

THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE LAW OF KARMA

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Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* is, first of all, a spiritual document, and should be read in that way.¹ But it is more than just a spiritual document, for it contains the claim that all, or most, religions share certain features, which constitute the *philosophia perennis*, a claim it tries to substantiate by citing numerous texts and authors from a variety of religious traditions. "The greatest merit of the book", Huxley was to say later, "is that about forty per cent of it is not by me, but by a lot of saints, many of whom were also men of genius".²

Huxley describes this *philosophia perennis* as "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the

1. Contrary to what Huxley and others following him declare, the phrase *philosophia perennis* was not coined by Leibniz, but long before him by Augustinus Steuchus (Agostino Steuco, 1497-1548) in 1540; see Charles B. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino to Leibniz", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 27 (1966), 505-32; and his Introduction to *De Perenni Philosophia by Augustinus Steuchus*, New York and London, 1972, v-xiv. About the modern use of the phrase, Schmitt observes: "It seems to have been the Neo-Thomists who first revived the term *philosophia perennis* early in the present century, applying it par excellence to their own philosophical tradition and emphasizing the timelessness of the truths to be found therein. It was not long, however, before other philosophical schools appropriated the term and by the middle of the century it had been used in many contexts and given numerous definitions. Many of these are quite foreign to the meaning of the concept initiated by Steuchus four centuries ago ..." (Introduction, v-vi).

2. Cited by David Bradshaw in his biographical introduction to the volumes of Huxley reprinted at the occasion of the Huxley centenary (1894-1994), London, 1994. In his Foreword to a reprint of *Brave New World* (1932), London, 1946, Huxley calls the book "an anthology of what the sane have said about sanity and all the means whereby it can be achieved".

knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being". This Perennial Philosophy, Huxley claims, is immemorial and universal: "Rudiments of [it] may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions."³

This claim, one might think, should interest scholars of religion. But in spite of the enormous popularity enjoyed by Huxley and his works, his idea of a perennial philosophy does not appear to have been taken seriously by academic scholarship during the half century which has passed since the publication of his book.⁴ Most scholars would seem to agree with such a

3. *The Perennial Philosophy*, 9. In the introduction which he added to the translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* by Swami Prabhavananda (*The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*, London, 1947, rpt. 1953) Huxley specifies the "four fundamental doctrines" at the core of the Perennial Philosophy as follows: "First: the phenomenal world of matter and of individualized consciousness – the world of things and animals and men and even gods – is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be non-existent. Second: human beings are capable not merely of knowing *about* the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known. Third: man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul. It is possible for a man, if he so desires, to identify himself with the spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature with the spirit. Fourth: man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground" (7). And in his novel *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944; rpt. London, 1994), Huxley presents the following "minimum working hypothesis": "That there is a Godhead or Ground, which is the unmanifested principle of all manifestation. That the Ground is transcendent and immanent. That it is possible for human beings to love, know and, from virtually, to become actually identified with the Ground. That to achieve this unitive knowledge, to realize this supreme identity, is the final end and purpose of human existence. That there is a Law or Dharma, which must be obeyed, a Tao or Way, which must be followed, if men are to achieve their final end. That the more there is of I, me, mine, the less there is of the Ground ..." (263). Virtually the same passage was first published (in 1944) in the bi-monthly magazine *Vedanta and the West*: see *Huxley and God*, ed. Jacqueline Hazard Bridgeman, San Francisco, 1992, 15.

