prizes of the universe,
For such I afford whoever can persevere to win them.

There is much in Whitman that reminds one of a Zen Master: one you wrestle with in a series of mind-bending encounters on the journey to enlightenment. The English social reformer and mystic Edward Carpenter liked to compare the photographs of Whitman and "an Indian Gnani or seer." He saw in both faces the same spiritual development, but thought that the Indian lacked the marks of a person deeply engaged with the world. I would say that he was comparing an advanced practitioner of the *via positiva* with an advanced practitioner of the *via negativa*.

A simple statement of Whitman's mysticism comes in this verse from "Song of Myself:"

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not
contain'd between my hat and boots,
And I peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.

The seeker on the *via positiva*, in my definition, expands their sense of identification until it encompasses all that is. Hence Whitman here can say that he is not contained between his hat and his boots – a memorable image. He adds in the same poem that “a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels” and that:

I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains,
esculent roots,
And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over.

Whitman is nothing short of coterminous with the Universe.

The Romantics

Turning now to the Romantic artists and poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it is clear that they were fired up by two powerful cultural forces of the period: the emerging freedom from conventional religion, and the current of anti-industrialisation epitomised by the Luddites. The Romantics were hence “spiritual” rather than religious, and horrified by the “Satanic mills” of emerging industry. They were often drawn to vaguely Neoplatonist writings, including the Kabala, Hermeticism and mysticism of various sorts, and had a profound instinct that scientific knowledge was the wrong kind of knowing – making them better aligned to Ficino than to Newton. The film *Pandaemonium*, starring Linus Roache as Samuel Coleridge, and John Hannah as William Wordsworth, is a good record of the sensibilities and japes of the English Romantic poets, and also conveys the modern unease with their vision. However I want to take the case of the German Romantic writer and polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as representing both the heights of the Romantic *via positiva* impulse and the depths of its mistake in ignoring the *via negativa* counterbalance.

Goethe represents not just the Romantic heights, but perhaps *all* the Western heights of that period: he embodied the Renaissance vision of the rounded-out humanist, one whose contributions to arts, politics and science were matched by their spiritual depths. He was an Enlightenment figure comparable to the American polymath and Deist, Benjamin Franklin. In other words, potentially, Goethe could represent the full flowering of the Western *Via Positiva*. Crucially for us is his attempt to pursue a science in Ficino's terms rather than those of Galileo, Kepler and Newton. Like most Romantics, and in keeping with the stronger links to Nature of the German peoples, Goethe felt that the mechanical emphasis in Newton's legacy was wrong, and particularly wrong when applied to biology, the science which he devoted more time to than any other. Darwin drew on his ideas, but the so-called “Goethean Science” still pursued today by his followers has gained little mainstream acceptance.

But the real problem with Goethe's legacy – and this is not to detract at all from the astonishing contributions he made – is that his Romantic side was not grounded in the restraint of either mainstream Christianity or the contemplation and simplicity so well-demonstrated in Ficino, Descartes or Spinoza. Once the Romantic thinkers had freed themselves from Christian church tradition, the core corrective of

that tradition – which is a genuine humility and well-founded suspicion of the “puffed up” intellectual – was lost. Instead of the ethical pull that continually forces a return to love for the neighbour, Romanticism put in its place the *aesthetic imperative*. We can illustrate this in two of Goethe’s works that were massively influential on Europe of the late 18th and early 19th centuries: *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and *Faust*.

Werther is a semi-autobiographical character who falls hopelessly in love and finally shoots himself when he fails to win his beloved Charlotte, oblivious to the pain this would cause her and her family. It was the aesthetic of unrequited love and suicide, so poetically described by Goethe, that allegedly led many young men in Europe to dress in the same “English-style” blue suit and yellow waistcoat of Werther and blow their brains out. (Censors in Leipzig and Denmark banned the novel to stem this tide.) In *Faust* the protagonist sells his soul to the Devil, gets a young woman pregnant through the Devil’s assistance (he’s not otherwise attractive enough to the opposite sex it seems), murders her brother, abandons the girl when she gives birth – and gets away with it all on the basis of his “tormented” soul. From a modern perspective we would just say that the upper classes always got away with behaviour like that: so what. But Romanticism fails precisely because the “tormented” – and oh so sensitive – soul of the protagonist has, in spiritual terms, pursued the *via positiva* with no correcting *via negativa*. It has become the cult of the individual.

