

On Thought—III

IT HAS always seemed to me that apart from a very few exceptions, the mental role of women is not to speculate on the metaphysical causes of the phenomena which are perceptible to us, but to draw practical conclusions from these phenomena.

Madame Martial was telling you very rightly last Friday that it would be wrong for women to want to think in the same way as men, that they would be in danger of losing their own qualities — profound intuition and practical deduction — without acquiring those of their masculine counterparts — logical reasoning and the capacity of analysis and synthesis.

That is why today I shall not attempt to demonstrate to you by logical reasoning and transcendental speculation that thoughts exist as true, autonomous, living and active entities.

Besides, if we do not want to indulge in idle talk, if, very sincerely, we want to explain the smallest phenomenon, we must always go back to the most universal general laws. The whole universe is necessary to explain a grain of sand. And this is not the programme we have chosen for the *Union de Pensée Féminine*. Those who, as a result of the teaching they have received and the cerebral gymnastics they have undertaken, are fond of taking up vast metaphysical problems, will find an excellent opportunity to do so at the *École de la Pensée* on the first Friday of each month.¹

¹ *Alternative version intended for another group:*

I do not know if you are familiar with the notion of thought as a living and autonomous entity. I shall not venture here to prove its exactitude to you, and this for two reasons.

The first is that in order to explain the smallest phenomenon (for such is our usual way of proving its reality to ourselves), it is necessary to bring in the most universal general laws. Many times we have been led to observe that the whole universe is necessary to explain a grain of sand. And this enquiry would lead us really too far tonight.

On the other hand, to do this, we would have to devote ourselves to lengthy meta-

Words of Long Ago

At the *Union de Pensée Féminine*, we shall be more modest, if you agree.

Women, by their very nature, are more capable of taking the spiritual or, in the deepest sense of the word, moral standpoint.

We are essentially realistic and formative in this spiritual domain; we want to know how to live well, and for this we must learn how to think well.

To realise the primary importance of thought, we must know it as it is, that is, as a living being; and so that you may be convinced of the autonomous existence of thought, I shall ask you only to ascertain this for yourselves, which is an easy thing to do.

A little observation will enable us to realise that very often, for example, we receive thoughts which come to us from outside, although we have not been brought into contact with them either by speech or reading.

Who has not also observed this phenomenon: a thought which is “in the air”, as we say, and which several inventors, several scientists, several literary men receive simultaneously without having been in physical communication on this matter?

One could go on giving examples indefinitely. I leave each one to reflect and find the examples which seem most conclusive to her.

Before proceeding further with our subject I shall read you a page on thought which may help you to understand it.

It is a page from an as yet unpublished philosophical volume.

“Any phenomenon implies a corresponding substance; any

physical speculations, and there is nothing I dread more than this form of mental activity.

Faithful in this matter to the teaching of the Buddha, I am convinced that we can make a far better use of our time and minds than in hazardous excursions into the intellectual realm which, in the last analysis, always eludes our enquiry and inevitably brings us face to face with the unthinkable.

The Buddha always categorically refused to answer any metaphysical question on the origin or the end of the universe, saying that only one thing matters: to advance on the Way, that is, to purify oneself inwardly, to destroy in oneself all egoistic desire.

vibration necessitates a medium of its own; and if vibrations of light require the medium which we know as ether, will not a medium be needed for the more subtle, more mysterious and also more rapid vibrations of thought?

“I am not speaking of a thought which has already assumed the form and substance provided by the materiality of the brain. Psychologists know very well that before it attains to its modes of conscious activity there, a thought must first of all have passed through remoter states, through the unknown regions of what we call the subconscious.

“It has come from the inner depths to our surface self like a meteor reaching us from inaccessible spaces.

“What was the origin of this meteor, the source of this thought? We do not know, but they exist, the one beyond our sun, the other probably beyond light.

“There is a relationship of ascendance between light and thought. To go from one to the other in the scale of imponderables, it is necessary to mount a step: conceiving (*concevoir*) is a higher way of seeing (*voir*).

“If we do not see thought, it is because its substance is more ethereal than that of light; just as, if we do not hear light, it is because its essence is more subtle than that of sound.

“Among the elements of its own order, thought moves just as our bodies do among physical objects. Just as our hands know how to shape these objects, in the same way thought also knows how to mould these elements and cast them into a myriad appropriate forms.

“Thus our intellectual gestures are no less fruitful than our physical gestures. And that is why wisdom has always taught that we must watch over our thoughts as we would over generating acts.”

So we see that thought, which is a dynamism in the highest sense of the word, acts in its own realm as a formative power in order to build a body for itself. It acts like a magnet on iron filings. It

Words of Long Ago

attracts all the elements which are akin to its own character, aim and tendencies, and it vivifies these elements — which are the constituent cells of its own body, that I shall call fluidic to avoid going into too many explanations — it animates them, moulds them, gives them the form which is best suited to its own nature.

We shall find a striking analogy between the work of thought and the work of the inventor, the builder of any kind.

Let us take as an example a steam engine. The engineer draws up a plan in its smallest details, calculates and arranges everything, then he selects the appropriate materials for the materialisation of his conception, watches over the construction, etc.

