

Chapter #25

NON-MEDITATIVE CONTEMPLATION AS A RESEARCH PROJECT IN PSYCHOLOGY: BETWEEN THE CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS MIND

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ABSTRACT

Contemplation as an unconscious mental phenomenon that exists in the form of a process or a state, forms the properties of an individual (contemplative personality). Notwithstanding the processes of attention, memory, perception, and thinking, contemplation is activated on their basis. The difference consists in uncontrollability of the process, since its contents are not presented to consciousness. While this process has been an integral part of human mentality for ages, and was a factor in the birth of modern Psychology and Philosophy, little research in recent times has gone beyond pragmatic application of the process of contemplation. Our research suggests deeper examination of the synergy of these processes with acceleration of humans and society via technology and global changes. In this we see the difference between contemplation as unconscious activity and Freudian understanding of the unconscious. Other differences are found in invariability of the emotional background of contemplation from start to finish. The process of contemplation should thus be regarded as spontaneous psychological self-therapy for an individual, and considered to be a vital element of mental processes and personality traits.

Keywords: contemplation, conscious, unconscious, self-therapy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamism of current events, the rate of technical, economic, social, and organizational changes have increased so considerably that it has become possible to speak of a “dynamic stress” or a stress of insuperable lag behind the quickly changing life. The pace of changes can significantly exceed the personality and social group adaptational potential. The social and psychological consequences of non-optimal speed excess of globalization over opportunities of social and personal designing and self-designing (information glut, fast and continuous change of social, professional, family, interpersonal roles, multiple identification, polyethnization, multiculturalization, manipulization, makiawelization,) are found in “sophisticated” crime, drug abuse, depression, psychosomatic diseases, and mental imbalances. Psychological differentiation is aggravated with each new generation which organically and quickly appropriate updating the birth environment with the corresponding artifacts not always and not fully fitting into the world image of previous generations. By analogy with A.P. Nazaretyan’s hypothesis of technical and humanitarian balance (Nazaretyan, 2008) one can put forward a hypothesis of global dynamic and social personal balance / imbalance.

The phenomenon of the unconscious mastered by science, art, and utilized in the practice of therapy in the versions of Sigmund Freud, Karl Jung, and Paul Diel, among

others, is acquiring a different outline today. In this context, contemplation can be compared to a stone that has remained aloof from the so-called construction site of the unconscious. At the same time, the theme of contemplation is widely represented in esoteric and religious publications.

Scientific interest in the problem of contemplation in Samara was initially realized in the format of the Volga Seminar (2011) and then at the All-Russian Conference (2013). On this basis, the prospects for overcoming the well-known opposition of consciousness and the unconscious by means of the category of contemplation were determined (Akopov, 2014; Shestun & Podorovskaya, 2014).

In the practical plan psychological technologies (psychopractice) of modern consultation, diagnostics, maintenances, or correction, do not always produce the desired effect. A series of demo researches has enabled us to regard contemplation as a mental phenomenon that considerably supplements the phenomenon of activity and expands the range of a personality's individual psychological characteristics. Treating contemplation as actualized unconsciousness organically connects it with processes, conditions, and properties of consciousness. As S.L. Rubinstein put it, "Greatness of a person and of his activity is manifested not only in deed but also in contemplation, in his ability to comprehend and correctly treat the Universe, the world, the life" (Rubinstein, 2003, p. 359).

2. BACKGROUND

Contemplation is a term seldom used in modern Psychology. The notion of contemplation has the status of a category. A broad response is associated with the term *sensual contemplation*. After K. Marx's works it was "neglectfully" returned to sensualism. It wasn't accepted by "grandiose" prospects of economic, social and political practice, metaphorically indicated as Pandora's box in one of M.K. Mamardashvili's works.