The Spiritual in 20th century art

To complete this brief survey of arts and the *via positiva* I want to turn now to a more recent phenomenon: the art of the 20th century. I worked for 21 years in the art department of a London university and was able to explore for a while how the spiritual manifested itself in 20th century art. It was an eye-opener. Although artists of the modern period rejected religious authority – perhaps more than most – and often declared intensely materialist philosophies, including those of Marx, many quietly pursued spiritual interests drawing on a wide variety of sources. I have published a number of essays on this topic, but only have space here to recap a few key features of the field. Firstly, 20th century artists mostly lived in comfortable freedom from religion, unlike the Romantics who were in still in full revolt against it and against science. Secondly, 20th century artists generally shared a modernist distaste for Romantic excess. To take just two key painters as examples, Wassily Kandinsky and Mark Rothko, we find in them and their work a sobriety and spirituality that echoes Ficino’s. Kandinsky was influenced by Siberian shamanism and Theosophy, while Rothko was influenced by Native American spirituality and conceptions of the “negative theology” – another name for the *via negativa*. In this case it becomes an artistic impulse to penetrate the world of form and seek the unmanifest through various painterly devices of erasure and absence: the spiritual essence as it were of abstract art. Indeed, drawing on the American critic Susan Sontag, I have suggested that the American Abstract Impressionist painters including Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock were pursuing an erasure of reference deeply aligned to the negative theology in Christianity. Pollock himself was drawn to a range of spiritual influences, including Native American shamanism, the teachings of Krishnamurti, and the writings of C. G. Jung on art, mysticism and the unconscious.

Spirituality and creativity: surviving the full voltage

We have seen that the Romantics were largely drawn to excess, and failed to find the balance that Ficino found in contemplation. Jackson Pollock committed suicide, one of dozens of internationally-known artists, poets and musicians – and even scientists – whose intensity of experience in their calling was alternated with periods of profound depression. While theirs was not the full-blown Romanticism of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Goethe – it was perhaps a more modern Bohemian version – they still succumbed to the same dynamic of secularised creativity, that is creativity without the proper *via negativa* counterbalance.

In an astonishing study of artistic creativity British author Colin Wilson has laid bare the plight of great creative individuals such as Ernest Hemingway and Van Gogh (both of whom shot themselves) and Friedrich Nietzsche and Vaslav Nijinsky (both of whom became insane). He showed that the sheer *voltage* of their creative intensity led not only to their incomparable artistic production in painting, dance and literature but also, in some cases, to a form of spirituality that tipped over into madness. I understood this problem from an early age because my father was a Bohemian sculptor in the 1950s whose output before his untimely death at the age of 29 was astonishing. I have lived in the shadow of this knowledge: that creative intensity can destroy not only the artist but also ruin the lives of the immediate family and beyond. At the same time I find myself the simultaneous inheritor of this creative voltage and the warning – beyond the grave as it were – from my father to “pace” myself. I have attempted to take this advice, but the real protection I have comes from a profound commitment to the spiritual life, which has always trumped my commitment to the arts. I recently wrote to Colin Wilson on this, citing the example of my father, and putting to Wilson that his work was in essence an exploration of how the artist could get high and stay high – without the terrible crashes that can lead to burn-out, suicide or death. Wilson declares himself too cheerful to suffer in that way, but the solution he offers to the artists is not convincing I think. Wilson understands well that there is a mystic dimension to the human psyche which can identify with the unmanifest, imperishable, eternal and infinite – or “God” if you prefer – but doesn’t believe that the answer lies there (perhaps because he fears that this would unravel the creative personality). I do. The Buddha’s example is clear to me: if you want to get high and stay high the only answer is to fully encompass the *via negativa*. From that grounding it is possible – in what I am calling the Western Via Positiva – to fully engage with art, science, politics and all the other callings of the modern world in a profoundly creative way, without the danger of burn-out. But this path is *much harder* than the straight *via negativa*, partly on the grounds I set out in the introductory essay, and partly I think because Westerners are not very good at pursuing balance in anything. The Western mind, it seems to me, is the mind of the prima donna, the drama queen.

A better understanding of the Via Positiva as a path of impersonal spiritual development – in which the creative forces of the cosmos flow through the psyche without burning it out – would help avoid such tragedies. The Romantic tradition, in its opposition to the new materialism of the industrial age, got it nearly right, but made creativity a destructive god instead of the natural expression of a path of spiritual illumination.

If we go back to the three poets of the Via Positiva discussed earlier, we can ask: how did they survive the full voltage of their creativity? We don’t know enough in the case of Traherne to answer this, though clearly even when he talks of being

“insatiable” for life and life’s experiences there is a simultaneous calm pervading his writings. But with Blake and Whitman, despite their clear adoption of frugal lifestyles – Whitman call on us all to despise riches – it is clear that they also used a bizarre therapeutic device: they wrote unbalanced nonsense as well as their finest sanities. In Blake’s case they are generally intermingled with his other writings in modern anthologies, but in Whitman’s they remained private and unpublished until very recently. Blake’s *An Island in the Moon* for example, a satirical or burlesque prose piece unpublished in his lifetime may have had some kind of serious intent, but to me it seems more like a way of venting excess creative pressure. I certainly haven’t found any elevated passages in it to match his most sublime and spiritually insightful epigrams many of which have entered the English language. I only point this out because the nonsense of these otherwise brilliant writers points to the problems of intense creativity. I am not sure that their solution could be universally applied, whereas I am sure about the practice of the *via negativa*.