4. See, however, Huston Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LV/3 (1987), 553-66; Jonathan Shear, "On Mystical Experiences as Support for the Perennial Philosophy", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LXII/2 (1994), 319-42. Among the advocates of this or a similar kind of perennial philosophy Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon may be mentioned in particular (Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, London, 1975, 262 ff.). New Age authors such as Ken Wilber and Stanislov Grof

criticism as the following:

Unfortunately, the most doubtful of Huxley's claims is that there is a "perennial philosophy," a "highest factor" common to *all* the great religions. The religions themselves do not confirm the claim unless one selects only what one wishes to see. Confucianism is barely mentioned in *The Perennial Philosophy*; except for some atypical elements, Judaism also is all but ignored. Yet Confucianism has had the allegiance of literally billions of Chinese. The significance of Judaism is even more apparent, but Huxley nowhere shows that he cares what Judaism is

The same critic continues:

Another claim is also clearly false – that the mystics agree on the nature of their experience. To most Christian mystics, "That" is *not* "thou" and never can be⁵

This last remark alludes to the famous *Upanishadic* sentence "That art thou", which constitutes, incidentally, the title of the first chapter of Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*.

Huxley may not have been surprised at the unfavourable reception his book received in academic circles; he may even have expected it. "The Perennial Philosophy", he points out

is primarily concerned with the one, divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfil certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit.⁶

This, of course, excludes most, if not all academics. As Huxley himself says, "In regard to few professional philosophers and men of letters is there any

also refer to the *philosophia perennis*. For the interpretations given to the term *philosophia perennis* before the twentieth century, see Charles B. Schmitt, "Prisca theologia e philosophia perennis: due temi del Rinascimento italiano e la loro fortuna", in *Il pensiero italiano del Rinascimento e il tempo nostro*, Florence, 1970, 211-36.

5. Charles M. Holmes, *Aldous Huxley and the Way to Reality*, Bloomington: Ind. and London, 1970, 145.

6. *The Perennial Philosophy*, 2.

evidence that they did very much in the way of fulfilling the necessary conditions of direct spiritual knowledge".⁷ Later on he remarks, "Significantly enough, I have observed, when making use of university libraries, that books on spiritual religion were taken out much less frequently than was the case in public libraries, patronized in the main by men and women who had not enjoyed the advantages, or suffered under the handicaps, of prolonged academic instruction".⁸

But if Huxley had his dose of academic mistrust, neither was he himself one of the "saints" or "prophets", "sages" or "enlightened ones", whom he considered the first-hand exponents of the Perennial Philosophy, and to whom he went in order to collect the statements which he quotes throughout his book.⁹ He concludes his Introduction by saying, "If one is not oneself a sage or saint, the best thing one can do, in the field of metaphysics, is to study the works of those who were, and who, because they had modified their merely human mode of being, were capable of a more than merely human kind and amount of knowledge".¹⁰ This, then, is what Huxley does: on the basis of his study of the works of saints and sages, he presents us with what he considers the common elements in their teachings. This, of course, is an activity which is not foreign to scholarship. Had he taken the scholarly aspect of his task more seriously, he might then have been able to point at some more precisely circumscribed features in the various texts he cites, and perhaps have evoked more interest in academic circles.

7. *Ibid.*, 3.

8. *Ibid.*, 287-88.

9. Compare, for example, the following remark from *The Doors of Perception*: "For until this morning I had known contemplation only in its humbler, its more ordinary forms – as discursive thinking; as a rapt absorption in poetry or painting or music; as a patient waiting upon those inspirations, without which even the prosiest writer cannot hope to accomplish anything; as occasional glimpses, in Nature, of Wordsworth's 'something far more deeply interfused'; as systematic silence leading, sometimes, to hints of an 'obscure knowledge.' But now I knew contemplation at its height" (*The Doors of Perception* [1954] and *Heaven and Hell* [1956], London, 1968, 31). Huxley made this remark in spite of his capacity to enter into Deep Reflection, an altered state of consciousness which Milton H. Erickson describes in "A Special Inquiry with Aldous Huxley into the Nature and Character of Various States of Consciousness", rpt. in *Altered States of Consciousness*, ed. Charles T. Tart, New York, 1972, 47-74. See also Huxley's description of his trance states in *Jesting Pilate* (1926), London, 1994, 59-60. One should note that he had not yet started his experiments with psychotropic drugs at the time he wrote *The Perennial Philosophy*.

10. *The Perennial Philosophy*, 5-6.