Essential growth of scientific interest and confidence to the problem of consciousness in recent years (Chalmers, 2010; Petrenko, 2010; Revonsuo, 2017; Whitehead, 2008 and others) gives rise to the hope that contemplation will take a worthy place in the categorial system of theoretic and applied psychology and modern science in general (Akopov & Akopian, 2021). In certain contexts (binarity, dichotomizm) it is not purposeful activity and consciousness that underlie one of the basic oppositions in modern psychology of consciousness, but activity and contemplation in the diachronic plan that are deduced from the dialectic discourse "subject and consciousness" (Akopov, 2010).

One of the first studies of contemplation from the standpoint of academic psychology was presented in Han F. De Wit's work on *Contemplative Psychology* (1991). The merging of psychological positions with theoretical concepts and various practices of spiritual beliefs, offered by the author, has become widespread. The category of contemplation in the works of this trend is revealed in terms of spirituality, meditative experience, compassion, etc. In the later studies, there has been an expansion of the problem of contemplation into the field of Science of Consciousness (Dorjee, 2016; Terje, 2017). Nevertheless, meditation still appears as the main concept that identifies the phenomenon of contemplation for example in the articles of *The Journal of Contemplative Enquiry*, Vol. 7, 2020 (<https://journal.contemplativeinquiry.org>), which, in our opinion, does not cover the entire phenomenology of contemplation.

Contemplative science overlooks mental processes and states (mental experience) of contemplation that are random, unpredictable, and spontaneous. These processes and states, for example, in perceptual consciousness, especially visual modality, are often caused by natural or other external factors. At a certain moment, they become meaningfully

unconscious, i.e. unintentional (not directed at the previous visual object). At the same time, the very fact of an unusual state is recognized, i.e. there is that part of the phenomenal consciousness that has the subjective character (Kriegel, 2011), defined as belonging of experience to oneself, to one's Self in the absence of a qualitative determination of the experience (qualia).

As there are some prospects of interpretation of the term *contemplation*, we will mention some established meanings of terms.

In S. I. Ozhegov's dictionary (Ozhegov, 2021) contemplation (contemplate, contemplator, contemplative) is defined as passive observations; inactivity.

A wider range of meanings is found in V.I. Dahl's dictionary: to contemplate is "to examine attentively and continuously, observe, look intently, go deep into the subject, learn it, admire it, consider something carefully with mentality and spirit" (Dahl, 1881, p. 267).

In the Concise Encyclopedia of Philosophy (1994) there are procedural and resultant aspects in three groups of meanings of the term *consciousness*; superficial and inner, perceptual and notional ways of contemplation; "empirical, non-conceptual, irrational comprehension of reality"

In the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, contemplation is defined as "direct connection of consciousness to the subject", "entering through the phenomenon outward to its inward" or (in dialectical materialism) "integral awareness preceding conceptual and logical thinking" (Averintsev et al, 1989).

In one of the new dictionaries of philosophical terms, "essence contemplation" is defined using the term *ideation* (phenomenology by E. Husserl) which is interpreted as "consciousness orientation on "general" ("essence", "eidos", "a priori") and also a method of contemplation of the general". In this case, the term *essence contemplation* is much alike to "categorical contemplation" and "ideation" (Kuznetsov, 2007).

In the historical context contemplation is defined in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<https://plato.stanford.edu/>).

3. DEEPER ANALYSIS

3.1. Traditional thoughts

If we compare the previous definitions and characteristics of contemplation with the notional system of Psychology, we get the following results. Contemplation as a term of philosophy can be compared with relevant psychic phenomena, which potentially can be a process, condition or properties of a subject (individual, personality, individuality). Being characterized as a reflection, it can both acquire and lose activity (freedom, intentionality, orientation, mediation, etc.), being an equal phrase "the subject reality" and "the object reality" (Rubinstein, 2003). There is a very interesting statement in S.L. Rubinstein – "contemplation is a reciprocal action of the subject and object realities" (Rubinstein, 2003, p. 409).