The Via Positiva and Creativity

In Colin Wilson’s work is found, I think, the starkest warning of, and also the least useful remedy to, the problem of ego-driven personal creativity. It is also a useful reminder of the problems facing the Via Positiva, and in particular its Western manifestation, given the highly competitive nature of Western culture. This is a good point then to return to the issue of why the Western Via Positiva is a spiritual path that may look attractive to start with – compared to the pure *via negativa* path of simplicity and detachment – but holds within it profound challenges we have not yet fully met. As I pointed out in the introductory essay, the Western Via Positiva is easy in the beginning, but hard in the end. It is profoundly different to the various Via Positiva paths of other cultures and epoch, because it is now located in the hi-tech industrial excess of modern Western life. This is both an opportunity and a danger: the voltage of creativity is now potentially higher than ever. For this reason I believe that the study of the great Neoplatonist Masters going back to Pythagoras, or perhaps further to Hermes Trismegistus, is the best course for the West. We have a huge spiritual treasure-house, an untapped resource, that can help us negotiate, survive and flourish in what is still really a human experiment on a grand scale: the Via Positiva.

Essay Five

The *Via Positiva* and Andrew Cohen's 'Evolutionary Enlightenment'

In this last essay in this series on the *Via Positiva* I compare the Western *Via Positiva* with the teachings of American guru Andrew Cohen on Evolutionary Enlightenment. Cohen's intense and extraordinary vision of a new enlightenment has a substantial following, publishing record and infrastructure to support his vision in various centres round the world. It is a vision coupled with an open invitation that Cohen has extended over many years in his dialogues with luminaries of all kinds, in effect an open invitation to come forward with a program to fulfil the vision. The track record of Cohen's open debates with other teachers is remarkable: it suggests an evolution in the very basis of guruship itself. It means that spiritual teachers are triangulating their own teachings with those of others, a step rarely taken before in history. This opens the door to new forms of spiritual collaboration.

In writing up the Western *Via Positiva* and contemplating the common ground and differences with Cohen's Evolutionary Enlightenment I realized that I was in effect constructing a candidate program for instantiating Cohen's vision. I am calling it "The Dolphin Program" on account of the animal that took an evolutionary leap which was also a recapitulation of a previous form of existence. It suggests program in which the "evolution" of Cohen could meld with the "recapitulation" of the Western *Via Positiva*.

Enlightenment and the West

In an earlier essay I put forward the idea of "the lost buddhas of the West" as a category to better describe spiritual teachers of the West lost to us for various reasons. But before I can turn to Cohen's teachings on enlightenment I need to say a little more about enlightenment as a concept, one implied in the term "buddha." It is of course a little confusing to have the word "enlightenment" mean both a spiritual attainment and a period in Western intellectual history. Usually I don't write about both in the same set of essays! However, in the third essay in this series I dealt with the Enlightenment as a period of Western development in which there was a great deal of hidden spiritual discovery and innovation, including – I suggest – the enlightenment or near-enlightenment of some key figures in the spiritual sense.

What is Enlightenment? This is both a question and the name of the journal founded and edited by Andrew Cohen, later renamed as *EnlightenNext*. The question of what exactly spiritual enlightenment is, and the various answers to it, have been extensively articulated over the publication history of the journals, making the collected editions an astonishing spiritual resource. They are also a tribute to Cohen's vision, determination and pluralism. My own definition of enlightenment – as a first approximation – is as follows: when a person is enlightened they experience union with all of existence, or, if they prefer the word, "God." The union experienced in enlightenment means to be co-extensive or coterminous with all that is. The Advaita

tradition puts it in the negative: “not two,” but it means the same thing. Hence the idea of recapitulation that I explored in the earlier essays is central to my understanding of enlightenment. I also believe that enlightenment is a trans-cultural, trans-epochal experience, though the way it is expressed depends partly on the prevailing culture and epoch, and partly on the personality of the person experiencing enlightenment. Of course the very term “enlightenment” has its origins in far eastern culture, and to be more precise in Hindu and Buddhist thought, where closely-related terms include *moksha*, liberation, self-realization, and *nirvana*. Purists may disagree that its meaning can readily be transplanted even across, say, the Buddhist-Taoist divisions of thought, let alone East-West divisions of thought. With respect to those who perhaps rightly fight for the purity of tradition, I find myself discovering enlightenment everywhere, all the time.