It is not my intention to add to the criticisms which Huxley's thesis has been subjected to – rightly, so it seems to me. I will try to do something more constructive, but also more risky, something which will no doubt expose me, too, to criticism. I will try to present Huxley's thesis – or part of it – in a modified and reduced form, which, I hope, may be of interest to the least spiritually inclined of academics. The problem I wish to address can be formulated as follows: do the religious currents which Huxley draws upon (and perhaps other religious or related currents as well) share significant features that can be described in non-spiritual, non-edifying terms, and which are no mere generalities? I think they may. More specifically, I have the impression that there is one feature which recurs so often in these currents that it deserves to be looked at more closely. I will call it the "concept or notion of inaction", and describe it, as a first approximation, as the expression of a disinclination to identify with the activities of the body.

This concept manifests itself in various ways. One of these is rather close to the second part of Huxley's description of the *philosophia perennis*. Huxley speaks there of "the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality". One could add that both the soul and what Huxley calls "divine Reality" are frequently presented as non-active; and Huxley could not fail to repeatedly hit upon this notion, since it shows up in a number of the passages which he quotes in *The Perennial Philosophy*. Ruysbroeck, for example, attributes inaction to the Godhead:

There is a distinction and differentiation, according to our reason, between God and the Godhead, between action and rest. The fruitful nature of the Persons ever worketh in a living differentiation. But *the simple Being of God, according to the nature thereof, is an eternal Rest of God and of all created things.*

And again:

(In the Reality unitively known by the mystic), we can speak no more of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, nor of any creature, but only one Being, which is the very substance of the Divine Persons. There were we all one before our creation, for this is our super-essence. There *the Godhead is in simple essence without activity.*¹¹

And Eckhart is quoted as saying:

For in thus breaking through, I perceive what God and I are in

11. *Ibid.*, 39-40 (in this and the other citations, italics added).

common. There I am what I was. There I neither increase nor decrease. For *there I am the immovable* which moves all things.¹²

Huxley appears to attribute the following quotation, too, to Eckhart:

The damned are in eternal movement without any mixture of rest; we mortals, who are yet in this pilgrimage, have now movement, now rest Only *God has repose without movement*.¹³

The following two quotations are credited to Albertus Magnus:

... Work to simplify the heart, that *being immovable* and at peace from any invading vain phantasms, thou mayest always stand fast in the Lord within thee, to that degree as if thy soul had already entered the always present now of eternity – that is, the state of deity

And again: “[*he*] becomes immutable and arrives at that true life which is God Himself.”¹⁴

Huxley also cites the Indian thinker Shankara (Śaṅkara):

The truth of Brahman may be understood intellectually. But (even in those who so understand) the desire for personal separateness is deep-rooted and powerful, for it exists from beginningless time. It creates *the notion*, “*I am the actor, I am he who experiences.*” *This notion is the cause of bondage to conditional existence, birth and death*

And: “It is ignorance that causes us to identify ourselves with the body, the ego, the senses, or anything that is not the Atman”¹⁵ And again: “Nor [can Brahman be denoted] by activity, because *it is without activity* – ‘at rest, without parts or activity,’ according to the Scriptures.”¹⁶ From Hakuin, a Zen saint of the eighteenth century, the following words are cited, describing the state of those who have realized the Zen ideal: “Abiding with the non-particular which is in particulars, /Going or returning, *they remain for*

12. *Ibid.*, 33.

13. *Ibid.*, 102.

14. *Ibid.*, 129 and 130.

15. *Ibid.*, 13.