Inversing from outward to inward and vice versa contemplation can pay its "attention" to different subjects, objects, phenomena, essence, processes, conditions, etc. making and destroying typologies, classifications, connections, disconnections, the whole and its constituent parts, compositions, and deconstructions.

At the same time contemplation does not have clearly visible, audible, tangible, etc. content (image), being often synchronous with stimulating and supporting visual, aural, kinaesthetic, etc. background. In these terms contemplation can be defined as actualized

unconsciousness, i.e. in contemplation the work of unconsciousness is shown to consciousness in forms of nonverbal (internal) languages (Akopov, 2021).

It is to be mentioned that the source and “tool” of contemplation is not just a visual system. There are also certain correlations of sounds (noise of wind and forest, pipe, long songs, symphonic or other compositions, etc.), intracorporal and superficial and muscular harmonious sensations (such as light satiation, feasible physical tension, primary exhaustion), quiet long movement, flight and so on. Contemplation in synchronism can be characterized as being free from history, not being worried about the future in the present.

3.2. Literary perspectives

From the standpoint of age-related psychology, contemplation has a dominant role (Ukhtomsky, 2020) during aging and other crises, especially in babyhood, youth, and declining years.

Being ill may stimulate contemplation (see Leo Tolstoy’s story “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”), helping to show latent contexts and meanings. It is crucial to differentiate contemplation and experience. For contemplation, emotions are not obligatory, whereas the fundamental characteristic of experience is emotion.

The character of correlations between contemplation and other psychological processes is rather complicated. Contemplation is congruent to attention but does not coincide with it (non-directional concentration, pensiveness). Contemplation can be turned from the present to the past and vice versa, disorienting the memory. It can be the sensing of reality and unreality, blending perception with imagination. Being alien to mediation, a contemplator does not think, but still he comprehends the essence. Not taking up (responding) any of the emotions mentioned in the science of contemplation perhaps has the majesty of Gioconda by Leonardo da Vinci and at the same time lack of motivation and obvious (visible) activity.

Equalizing the realities of the subject and object (Rubinstein, 2003), contemplation is in opposition (antinomy) to activity confirming or denying the unity of activity and consciousness. Contemplation is opposed to pragmatism (utilitarianism, lucre, commitment, etc.) not only in one of its types – aesthetic contemplation (Kant, 1790/2020). In its “fixed” opposition to any vector of motion (activity) contemplation is illuminating. At the same time, it is not a flash of inspiration or insight, as both of them are final phases of purposeful search; an expected solution of the settled problem. Contemplation is absolutely free since it cannot be regulated.

According to V.F. Petrenko and V.V. Kucherenko, “concentrating on ‘here and now’ by sight of a majestic mountain ridge or looking at the horizon of the great ocean, we feel practically the same as a person who was standing here and contemplating centuries ago. At this moment the past, the present and the future (in sense of an unborn man) merge and we feel the chasm of eternity” (Petrenko & Kucherenko, 2007, p. 172).

Freedom or fortuity (spontaneity) are expressed in the possibility of this condition to be actualized or not, as well as its semantics.

3.3. The eastern philosophical background

Correlating contemplation to the phenomena of an altered state of consciousness (ASC) makes it possible, in our opinion, to place contemplation into the class of ASC as an unusual condition of consciousness, if the latter is defined as a kind of ASC. In this case, in the class of ASC contemplation does not coincide with other known phenomena (meditation, trance, prayer, seclusion, mantric and tantric contemplation, Samadhi, Vipassana, etc.). However, some ASC are closely connected with contemplation stimulating or generating each other (Petrenko & Kucherenko, 2007).

With this regard, the conclusion made by V.F. Petrenko and V.V. Kucherenko can, in our opinion, be applied not only to meditation conditions, but also to contemplation. The congruous quality of contemplation and meditation is connected with “change of forms of a categorization of the world, oneself, others, with neutralization of the subject-object opposition of “me” and “the world”, i.e. “duality removal” (Petrenko & Kucherenko, 2007). However, in all similarity of the above-mentioned mechanisms (decategorization, opposition change of the quality “me” – “not me”), the contemplation condition, unlike meditation, is not obligatory and not often associated with disappearance of “me”, “its dissolution in common consciousness of the world”. Contemplating “me” is “in itself” and “in object” (world), it is safe though with hardly distinguishable borderlines that is apparently more common for the western mentality than for the eastern mentality.