The minute one starts looking for enlightenment in the West, one discovers a huge range of candidates. Richard Maurice Bucke, in his lovely book *Cosmic Consciousness* is perhaps the first Western thinker to do so, using his coinage “cosmic consciousness” where “enlightenment” is used in the East. One may not entirely agree with Bucke’s selection of candidates for the category of enlightened, but one thing is for sure: Western spiritual traditions have no *exact* equivalent for “enlightened” and so there is no history of precedent to draw on. Bucke was a trail-blazer.

It is in this context that I coined the term “The lost buddhas of the West” and which I introduced in the earlier essays. It is a way of saying that many Western figures more normally thought of under different categories such as philosophers or poets were actually either fully enlightened or had strong intimations of that state. As we saw, several factors have masked this phenomenon: firstly a Christian world in which personal claims for union with “God” were treated with suspicion; secondly a confusion over the statements of such individuals as comprising “philosophy;” and thirdly the world-embracing nature of some of these accounts. That is to say, while some individuals, for example Socrates and Eckhart, pursued an intensely *via negativa* path like the Buddha, others, such as Pythagoras, Ficino, Mirandola, Blake and Leibniz pursued a vigorous *via positiva* path, which may look foreign to classical notions of enlightenment. In fact the East threw up all kinds of *via positiva* traditions, including the Upanishadic, the Taoist, the Bon and Shinto, and their great strength was often a profound engagement with an animist Nature. But the uniquely Western version, in its articulation of union, threw up “man as microcosm” in which both the path and the goal of this spiritual orientation was a knowing of the world through *recapitulation*.

The essence of this realization is this: I recapitulate the universe within me.

With this as context, let us turn to Andrew Cohen’s Evolutionary Enlightenment.

Andrew Cohen’s Evolutionary Enlightenment

In a number of recent discussions with Andrew Cohen, I have found that, despite considerable differences of approach, we have far more common ground than difference. We have both had spiritual awakenings earlier in our lives and have spent our time since then thinking intensively about the meaning of enlightenment and the spiritual life in general. In the first instance however, the development of my thinking has perhaps had greater instinctive sympathy towards spiritualities of the past, leading for example to the emphasis I place on animistic and shamanic modalities of the spirit. This has made me less enthusiastic than I might have been about evolutionary

theories of the spirit, which I encountered in Hegel, Aurobindo, and Richard Maurice Bucke, for example. In exploring our common ground and differences however I soon realised that Cohen's Evolutionary Enlightenment has great similarities with a spiritual impulse I have identified here as the Western Via Positiva. (In this discussion I will draw on Cohen's recent book *Evolutionary Enlightenment* as his most recent presentation to date of his thinking on enlightenment.)

In the first instance the Via Positiva is a spiritual path that is intensely committed to *becoming*, in the sense that Cohen uses the term as the complement to *being*. For Cohen becoming is, by definition, world-orientated, rather than world-renouncing. The Via Positiva also encompasses the same creative urge that Cohen believes is an essential component of becoming. The creative urge for Cohen is an expression of our profound spiritual connectedness to the universe, one that is essential to the spiritual life, as opposed to the mere expression of individualistic, ego-bound competitive striving.

As we have seen in the four preceding essays I have articulated the Via Positiva as a framework for understanding all those spiritualities variously called world-curious, world-embracing, engaged, embodied, or just generally enthusiastic about *this* world, whatever their visions of the next. The Via Positiva (using capital letters) makes the necessary and equal distinction between *via positiva* and *via negativa* – the latter being the essential ground and balance which presupposes a profound contact with the infinite, the eternal, the imperishable, and the unmanifest. In my understanding there cannot be a *via positiva* without the *via negativa*, so a Via Positiva is a path that includes the *via negativa* but does not stop there. The Western Via Positiva, as I am putting it forward, is simply a distinct historical version of the more general Via Positiva.

So, how does the Western Via Positiva compare with Cohen's Evolutionary Enlightenment? In discussions with Andrew it has become clear that at times our terminology can be completely interchangeable: there is a clear analogy between my *via negativa* / *via positiva* distinction and Cohen's being / becoming distinction. It's not identical of course: we have come to similar conclusions through very different routes. So can the two systems have more in common than this? Given that I am drawing so extensively on a deeply historical progression of spiritual thinkers?