16. *Ibid.*, 32.

ever unmoved.”¹⁷

Huxley himself commenting on a statement by the Chinese Zen patriarch Hui Neng, according to which the first reality is immovable, observes:

These phrases about the unmoving first mover remind one of Aristotle. But between Aristotle and the exponents of the Perennial Philosophy within the great religious traditions there is this vast difference: Aristotle is primarily concerned with cosmology, the Perennial Philosophers are primarily concerned with liberation and enlightenment: Aristotle is content to know about the unmoving mover, from the outside and theoretically; the aim of the Perennial Philosophers is to become directly aware of it, to know it unitively, *so that they and others may actually become the unmoving One.*¹⁸

Elsewhere, Huxley cites Lao Tzu –

Learning consists in adding to one’s stock day by day. The practice of Tao consists in subtracting day by day: subtracting and yet again subtracting until one has reached inactivity –

and comments, “It is the inactivity of self-will and ego-centred cleverness that makes possible the activity within the empty and purified soul of the eternal Suchness”.¹⁹ But in his chapter on “Time and Eternity”, he points out that the spirit – that part of man that exists, according to the exponents of the Perennial Philosophy, besides his body and psyche – is always timeless; it remains always what it eternally is.²⁰ Huxley’s book *Heaven and Hell*, where he comments on the static nature of much religious art, contains the following remarkable passage:

But action ... does not come naturally to the inhabitants of the mind’s antipodes. To be busy is the law of *our* being. The law of *theirs* is to do nothing. When we force these serene strangers to play a part in one of our all too human dramas, we are being false to visionary truth.²¹

17. *Ibid.*, 79.

18. *Ibid.*, 78.

19. *Ibid.*, 167.

20. *Ibid.*, 212-14.

21. *Heaven and Hell*, 102-103. Already in *Brave New World* one of the characters, while discussing religions, observes, “What need have we ... of something immovable,

His novel *Time Must Have a Stop*, finally, describes the state after death of one of its characters in the following terms: "it was as though that calm boundlessness of bliss and knowledge had been limited by the interpenetration of an activity."²² It is clear from these quotations that the concept of inaction did not completely escape Huxley's notice. We will see, however, that the full scope of the concept eluded him.

It is easy to add quotations from a variety of religions concerning the inactive nature of God, or of the soul – or spirit, as Huxley prefers to call it – or of both. Space does not allow me to do so at present. I will however draw attention to one particularly important movement in this respect: Gnosticism. Huxley could not yet know the collection of Gnostic gospels discovered, after the publication of his book, at Nag Hammadi, in Egypt – a collection now available in an English translation.²³ God, and the human soul which is essentially identical with it, are there so often referred to as immovable, immutable, and the like, that those who possess the *gnosis* are called "the immovable race", which is, incidentally, also the title of a recent book dealing with this designation and related issues.²⁴ The concept of inaction is also particularly frequent in India, to which I will turn in a while.

Huxley does not have much sympathy with severe physical austerities.²⁵ This is a pity, for it is here that the notion of inaction manifests itself in a particularly radical, and quite visible, form. Interestingly, those ascetics who force their bodies into most extreme forms of inaction, or rather motionlessness, are not usually those who adhere to the notion of an inactive, motionless, soul. The early Christian ascetics were precisely not Gnostics.

when there is the social order?" (213).

22. *Time Must Have a Stop*, 141.

23. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, 2nd edn, Leiden, 1984.

24. Michael Allen Williams, *The Immovable Race*, Leiden, 1985.

25. Perhaps his most favourable remark occurs in *Heaven and Hell*: "Asceticism, it is evident, has a double motivation. If men and women torment their bodies, it is not only because they hope in this way to atone for past sins and avoid future punishments; it is also because they long to visit the mind's antipodes and do some visionary sightseeing. Empirically and from the reports of other ascetics, they know that fasting and a restricted environment will transport them where they long to go. Their self-inflicted punishment may be the door to paradise" (77) And in 1942 he wrote in *Vedanta and the West*: "... ascetical self-mortification, at once physical, emotional, ethical, and intellectual, is one of the indispensable conditions of enlightenment, of the realization of divine immanence and transcendence" (see *Huxley and God*, 93).

But the "Lives" of these ascetics mention again and again the extent to which they managed to immobilize their bodies. Once again space does not allow me to cite examples.²⁶ However, we might think of the perhaps best remembered among these Christian ascetics, the Stylites, some of whom spent tens of years standing on a pillar, until their feet were worn away by inflammation and the gnawing of worms.