And when the engine works, becoming by its movement a real living being, it will be the most complete possible manifestation of the thought which has built it, it will give the full measure of the power of this thought. (The awakened unconsciousness of locomotives, cars, ships.) The formative thought, a living entity, animates the body which has been built for it by the hands of men. In the mental domain also, there are conscious builders.

There are people who are specially gifted or who have developed certain inner senses in themselves, who can come into direct contact with this domain, mainly through vision and touch.

When they are thus able to watch over the working of the phenomenon, they can, like chemists in their laboratories, manipulate substances, select them, mould them by their will-power and clothe their thoughts in forms that can manifest them fully.

But this is the ultimate stage of one of the many paths of individual progress. Long before achieving this full consciousness, it is possible to make powerful formations. Any person whose thought has any strength and persistence is constantly making formations without being aware of it.

If you keep in mind that these formations are living entities always acting in the direction imparted to them by the thoughts which have given them birth, you will easily perceive the considerable consequences of these mental acts.

Just as a good, kind, just and lofty thought can be eminently

beneficial, so also a malevolent, base, wicked and selfish thought can be baneful.

On this matter, I shall quote to you a passage from the Dhammapada which will give you an idea of the enormous importance attributed to thought by the wisdom of the past.

“Whatever an enemy may do to an enemy, whatever a hater may do to a hater, the harm caused by a misdirected thought is even greater still.

“Neither father nor mother nor any other kinsman can do so much good as a well-directed thought.”

If you reflect upon the incalculable number of thoughts which are emitted each day, you will see rising before your imagination a complex, mobile, quivering and terrible scene in which all these formations intercross and collide, battle, succumb and triumph in a vibratory movement which is so rapid that we can hardly picture it to ourselves.

Now you realise what the mental atmosphere of a city like Paris can be, where millions of individuals are thinking—and what thoughts! You can picture this teeming, mobile mass, this inextricable tangle. Well, in spite of all the contradictory tendencies, wills and opinions, a kind of unification or identity gets established among all these vibrations, for all of them—with a few minor exceptions—all express craving, craving in all its forms, all its aspects, on all planes.

All the thoughts of worldly-minded people whose only aim is enjoyment and physical diversion, express craving.

All the thoughts of intellectual creators or artists thirsting for esteem, fame and honour, express craving.

All the thoughts of the ruling class and the officials hankering after more power and influence, express craving.

All the thoughts of the thousands of employees and workmen, of all the oppressed, the unfortunate, the downtrodden struggling for some improvement of their cheerless existence, express craving.

All, rich or poor, powerful or weak, privileged or deprived,

Words of Long Ago

intellectual or obtuse, learned or ignorant, all want gold, always more gold to satisfy all their cravings.

If from place to place there occasionally flashes out a spark of pure and disinterested thought, of will to do well, of sincere seeking for truth, it is very soon swallowed up by this material flood that rolls like a sea of slime....

And yet we must kindle the stars that one by one will come to illumine this night.

But for the moment we are living within it, soaking it up, for in the mental as in the physical domain we are in a state of perpetual interchange with the environment.

This is to point out to you how we are contaminated each day, at each minute.

Can any one of us say that she has never felt craving and that she will never feel it again? Besides, how could we not feel craving when the atmosphere we breathe is saturated with it? How could we not feel this host of desires rising in ourselves when all the vibrations we receive are made of desires?...

And yet if we want our thought to be beneficial and effective we must free ourselves of this bondage.

With this fact in mind, let us first of all draw a practical conclusion: let us be lenient towards all, for temptation is strong and human ignorance is great indeed.

But just as we must be compassionate and kind to others, we must be exacting and strict with ourselves, since we want to become lights in the darkness, torches in the night.

We must therefore learn to resist this daily pollution victoriously.

The very fact of knowing that there is a danger of contagion is already a great step towards liberation. But it is far from sufficient.

There are two possible victories to be won, one collective, the other individual. The first is, so to say, positive and active, the second negative and passive.

To win the positive victory it is necessary to declare an open

war of idea against idea, for the thoughts that are disinterested, lofty and noble to give battle to those that are selfish, base and vulgar. This is a real hand-to-hand fight, a struggle of each minute which demands considerable mental power and clarity. For to fight against thoughts it is first of all necessary to receive them, to admit them into oneself, deliberately allow oneself to be contaminated, absorb the sickness into oneself the better to destroy the deadly germ by healing oneself. It is a real war in which one imperils one's mental balance at every minute — and a war demands warriors. I shall not recommend this practice to anyone. It belongs by right to the initiates who have prepared themselves for it by long and rigorous discipline, and we shall leave it to them.

For our part, we shall be content to asepticise ourselves so as to be safe from all infection. We shall aspire therefore for the individual victory, and if we win it we shall find out that we have done more for the collectivity in this way than we suspected at first.

To win this victory we must build up in ourselves a mentality whose quality is the opposite of that of the surrounding medium. We must, little by little, day by day, fill our minds with the loftiest, purest, most disinterested thoughts we can conceive of, and through our deliberate care they must become sufficiently living that they awaken in us each time a temptation to think wrongly comes to us from outside and rise in their dazzling splendour to face the shadow which constantly lurks in wait ready to assail us.

