

I believe. I believe?

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Confinement appears to offer luscious time for a writer to start a new work or complete a work in progress. For some that must be so. I have not had that good fortune: scarcely any initiative rings true, rings with invitation. I considered, for example, that the time had come to write a “credo”. I am old; isn’t it time for a summation? What, after all, do I believe? Does the notion of “belief” have any weight for me? Isn’t belief a thin substitute for experience, for direct knowing? Discovering that I don’t care for belief as such, how could I write a “credo”?

My niece, and not only she, has asked me to write from experience, to write a personal memoir: what have you known and lived, whom have you loved and not, what values and ideas matter most to you, where did those elements originate in your experience? Asking this of a writer who has dedicated much of his working life to biography—to Coomaraswamy, Hammarskjöld, Merton, Gurdjieff—is like asking a snail to abandon its shell. Snails don’t do that.

Yet the thought of writing a credo surreptitiously haunted me. It’s an ancient form of self-inquiry, Socratic and Augustinian; that will do—the lineage is noble and serious. The challenge of writing such a thing would flash unexpectedly into my thoughts, exert subtle pressure, occasion some inscrutable shame.

Then I realized that I have no thoughts of my own. A person with no thoughts of his own can hardly write a credo. I began to look more closely at this discovery. For me personally, it has a distinguished history. In his seventieth birthday address, a farewell to friends and colleagues who had gathered in his honour at the Harvard Club in Boston, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy said: “I should like to emphasize that I have never built up a philosophy of my own or wished to establish a new school of thought. Perhaps the greatest thing I have learned is never to think for myself; I fully agree with André Gide that ‘toutes choses sont dites déjà,’ and what I have sought is to understand what has been said, while taking no account of the ‘inferior philosophers’.” For

decades after I published this marvelous talk in an edition of Coomaraswamy's papers, I viewed this brave statement as his truth, but not mine—the perfect coda to his lifework as a scholar, little related to my own work.

But now I ask: what do I think? Do I have original thoughts? Or am I—and perhaps nearly all of us—a sentient being in a current of thoughts of immensely long lineage? If so, then I think the current. Is that right? I think Heraclitus, think his memorable gnomic understandings; they were his perceptions, and now mine by inheritance. I think Socrates and Plato, I think Diogenes. I think Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. I think Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Jesus of Nazareth. I think Montaigne and Rabelais and Pascal—Pascal, how I think him, what a friend to my mind and being! I think Gurdjieff, the central teacher of my life though I was still a child when he died. I think the Tao Te Ching and beloved Confucius. I think the Gita and Upanishads. And I think the nearby writers and seeking souls with whom there is such companionship: Emily Dickinson, H. D. Thoreau, Dag Hammarskjöld, Thomas Merton, Elie Wiesel, Martin Buber, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, many more. We are particles in a current, we touch on each other, nourish each other effortlessly. I don't mind having no thoughts of my own. I have all this.

It is time now for correctives. I have no doubt that original thought appears from time to time: Kuhn's notion of a paradigm shift matters here. Newton and his generation of scientists introduced entirely new thoughts; Einstein and his generation again renewed the paradigm. Weber taught us how to think about society and motivation in an entirely fresh way. Many others have introduced new, vastly fruitful thought into the current. This is the first corrective.

The second corrective requires a return to self-inquiry. If I have no thoughts of my own, do I have anything whatever of my own? I cast about, I wait. *Cogito ergo sum* won't do; in the end it's absurd, better to reverse the terms: *Sum ergo cogito*. Thought is an expression of being. What then is mine, in any reasonable sense of the word "mine"? Staying with that question, I come upon the workings of the mind and heart, the body with its ways of knowing; ultimately, I come upon attention. "I am" in the current of memory and experience. I am here, reasonably vigilant, shaped and nourished by the current but joyously free to explore when I gather my attention yet again. I have no thoughts of my own. But beneath the surface I discover gratitude to God and Nature for attention: this gift of intelligence persistently probing experience.

It is this I must care for. When there is attention of that quality, every experience is new and calls for new interpretation. It doesn't matter any longer that I have few or no thoughts of my own. Classification into old and new, inherited and of the moment, is a sign of vulgar self-preoccupation; awareness is innocent of all that. The current is beautiful and infinitely nourishing; may it endure forever despite our human folly—and to cure that folly. The attention that “hovers over the waters” is equally beautiful, and all that I can or need know as my own.