Such ascetic extremists were not, however, only to be found among Christians. In India they are well known, most notably (but not exclusively) among the Jainas, who claim Mahavira, a contemporary of the Buddha, as their most recent enlightened teacher. Taoism, too, is familiar with the concept of physical motionlessness. Since this aspect of Taoism is not so well known, I will cite a few examples. Lieh Tzu, according to a story, "became like a clod of earth; in the midst of distraction he remained concentrated, and so on until the end of his life".²⁷ In Chapter 21 of the *Chuang Tzu* the Holy Man Lao Tan, while in meditation, is characterized as completely inert and looking like a lifeless body, and resembling a piece of dry wood.²⁸ In Chapter 2, similarly, the body of someone in meditation is said to have the appearance of dead wood, and his soul to have the insensibility of dead ashes.²⁹ Some texts explain that the meditation which consists of "sitting down and losing consciousness", and which does not impose any subject for meditation upon the heart, is superior to meditation which consists of a vision of the gods and the spirits. In this "perfection of meditation ... the body is like a piece of dead wood, the heart is like dead ash, without emotion and without purpose".³⁰ Similar descriptions are frequently found in India in connection with ascetics.

Sometimes the concept of inaction expresses itself differently again. In philosophical Taoism, the Tao should be allowed to act through the body; this is then called, significantly, *wu wei*, which means "inaction".³¹ The

26. Some examples are given in Williams, 85 ff.

27. *Chuang Tzu*, ch. 7, in *Lao Tzu and Taoism*, translated from the French text of Max Kaltenmark by Roger Greaves, Stanford, 1969, 89.

28. *Ibid.*, 65.

29. *Ibid.*, 93.

30. Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. A. Kierman Jr., Amherst, 1950, 283; for mental "motionlessness", see Kristofer Schipper, *Le Corps taoïste*, Paris, 1982, 200-201, 203 ff.

31. Not "non-assertion or equilibrium", as Huxley has it (*The Perennial Philosophy*, 91).

Bhagavadgītā admonishes Arjuna to act in accordance with his duty as a warrior, but to remain detached from the results of his actions. Huxley himself presents the position of the Perennial Philosophy in the following words: "All our actions must be directed, in the last analysis, to making ourselves passive in relation to the activity and the being of divine Reality."³² He then cites a number of authors, primarily Christian mystics, in support of this statement.

In India the notion of inaction is particularly interesting, because its various manifestations are embedded in a wider theory, the doctrine of karma.³³ Karma means action, and the doctrine of karma implies that our past actions are responsible for our present state, while our present actions determine our future state. In this way the force of our actions continues the cycle of ever repeated rebirths to which we are subjected. Breaking out of this cycle is only possible by abstaining from further activities, and it is here that the concept of inaction finds its place. Ascetics such as the Jainas literally, that is, physically, abstain from actions, and practise, for example, standing motionless for long periods of time. The extreme discomfort which such practices entail are considered manifestations of the process in which the effects of earlier actions are used up, so that at the moment of death as a result of motionless starvation, the ascetic may be free from all the fetters that bind him to this world. Others believed there was another way to break the chain of actions which had no beginning and their results. The trick is to realize that one's true self, one's soul, is by nature inactive. Once a person fully realizes that his true self has nothing whatsoever to do with the activities of his body, the effects of those activities will affect him no more, and he will be liberated. Confronted with the question how, then, his body should act, texts like the *Bhagavadgītā* add that one should leave the body to perform the activities prescribed by one's station in life, meanwhile making sure that one does not get involved in these actions.

This presentation of the Indian situation is admittedly somewhat schematic. And one important exception should here be mentioned, Buddhism, which started off by being very critical of both ways of reaching liberation indicated above. Ascetic practices were ridiculed, and Jainas in particular are explicitly referred to in the early texts. With regard to the search for a permanent, unchangeable self, the early texts are more than clear

32. *Ibid.*, 190.