In fact Cohen describes the two halves of his Evolutionary Enlightenment in terms that readily fit the thought of many of the historical figures I have introduced in these essays. For example he defines the ground of both traditional and evolutionary enlightenment in these terms: *Before everything that was and before everything that is, I already am*. I don't think Ficino or Traherne would argue with that (though as Christians they would be sensitive to its phrasing as an echo of Christ's "before Abraham was, I am.") It is one of the basic ideas of mysticism, that in a state of unity with "God" or the universe, or existence, the passing of time is revealed as a mere construct with no existential basis to it. There is only ever the eternal now. And I think that Cohen is right to go on to say that this is a statement of the *via negativa*; that it implies at least a sort of fatalism; and it provides little impetus to get up and change things in the world. Indeed the basic mystical insight that one is co-extensive with the universe begs the question of what an intention to change it might mean.

Yet, as Krishna says so beautifully in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, when one is in the world one has to *act*. Doing nothing is as much a statement as doing something, indeed doing nothing may even be a denial of a fundamental truth, that the universe is creative and the human being has the unique place of being an astonishingly equipped conduit for cosmic creativity. *We have an obligation to create*. The Via Positiva, as I

have sketched it out in these essays, does not make that a starting point however, for several reasons. Firstly, the *via positiva* as a path to spiritual enlightenment is a question of progressively increasing identifications with the cosmos. It is the mirror image of the *via negativa* and lands up in exactly the same place. At that point enlightenment occurs and there is no immediate question of creativity. On this journey any extensive engagement outside of spiritual practice can easily become a dissipation of spiritual energies. As I pointed out earlier the *via positiva* is easy in the beginning but hard in the end because it so easily elides into materialistic indulgence. This means that creativity on the path to enlightenment must be practiced with detachment, an almost impossible demand when the creative voltage ratchets up as we saw in cases like Van Gogh and Nijinsky.

Once enlightenment has sufficient hold however, then engagement in the world as part of the Via Positiva becomes a spirituality committed to action. However this cannot be understood in prescriptive terms: the exact form of that action will vary tremendously. The Buddha engaged intensely with his *sangha*, as do most spiritual teachers, and, in an era with no modern technological wealth or communications, the scope for immediate wider social change was just about nil. (The Buddha's teachings did of course eventually bring about huge social changes when it was adopted by King Ashoka as the religion for his empire.) And this is where Cohen is right, I think, to say that his form of Evolutionary Enlightenment is new. It is new because the opportunities now are utterly different to the time of the Buddha. But my account of the Via Positiva should suggest at least that enlightenment always had this potential for action within it, depending firstly on the temperament of the enlightened person and secondly on the circumstances of their lifetimes.

The Via Positiva always challenges us with the question: is life inherently good? Cohen is ecstatically convinced it is. So was Leibniz, and, as we saw, he developed a whole new theology to articulate his conviction. But Cohen observes – as many do – that people naturally respond to the suffering in this world with pessimism. He says: “You may make the best of it, and even endeavour to alleviate the suffering for yourself and others, but still deeply cherish the conviction that this world is not a good place.” Now, I have always been fascinated by people in moderately good circumstances who, when pressed, and in moments of great honesty, tell me that they really don't want to be here. Not just “here” as in London or wherever, but “here” as in this material plane of existence. I can't dismiss this as an occasional aberration: it seems too widespread to call it a mistake of some kind. It represents a truth that has to be taken seriously, even if I – and perhaps Cohen – cannot identify with it. He is absolutely right, I think, to identify some of the practice and motivation of the *via negativa* to be down to this stance. Too often the *via negativa* Masters seem to be saying, as Cohen puts it: “that being here is not a good thing.” In reality I don't think that any of the enlightened ones are saying this at all. It is just that many of them are not Via Positiva Masters, that's all.

Scholars of religion or philosophy are often obsessed with sources: did Moses learn from Hermes? Or is the Hermetic literature not much more than early Christian forgeries using the name of a mythical figure? Who got what idea from where? But I don't think this matters much, because teachers of enlightenment have to know what they are talking about *from the inside*. Only afterwards does it become of interest to triangulate this unmediated knowledge with other accounts. Ramana Maharshi is a prime example of a person who became enlightened first and only discovered his cultural tradition of it afterwards, mostly at the prompting of his disciples. Cohen clearly knows enlightenment from the inside, not from study of past Masters, whether

of the East or West. Hence the common ground between his Evolutionary Enlightenment and the Western Via Positiva should not be so surprising: both he and the great figures of that Western tradition know what they know – at least initially – *from the inside*.