A more general mechanism of regulation of conditions in one and the other culture is presented by us as a context of factorial structure of consciousness, the mechanism of a contact ratio (communication, semantic communication) and freedom (a choice, creation) in a combination with internal or external life plans. General for both cultures (West-East), predictors of contemplation are situations of extreme restrictions in external communication (various forms of privacy). Another ratio is in the case of extreme restriction of external freedom which is subjectively accepted in one mentality (East), and only more or less limited in the other (West). Here, in our opinion, is the border between meditative and non-meditative contemplative conditions. As an examples one can mention the contemplating character from F.M. Dostoyevsky’s story “The White Nights” or F. Kafka’s early literary etude named “Contemplation”.

3.4. Mysticism

A more differentiated cross-cultural research of the contemplation (meditativeness) moments in ornamentalistics, architecture, gardening, long-drawn-out songs and other genres of musical folklore, poetry etc. will enable us to define a variety of modes and structures imprinted as organic conscious and unconscious additions in different types of human activity.

If we continue the comparison, we note that contemplation is also not the same thing as mystical conditions. According to W. James who, as P.S. Gurevich (Gurevich, 1993) put it, “is still unsurpassed on penetration into secrets of mystical experience” (p. 422), one can draw the following main conclusions. One of the main differences is that a psychological basis of mysticism makes “aspiration to have direct contact with the supernatural” while for contemplation it is not obligatory. P.S. Gurevich points out four main characteristics or criteria of mystical experience according to W. James. Some of them coincide with contemplation manifestations, for example, “impossibility to state own feelings and impressions in usual language since as mystical experience has no concrete analogs in terrestrial life” (Gurevich, 1993, p. 406). The meditating (contemplating) person cannot give a definite answer expressing the experience.

Certainly, it is possible to find certain words as I.A. Ilyin did it in his wonderful sketches: “The person indulges in free and easy watching; happiness of pure and disinterested contemplation is given to him; it enters a God’s theater, ancient as the world and mellow as its Creator”, etc. (Ilyin, 2016, p. 167).

However, the transfer of the “true” contents requires other characteristic of mystical experience – “intuitiveness as a special form of cognition ..., the moments of inward enlightenment” (Gurevich, 1993, p. 416). In accordance with it, P.S. Gurevich, while characterizing “ancient gnosis”, mentions contemplation, all-inclusiveness and intuitiveness of reality comprehension (Gurevich, 1993). Intuitiveness which is common for mysticism

does not have anything in common with contemplation, which also can be a form of cognition, an enlightenment. The third feature – short duration – is common both for mysticism and contemplation, though, in our opinion, in these conditions they must be estimated somewhat differently.

A very important sign of mystical experience is “the will inactivity” (Gurevich, 1993). Contemplation is also characterized by a “stopping” of previous processes, lack of action and movement vector. The difference is, in our opinion, only in a mystical condition, at least a part of previous expectations remains, while contemplation does not have this since it is always one-staged (at the beginning), situational, unexpected (sudden); besides, contemplation is not obligatory, unlike mysticism that seeks “mysterious communication with God and the world” (Gurevich, 1993, p. 413).

Brooding on common features of mysticism and contemplation, one has to agree with the conclusion made by P.S. Gurevich: “In the ocean of consciousness differences between the individual and the world are removed. They disappear in unlimited integrity” (Gurevich, 1993, p. 417).