33. The following observations are based on my book *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, 2nd edn, Delhi, 1993.

that this is not the way to obtain liberation.³⁴ In other words, Buddhism can be seen as a religious movement which rejected the notion of inaction in all its manifestations, and instead proposed another method to obtain liberation. Buddhism did not, however, reject the doctrine of karma, which, as we have seen, is so intimately linked to the concept of inaction. Perhaps this is one reason, besides others, why activities and beliefs connected with the notion of inaction were so persistent in pushing their way back into Buddhism. Ascetic practices rejected in the early texts were already on their way back in the early centuries of the religion. And although the doctrine of non-self had become something of a hallmark of Buddhism, various ways were found to interpret this doctrine in such a manner that the differences with the views rejected by early Buddhism became less pronounced. This process, too, started early in the history of Buddhism, which explains why some modern scholars, foremost among them Erich Frauwallner, could think that the same views underlie the doctrines of liberation in Buddhism and in Sankhya. Sankhya, it may be recalled, is the most important early exponent of the view that the soul does not participate in any action whatsoever, including mental acts.³⁵

Let us now look again at the concept of inaction as it seems to manifest itself in these various religious currents. Are we justified in calling it a philosophy, or even, with Huxley, a perennial philosophy? And can we agree with Huxley that this philosophy is, moreover, somehow true? The answer must be no. Motionless asceticism is not a philosophy, much less a true philosophy, although it may fit in, or give rise to, more or less philosophical ideas, such as the notion of the inactive nature of the soul, or the doctrine of karma. But there have also been ascetics, both inside and outside India, who practised advanced forms of inaction without trying to obtain freedom from the law of karma, that is from the results of one's actions. The warrior Arjuna – to whom Krishna revealed the *Bhagavadgītā* – is reported to have practised terrible mortifications, including a whole month without food, with his arms raised, standing on the tips of his toes, with no higher aim than to obtain divine weapons.³⁶ This is not philosophy, nor does it express a

34. See, for example, Johannes Bronkhorst, "The Buddha and the Jainas Reconsidered", *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*, XLIX/2 (1995), 333-50.

35. Erich Frauwallner, *Geschichte der indischen Philosophie*, Salzburg, 1953, I, 222.

36. This example shows that the theme of inaction – even within a single literary composition, in the present case the *Mahābhārata* – does not always carry the same meaning. In the present article we are indeed not primarily concerned with meanings, but with a theme which, in different cultural contexts, may be given different interpretations.

philosophy. The common element between these various ideas and forms of ascetic behaviour would rather seem to be, as I pointed out earlier, a disinclination to identify with the activities of the body.

But is this disinclination perennial? How does Huxley's claim to the extent that "rudiments of [the Perennial Philosophy] may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world" fare in connection with this notion? Huxley is hesitant to ascribe elements of his Perennial Philosophy to the concepts of the highest God among such peoples:

In regard to no twentieth-century "primitive" society can we rule out the possibility of influence by, or borrowing from, some higher culture. Consequently, we have no right to argue from the present to the past. Because many contemporary savages have an esoteric philosophy that is monotheistic with a monotheism that is sometimes of the "That art thou" variety, we are not entitled to infer offhand that Neolithic or Palaeolithic men held similar views.³⁷

Huxley is obviously right in warning against offhand inferences with regard to the beliefs of Neolithic and Palaeolithic people. For once, however, he may have been overcautious when he speaks of the possibility of influence by what he calls a higher culture on the monotheistic ideas of these same peoples. A number of scholars have commented on the remarkable fact that many pre-literate societies recognize the existence of a Supreme Being. The most universal, and noteworthy, feature of this Supreme Being is its remote and inactive nature.³⁸ This virtually excludes the possibility of Christian or Muslim influence, for the God of these two religions is not remote, nor is he inactive. The fact that examples of such a *deus otiosus* have been recorded in all continents, suggests rather that Huxley may be right, if only we modify his remark so that it becomes: "rudiments of the concept of inaction" (instead of "rudiments of [the Perennial Philosophy]") "may be found among the traditionary lore of 'primitive' peoples in every region of the world."