Points of Departure

Where however are the points where Cohen's Evolutionary Enlightenment and my articulation of the Western Via Positiva diverge in their thinking? Both present a way of looking at the difference between world-renouncing and world-engaged spiritualities. But the real difference, I think, lies in how each treats the issue of *time*. For Cohen there is a progression or evolution from the *via negativa* to the *via positiva* over historical time. For Cohen, world-engaged spiritualities are radical, evolutionary, and superior to world-renouncing spiritualities; the former belong to the future while the latter belong to the past. But in my assessment of the same issue the two are instead *complementary*, have always coexisted, and are of equal importance and value. Now, it is true that if we look at the last fifteen hundred years of Western history we tend to see a huge cultural shift from a world-renouncing spirituality of the "Dark Ages" to a contemporary world-engaged spirituality. It was triggered by Aquinas, seized upon in the Renaissance, amplified in the Enlightenment, and revved up to full speed in our post-post-modern world. But I don't see a vector in this that suggests a linear path to some qualitatively different future, moving towards any of those end-points posited by evolutionary thinkers, such as an Omega Point, a Singularity, or any kind of social utopia. And that is because, in terms of the move from the *via negativa* to the *via positiva*, the change initiated by Aquinas was *local*, in time and space. The same movement has taken place many times, and also the reverse movement, even within a single society in its spiritual sub-cultures, and even within human experience of a single day. It is a *rhythm*. We only think that the *via negativa* was universal to the religious sphere before Aquinas because we don't look beyond the Western horizon, and we don't look far back enough in time. The Judaeo-Christian *via negativa* was a particular – and deeply beautiful – experiment at a particular time and place in history. But I don't believe that its giving way to the marvellous new experiments in the *via positiva* made possible by social and technological advances indicates any grand trajectory for humankind as a whole.

This is where I guess that Cohen and myself have to agree to disagree. He says for example: "It would make sense to long for a heavenly realm if you had not yet discovered that the world of time and form was *going somewhere*." For me the jury is out on this: perhaps it is going somewhere, perhaps it isn't. All I can say is that I can't extrapolate such a conclusion from what I know at this point.

I hope that Cohen doesn't mind, but I am intrigued to speculate on his own influences, ones that would incline us to differing interpretations of the same data. As I understand his life from his autobiography and from our conversations, he is initially deeply influenced by Judaism and the Advaita: two intensely *via negativa* traditions. In presenting to the world his Evolutionary Enlightenment, a deeply Via Positiva spiritual path, it seems to me that he has had to overthrow the influence of both those traditions. But I think our points of departure still probably arise from those influences on him, particularly when it comes to contemplating the world of nature spiritualities. A deep immersion in Judaism and the Advaita would firstly incline one to think that there wasn't a world-engaged spirituality out there, and secondly that Nature was a fallen place.

In the meantime however our differences of approach make no difference to the much more important issue: the articulation of the difference in spiritual orientation between being and becoming, between *via negativa* and *via positiva*. The distinction is the important thing, and also the personal freedom to find a personal and unique balance between the two.

The real and astonishing overlap between Evolutionary Enlightenment and the Via Positiva becomes apparent when we consider the *Western Via Positiva* however, rather than a generalized Via Positiva which might include such traditions as shamanism, Taoism, Shinto, and the Upanishadic vision. The Western Via Positiva is a unique articulation of the vision of enlightenment because it places the human being as central to the cosmos, and central to the creativity of the cosmos. It is unique because of the two phrases, “man as microcosm” and “as above so below,” which embody the capacity of the human being to *recapitulate* all that is. This also places the human being under an obligation to *know* the cosmos. The East, as far as I can work out, never really explored this.

Hence it is astonishing to find at one point in *Evolutionary Enlightenment* that Cohen says: “The human vehicle becomes a vessel through which the whole universe is able to know itself.” Cohen has independently discovered the very essence of the Western Via Positiva. It is this insight – and indeed obligation – that is the profound common ground between the two systems. We are here to know the cosmos, and in turn the cosmos is fructified by it. As we saw in touching on the work of Joseph Milne, this is an essential feature of Neoplatonism.

It is my hope that in this brief outline of the history of the Western Via Positiva I have been able to show the intriguing agreement between it and Cohen’s Evolutionary Enlightenment, even if the exact understanding of time, of telos, varies between them. The two systems belong to very different cultural spaces and sensibilities, but the common ground is substantial.

An Open Invitation

While Cohen’s insights bear a remarkable parallel with those of the Western Via Positiva, his background in Judaism and the Advaita may also be the reason that his vision yields as yet an undefined programme of *action* in the world. The Western Via Positiva, in the hands of Pythagoras and Ficino for example drew on a rich Mediterranean brew of spiritual traditions – all dismissed patronisingly as “paganism” by the Christian world – out of which a clearly defined programme could emerge in ways appropriate for the period. Christianity of course had its own programme representing its own *via positiva*: charity. But this did not include any significant developments in the arts, the sciences or politics.

Cohen is clear enough that his vision to date has no defined programme. He says for example: “When we speak about creating a new culture at the leading edge beyond the status quo that we are embedded in, we don’t necessarily know what it is supposed to look like. That’s understandable – after all, it has not emerged yet.”