4. EMPIRICAL SURVEY RESULTS

4.1. Preliminary

Based on the results of the pilot study, a contemplative activity questionnaire was designed. The structure of the questionnaire makes it possible to determine the respondents’ ideas of contemplation and personal experience in contemplation. The participants were 18-19 year old students specializing in the pedagogical issues of inclusive education. In a group of 29 subjects, 93 descriptions of contemplation were produced. 42% of them define this state as “immersion into oneself” (“into their own world”, “into their thoughts, feelings, dreams”, “withdrawal into oneself”, detachment from the external the world”, “being in your world”, “immersing in your world”, “immersing in yourself”, etc.); somewhat more – 46% of respondents define contemplation as a state of calm (“humility”; “pleasure”, including aesthetic, “pacification”, “unity with the world”, “with the surrounding space”, “openness to the world”, etc.); the rest 12% identify contemplation as “pensiveness”, which, apparently, can also be attributed to states.

4.2. Deeper analysis

In the aggregate of students’ answers to clarifying questions about the peculiarities of activity during contemplation and its content, we managed to identify the following aspects of the individual’s immersion in contemplation:

1) the procedural aspect is characterized by “immersion or withdrawal into oneself”, “stopping the internal dialogue”, “calmness”, “spiritual harmony”, “enjoying what is happening”, “feeling like a third person, “observer”;

2) the content aspect is determined by the participants’ statements: “you think about important things in life”, “about love of Nature and people, about fate”, “you look at beauty, Nature, contemplate it and immediately thoughts about your life, about the past, the future, the present creep into your head”, “something that has not been analyzed emerges unconsciously”, “the situation is assessed without feelings or emotions”;

3) the situational aspect: “contemplation comes in natural environment”, “when alone”, “when you look at or listen to something beautiful or calm”;

4) the functional (effective) aspect: “contemplation helps to correctly analyze what is happening”, “gain experience”, “sometimes we do not have enough time to pause, contemplate and think over”, “harmony with oneself is achieved”, “internal clamps go

away", "perception changes", "calming the mind", "re-evaluation of events without emotions, without regret, as an observer from the outside", "after contemplation, lightness and joy", etc.

Choosing the conditions specified in the text of the questionnaire that stimulate the process of visual contemplation, the survey participants in approximately the same way recognized as such: "view from the height of a mountain peak", "vastness of the sea", "clouds floating in the sky", "horizon distance", "burning bonfire", "a flowing river". To this list, some students added "a starry sky", "a view of a bright moon." Auditory contemplation is equally stimulated by the "sound of the sea" and "birdsong", a little less – by a "lingering song"; rarely – by "ticking of the clock" and "an audible quiet conversation." The psychomotor activity that promotes contemplation, according to the choice of the participants, consists of the processes of walking and monotonous actions. The quantitative distribution of the selected visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimuli of contemplative states in 29 participants is as follows: 71, 36 and 21 stimulating situations.

4.3. Excerpts of reflection

In the experience representations of contemplation, the survey participants identified a significant variability in the content of contemplation: "thoughts themselves come and you think about everything and nothing"; "at one moment – thoughts and memories, at another – just emptiness"; "someone is in the state of lack of any thoughts, while others, at the moment of contemplation, there is a reassessment of the life situation, but without emotions and regret"; "sometimes, when you think about a situation or a question for a long time, you yourself drive yourself into this state"; "in contemplation, internal activity is carried out unconsciously, unperceived", etc.

The participants attribute approximately the same emotional coloring to the process of contemplation. These are mainly states such as: calmness, happiness, satisfaction, freedom, warmth, a sense of unity. Many answers deny any emotional accompaniment of contemplation: "without feelings and emotions", "disconnection from the whole world", "feeling like a third person, an observer." It is interesting to note that in the descriptions of the moment prior to contemplation, the participants do not record any emotions. However, after contemplation they feel calmness, relaxation, "a pleasant aftertaste from the process", "everything falls into place in thoughts"; feeling of harmony, lightness, and joy are attributed. Single statements attributing to an active post-contemplative state: "the feeling that something needs to be changed or some action to be performed right now", or "there is a feeling of irritation if interrupted."