With regard to the spirit, or soul, in such societies, Huxley says, "Crude formulations of some of the doctrines of the Perennial Philosophy are to be found in the thought-systems of the uncivilized and so-called primitive peoples of the world".³⁹ He then cites examples from the Maoris and from

37. *The Perennial Philosophy*, 23.

38. See Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Supreme Beings", in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, New York and London, 1987, XIV, 166-181.

39. *The Perennial Philosophy*, 23.

the Oglala Indians, both of whom recognize a divine element in man; the Oglala Indians regard this divine element as identical with the divine essence of the world. Other examples of the kind here presented by Huxley could be added from a variety of "primitive" societies, and they do support the presence of the concept of inaction in these societies.⁴⁰ More common, and more important in this connection, is the idea that human beings have several "souls", one of which, referred to by researchers variously as the "free-soul" or "dream-ego" or the like, is characterized by the fact that it does not participate in bodily actions. Often it only has a role to play in situations where the body is motionless – in sleep, trance or unconsciousness.⁴¹ This particular soul, according to certain scholars, is the principle of life and of consciousness, and the precondition for thought, feeling and will.⁴²

If it is justified to connect these wide-spread conceptions – of an inactive Supreme Being, of a soul which has no part in the activities of the body – with the notion of inaction as we find it in the major religions, we are led to surmise that this concept, though perhaps not universal, is of very general occurrence. We might then conclude that, even though Huxley's substantive "philosophy" would seem to be out of place here,⁴³ the adjective "perennial" has something to recommend itself. The notion of inaction might be "perennial" in the sense of "recurrent": it shows up again and again in a large variety of widely differing circumstances.

Huxley, as you know, was not particularly impressed by scholarship. As he says in *The Doors of Perception*: "There is always money for, there are always doctorates in, the learned foolery of research into what, for scholars, is the all-important problem: Who influenced whom to say what when?"⁴⁴

40. See, for example, Åke Hulkrantz, "Gnostic Parallels in America? A Problem of Identity, Diffusion and Independent Invention", in *Ἀγὰθὴ ἐλπὶς: Studi Storico-Religiosi in Onore di Ugo Bianchi*, ed. Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, Rome, 1994, 463-78.

41. See the surveys by Åke Hulkrantz, *Conceptions of the Soul among North American Indians*, Stockholm, 1953; Hans Fischer, *Studien über Seelenvorstellungen in Ozeanien*, Munich, 1965; Hermann Hohegger, "Die Vorstellungen von 'Seele' und Totengeist bei afrikanischen Völkern", *Anthropos*, 60 (1965), 273-339; and Ivar Paulson, *Die primitiven Seelenvorstellungen der nordeurasischen Völker*, Stockholm, 1958.

42. See Fischer, 321, 324.

43. Even if we define philosophy, as in *Brave New World*, "as the finding of bad reason for what one believes by instinct" (214).

44. In *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*, 61. In an article first published in 1956 he refers again to "the learned foolery of scholars", then observes: "If the European student wishes to remain shut up in the prison of his private cravings and the

With regard to the concept of inaction we may have to share his distrust of this kind of approach. Its wide-spread occurrence may have to be explained differently: not by the influence of one religion upon another religion, or of one culture on another culture, but rather by the assumption that this concept is one of the "processes forever unfolded in the heart of man", to borrow Huxley's expression.⁴⁵

But if the notion of inaction is perennial in this sense, and therefore in a way inborn, why is it not universally attested? Is this concept of inaction in that case not susceptible to exactly the same objection which a critic raised against Huxley's Perennial Philosophy? To repeat what was quoted earlier:

Confucianism is barely mentioned in *The Perennial Philosophy*; except for some atypical elements, Judaism also is all but ignored. Yet Confucianism has had the allegiance of literally billions of Chinese. The significance of Judaism is even more apparent, but Huxley nowhere shows that he cares what Judaism is.