Christ had a vision without a social programme, and so did the Buddha, and it is easy enough to show that both were deeply *via negativa* thinkers. However, both had huge long-term impacts through their followers and particularly through two emperors, Constantine and Ashoka, who propagated the original vision empire-wide. Both led to programmes of social action, Christianity through charity, *caritas*, and Buddhism through a quiet ethical programme for peace and equality. Clearly then, a programme of social action may be implied in a vision, but is not necessarily the

initial product of the visionary. Cohen has effectively invited, through his collaboration with people like myself, to contribute a possible programme that would instantiate his vision.

So here goes.

The Dolphin Programme: Evolution through Recapitulation

In thinking through the ideas behind the Western Via Positiva for these essays I have realised that I *do* have a programme to offer as an answer to Cohen's visionary call. It's germ lies in the concept of *recapitulation* which ran through the previous essays, particularly its flowering in the Renaissance.

I have pointed out to Cohen that "evolution" in his thinking draws its power as a concept from a sphere far removed from the spiritual: the biological sciences. His evolutionary enlightenment does not literally mean that that the human genome is changing in any significant way and anyway evolutionary biologists know very well that their science is a very long way from being able to correlate genes with even gross bodily characteristics, let alone anything as subtle as the spiritual aspects of mind. At present at least, "evolution" when applied to the world of spirit is a metaphor, a metaphor on a grand scale but unspecific. But this got me thinking about what specifically in the field of biological evolution might become a metaphor with a *programmatic* potential, a metaphor that can drive a program of action in the world.

I hit on the dolphin.

The dolphin is extraordinary in evolutionary terms because it evolved from a land mammal, possibly an early relative of the modern deer, which took as a survival strategy the lengthy immersion in water to escape predators. The environmental pressure of increasing predation must have put pressure on the creature's genome, without which it would have stayed the same, perhaps for hundreds of millions of years. This pressure eventually led to a complete adaptation to aquatic living, a *return* as it were to an ecological niche already occupied by other successful animals as varied as the seal, the shark, the tuna, and the gannet. Despite all that competition the animal that was eventually to become the dolphin became master of the oceans. Why? Because, although at one level it recapitulated evolutionary history by *returning* to the water, it did so with new "technologies" that gave it mastery. It was a full turn of the spiral, as it were, but now at a higher level. And what were its new "technologies"? Firstly the large mammalian brain, secondly its advanced social structures, and thirdly its echo-location. It took a technology developed on land – hearing – and reworked it for the ocean setting, and which gave the dolphins the necessary edge in hunting over their competitors. Their mammalian ancestry also seems to give them something no other aquatic creature has: a wonderful passion for play. Fish seem a deadly serious lot in comparison with the delightful and social intersubjectivity of the dolphin. It is a true evolutionary advance.

The dolphin as a metaphor solves the problem for me of how to reconcile Cohen's forward-looking evolution with my instinct for the great spiritual traditions of the past. As Cohen repeatedly points out in his work, the human being is now under unparalleled environmental pressure to change. I would add: yes, but this pressure cannot affect the genome because natural selection has been eliminated as a biological mechanism in human society. On the other hand staying as we are is not an option. So what is the solution? Evolutionary theory teaches us that each step in evolution is only possible through recapitulation: everything that the new creature *used to be* is used as

a platform for change, and everything that the new creature *becomes* recapitulates what it was. The dolphin became the extraordinary king of the oceans by rediscovering its long-abandoned heritage: the water. But it retains within its bodily structure and its social structure the great mammalian advances.

At a spiritual level, the dolphin metaphor works like this. Humanity needs to make a spiritual leap forward, as Cohen argues. But the lesson for me from the Neoplatonist legacy I discussed in the earlier essays is this: the human spirit is unique in creation because it has the capacity to recapitulate all of the universe within it, and *all of history*, particularly our spiritual history. As I also pointed out, we are unfortunate in the West that our spiritual history has such deep ruptures within it, and that it is catheted with so much pain. But the environmental pressure on our “spiritual genome” is so great now that I believe we have no choice, just like the dolphin, but to re-examine all our earlier spiritualities, to see where we might make our home anew, bringing to it of course all our new spiritual “technologies.” We use the fact that we recapitulate all our spiritual history within us to search through that history, at the same time owning an essential part of that history: that we are unique in our capacity to recapitulate the universe within us in the first place.

The dolphin metaphor also holds at the physical, social, political and economic levels. Everyone is now agreed that we live an utterly unsustainable lifestyle predicated on endless compound growth, which is heading towards catastrophe. At a physical level this is the environmental pressure on our “genome.” But biologically speaking there is in fact no pressure on our biological genome at all: because we have a largely moral society in which we care for each other all the biological mechanisms of natural selection are gone. Wars, disease and urban violence don’t change this bigger picture at all: *biologically* we are not going to evolve under the pressure of our looming environmental catastrophe, and anyway, the dolphin took 20 million years to do it. We don’t have time for biology! Hence to speak about evolution and evolutionary pressure is to use a metaphor, borrowed from biology but not operative in the world of biology. It may be a metaphor, but I believe that it is a powerful one. How could it be used to derive a concrete program for action?