Let us light within ourselves the fire of the ancient vestals, the fire symbolising divine intelligence, which it is our duty to manifest.

This work cannot be achieved in a day or a month or even a year. We must will, and will with perseverance. But if you could know the benefits one reaps from this, if you could feel that peace, that perfect serenity which gradually replaces in us the agitation, the anxiety and fear which spring from desire, you would unhesitatingly set to work.

Words of Long Ago

Moreover, the building up of a synthesis of pure and powerful thoughts does not lead solely to our own happiness. The clearer and higher the flame, the more light it sheds around it.

The star we allow to shine through us will foster the birth of similar stars by its example; fortunately, not only darkness and ignorance, but also knowledge and light can be contagious.

In addition, the care we take to remain conscious of our highest thoughts will compel us to control our thoughts constantly, and this control is gradually obtained by the methods I outlined to you last month — analysis, reflection, meditation, etc. Those who have achieved the control of their mental being can emanate at will a certain portion of their intellectual power, send it wherever they think proper, while remaining perfectly conscious of it.

These emanations, which are true messengers, will take your place wherever, physically, it is for any reason impossible for you to go yourself.

The advantages of this power will be easily apparent to you.

A thought which is skilfully directed and sustained can, by affinity, awaken to consciousness a glimmer of wisdom in many minds as yet wrapt in darkness, and thus set them on their way towards progressive evolution; it can serve as an intermediary for one who is sick by drawing towards him the vital forces needed to cure him; it can watch over a dear friend and protect him from many dangers, either by warning him through mental communication and through his intuition or by acting directly on the cause of peril.

Unfortunately, the inverse is also true, and bad thoughts as well are not wanting in power of action.

We cannot imagine all the harm we do by receiving and emanating bad thoughts, thoughts of hate, vengeance, jealousy, envy, malevolent thoughts, harsh judgments, sectarian valuations....

We all know how injurious it is to listen to and repeat slanderous gossip, but it is not enough to abstain from the words,

we must also abstain from the thoughts.²

Besides, a little reflection will suffice for this, for we shall very soon understand how rash our judgments and estimations always are.

With regard to acts, to actions committed, we shall be able to tell ourselves again and again that we do not know them exactly as they are, that in any case, the motives behind these acts, the many causes which have determined them, almost completely elude us.

With regard to defects, let us not forget that those which annoy us most in others are usually those which thrive most in ourselves and that, in any case, if we did not have any seeds of these defects within us, we would not be able to perceive them anywhere. Besides, what exactly is a defect? Most often it is the reverse side of a quality, an excess of virtue which has found no outlet, something which is not in its place.

As for what concerns us personally, we must be more prudent still and follow one strict rule very scrupulously: never judge anything without first having put ourselves in the place of the other, whoever he may be, with the greatest possible impersonality; try to feel what he has felt, see what he has seen, and if we succeed in being perfectly sincere, very often we shall see our estimation becoming less strict and more just.

Besides, as a general rule, in what light shall we look at what we want to judge? What shall our criterion be? Indeed, do

² *Passage added when presented to another group:*

For nothing is more pernicious to ourselves and to others than this uncharitable state of mind. How many times have we not felt a kind of insurmountable barrier rising up between ourselves and someone we know? And yet towards this person, our words and acts have always been perfectly courteous and occasionally even very friendly.

But where this person is concerned, within ourselves, we have given rein to this spirit of analysis and criticism which lightly dismisses good qualities and fastens only on shortcomings, no doubt without any spitefulness, but with a shade of irony or malice, a feeling of our own superiority—wretched as we are! And so, little by little, drop by drop, between this person and ourselves, a veritable river is formed which separates us more and more from each other, despite whatever physical efforts we may make to come closer together.

Words of Long Ago

we fancy that we possess the supreme wisdom and the perfect justice that we are able to say with certainty, “This is good, this is bad”? Let us never forget that our notions of good and evil are wholly relative and so ignorant that, in what concerns others, we often find fault with an act which is the expression of a wisdom far greater than our own.

True science does not judge; it investigates phenomena as precisely as it can in their manifold causes and numerous effects. It says, “This will determine that” — see therefore whether *that* conforms to what you wish before doing *this*. At all events, even if in what personally concerns us we can take as a criterion our greater or lesser likeness to our highest ideal in all its intensity and progressive splendour, we have no right to demand from others that they should realise our own ideal, unless we know that our ideal is superior to theirs, in which case we would have to be quite certain that our ideal conforms in every respect to the supreme ideal, the absolute ideal, to the universal plan in its innermost essence....

But before attaining to such transcendent heights, we can always keep in mind that the malevolent or uncharitable thoughts emanating from men are the chief causes of division among them; they make their union almost impossible even when they wish to realise it.

What we constantly endeavour to achieve in our physical actions is at the same time constantly hampered or even destroyed by our mental actions.

So let us watch over our thoughts, let us strive to create for ourselves an atmosphere of beautiful and noble thoughts and we shall have done much to hasten the advent of terrestrial harmony.

19 February 1912