Does the notion of inaction manifest itself in Confucianism? And in Judaism? And if not, why not?

Questions like these do not allow of simple answers. First of all, what exactly is this "concept of inaction"? I have provisionally described it as the disinclination to identify with the activities of the body, but this, of course, is no more than a first attempt. Until and unless the concept has been sufficiently refined in the light of further material and profounder reflection,⁴⁶ it is hard to say whether or not it can be found in this or that religious

thought-patterns inherited from his predecessors, then by all means let him plunge through Sanskrit, or Pali, or Chinese, or Tibetan, into the verbal study of 'a way of thought, the difficulties of which become more formidable the more diligently he applies himself to it.' If, on the other hand, he wishes to transcend himself by actually understanding the primordial fact described or hinted at in the Upanishads and the other scriptures of what, for lack of a better phrase, we will call 'spiritual religion,' then he must ignore the problems of language and speculative philosophy, or at least relegate them to a secondary position, and concentrate his attention on the practical means whereby the advance from knowledge to understanding may best be made" (see *Huxley and God*, 200-201).

45. *The Perennial Philosophy*, 63.

46. One might object that this provisional description is too "psychological", and prefer a "phenomenological" definition. The present "psychological" description allows to include philosophical Taoism and the teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā*, in which inaction in the literal sense plays no or practically no role. (Interestingly, philosophical Taoism yet speaks of *wu wei* "inaction".)

tradition. What I have presented so far, is at best a first approximation of what might, perhaps, turn out to be something like a human universal.

But here we have to confront another question. If human universals exist (and I have the impression that it is no longer taboo to entertain the idea⁴⁷), do they have to manifest themselves universally? The question is not new. Linguists, most notably Derek Bickerton,⁴⁸ have used the notion of a "bioprogramme" to account for features that occur in many languages, and which supposedly manifest themselves consistently in Creole languages and children's talk. If our "concept of inaction" is a universal of that kind, a bioprogramme, it is understandable that it is not present in all religious traditions. In that case, however, one will have to address the question what circumstances are favourable, and which are unfavourable, to its expression.

Huxley, as we have seen, linked the Perennial Philosophy to the presence of saints, prophets, sages and enlightened ones. Should we do the same with the concept of inaction? Many of the statements cited derive from such people. But is this really surprising? We are, after all, speaking about religions, most of whose statements derive from saints, prophets, sages and enlightened ones. The moment we try to define these vague terms more precisely, we run into trouble. For example, is the notion of inaction an aspect of the experiences of mystics? When considering the Christian mystics, one might be tempted to think so. But Christianity, according to Huxley, "has remained a religion in which the pure Perennial Philosophy has been overlaid, now more, now less, by an idolatrous preoccupation with events and things in time ...".⁴⁹ Translated into our present concerns, the concept or notion of inaction manifests itself in Christianity almost exclusively in its ascetics and mystics and in the Gnostic movement. But in other religions, such as Hinduism, the concept forms part of the most orthodox doctrines, and is in no way confined to mystics and ascetics.

47. See, for example, Donald E. Brown, *Human Universals*, New York, 1991.

48. Derek Bickerton, *Roots of Language*, Ann Arbor: Mich., 1981.

49. *The Perennial Philosophy*, 63. In Huxley's *Island* (1962), London, 1966, one character presents "a theory that, wherever little boys and girls are systematically flagellated, the victims grow up to think of God as 'Wholly Other' Wherever, on the contrary, children are brought up without being subjected to physical violence, God is immanent." The same character then continues: "A people's theology reflects the state of its children's bottoms. Look at the Hebrews – enthusiastic child-beaters. And so were all good Christians in the Ages of Faith. Hence Jehovah, hence Original Sin and the infinitely offended Father of Roman and Protestant orthodoxy. Whereas among Buddhists and Hindus education has always been non-violent" (115-16).