The dolphin “returned” to water with a new set of technologies and remains the most evolutionary advanced creature of the seas. What will the human being “return” to? What will a full turn of our spiral mean, physically, and what kind of program for action in the world does that suggest? Clearly its basis must be a sustainable way of life, even if our culture evolves in unexpected other ways, perhaps via the virtual world where resources now are like those to early man: apparently infinite. And this “return” means revisiting, recapitulating, and re-assessing simpler ways of life, mixing ancient wisdoms with modern cultural forms and technologies. It means taking the voyage of spiritual discovery back in time, not just to the Renaissance, or even to Pythagoras, but perhaps back to his antecedents, the spiritual “shape-shifters” of the shamanic-animist worlds. Only the past, explored in the spirit of empathetic recapitulation, can give us the resilience to face the shocks of the future.

Recapitulation and the Virtual World

Before summing up this brief comparison between Cohen’s Evolutionary Enlightenment and my exposition here of the Western Via Positiva, I want to take a short cultural detour on a subject mentioned in passing: Virtual Reality (VR). Even if our genome may not have evolved significantly in hundreds of thousands of years, clearly our culture does, if we include in “culture” our advances in technology, the

arts and social structures. What happens though if at some level at least we have to rein back our exponential growth in resource-use, as we approach what is being called “peak everything?” Where can the great cultural evolution go forward? The answer I suspect is within the virtual worlds.

Having been involved with digital technologies of the virtual world for most of my working career I find myself well placed to consider both the evolutionary implications of this field and the dangers. In the first instance it has to be observed that the massive digitisation programs underway round the world – and I have contributed to these in several grant-funded projects – are busy recording and recapitulating *all that was* on this planet. This includes the digitisation of the biological genomes of species, including those under threat of extinction. But in the virtual world of contemporary culture we also see an endless postmodern quotational impulse: to remix what has gone before in countless new permutations of dramatic scenarios, cultural backdrops, and genre-bending: an evolution through recapitulation. Cultural evolution in the virtual world is accelerating at an incredible pace at the same time that the physical resources for material growth in the real world are dwindling. For example the resources for individual travel and tourism in the real world are declining, just as they are growing in the virtual world. I spend time with my wife and children absorbed in stunning high-definition videos of the natural world, the journey to which would be physically resource-intensive and environmentally damaging if we and other families attempted to make them in real life. The increasing monetary and environmental cost of physical travel is counterbalanced by the decreasing cost – in all terms – of virtual travel.

This raises a question then: is perhaps VR our equivalent to the dolphin’s echolocation? Or just one of many technologies we will retain in an otherwise dramatically different future? Is VR the technology we will rapidly evolve as we return to an otherwise low-energy nature-friendly lifestyle? That’s my guess at least. After all, we also make this “return” with advanced social structures, and an advanced sense of play, just like the dolphin. And a massive brain!

Conclusions

To many people, and perhaps to Cohen himself, the program suggested by the dolphin metaphor may seem initially unattractive. In the first instance it may seem like a retreat rather than an advance. It is a quality of the human mind that it is not satisfied with the known, but must always seek out the new, or as Cohen puts it must, identify itself with the ecstatic urgency of creation. But just as powerful, I would suggest, is the extraordinary human gift – and obligation – of recapitulation. We contain the entire universe within us, and in turn the universe needs us to know it in its entirety, even as it continuously evolves. Our survival *matters* to the universe. We have to treasure and honour its entire lesson to us to date, to make the past just as much as the future a journey of thrilling exploration, and to meld from past and future the “evolved” human that can co-exist with creation. The meaning of the dolphin metaphor for me is summed up like this: *evolution through recapitulation*. I offer it as a program – or rather the germ of a program – to instantiate the evolutionary vision of Andrew Cohen.

To quote Cohen again: “So the eternal passion of the evolutionary impulse is change. It is always only interested in the future, always one step ahead, ever reaching for what’s on the edge of the possible.” I would agree. The dolphin with its joyous mastery of the ocean, its advanced social structures and the astonishing technology of

its echolocation reached out to the edge of the possible. But it achieved this, I would suggest, through recapitulation, and in turn it recapitulates its former selves. The great German biologist Ernst Haeckel – who was an important influence on Darwin – had a catch phrase: “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” It means that the individual’s evolution recapitulates the evolution of the species, that recapitulation is the engine of evolution. That, I think, is the meaning of the “dolphin programme.”