Assessing the frequency of experiencing moments of contemplation, the majority of students chose the mid-position in the proposed scale (very often, often, occasionally, rarely, very rarely). Those who notice the state of contemplation in other people describe the following external signs: "a person looks out with concentration at one point, and does not react to the environment", "looks at something, but is immersed in himself"; thoughtful, peaceful. The ability to evoke a state of contemplation at will, to manage it, was recognized by very few participants. At the same time, as a means of immersion in contemplation, a very limited range of possibilities is noted ("choosing a quiet place", "in the countryside", "in solitude", "after reading a book", "looking out of the window", "at a dull lecture", "taking a long walk", "thinking over some issue for a long time."

Most of the participants stated that contemplation almost always comes spontaneously. At the final stage of the survey they compared contemplation with such mental states as drowsiness (dreaming), thoughtfulness, inspiration, insight, remembering, concentration, meditation, observation, imagining things. The comparison was to be made according to three criteria: a) complete coincidence (identity); b) a certain similarity;

c) absolute dissimilarity. The participants attributed a high degree of similarity of contemplation (more than 80%) to states of thoughtfulness and observation; a certain similarity – to inspiration and meditation; complete dissimilarity – to drowsiness and recollection.

5. DISCUSSION

Our results, paradoxically, largely coincide with those obtained in studies on samples of high school students (16-17 years old) and university students (20-21 years old), in previously published works (Akopian & Akopov, 2013; Akopian, 2014). The paradox consists in independence of the results from various instruments used and the time difference of 7-8 years. Such reproducibility of the phenomenon of contemplation characterizes it as an important, non-random mental property of a person. At the same time, contemplation cannot be attributed to any of the well-known classes of human mental properties, be it processes (attention, memory, etc.), states, features (factors) of a person. So, the process of attention (direction and concentration of mental activity) cannot be identified with contemplation, which is characterized only by concentration in the absence of an object of direction (excluding the prior state). Contemplation can carry traces of memory, but it is not a purposeful process in recalling, reminiscing, memorizing, etc.

More broadly, it can be argued that contemplation also does not coincide with the phenomena of consciousness, particularly with sensory, perceptual, affective and cognitive consciousness. As is known, one of the generally accepted criteria for the awareness of one or another human activity is the ability to give an account of one's actions, deeds, experiences, and one's states. The phenomenology of contemplation presented above does not allow for speaking about the complete accountability of the process of contemplation to the individual. Only the state of contemplation itself, an immersion in it, is clearly realized. What is being contemplated (excluding pre-contemplative objects of mental activity) is not explicitly conscious, while in sensory, perceptual and other types of consciousness, the object is directly represented in the field of consciousness.

In non-classical psychology (Vygotsky), consciousness is defined by the attributes of communication and generalization. On these grounds, it also cannot be argued that contemplation is a fully conscious process. If one tries to attribute contemplation to unconscious, mental phenomena, then it is also clear that this is not a Freudian libido, nor a Jungian archetype, nor Diel's vanity, etc. At the same time, it is similar to the manifestations of the Ego according to Freud, the Self according to Jung, etc.

Turning to modern studies of consciousness, one can pay attention to such identification of consciousness as qualia (Revonsuo, 2017). Of the five leading ideas that make it possible to identify consciousness (Honderich, 2014), the idea of qualia, in our opinion, enables assigning the status of consciousness to contemplation. At the same time, qualia belongs to the category of phenomenal consciousness, which, in contrast to perceptual, cognitive and other types of consciousness, defines the so-called "Hard Problem" of consciousness (Chalmers, 2010; Velmans, 2002 and others). Difficulty, i.e. the unsolved problem of scientific explanation of phenomenal consciousness, does not allow for the inclusion of contemplation in the categorial space of consciousness.

6. CONCLUSION

By way of summarizing, we deem it necessary to mention that placing the category of contemplation into the subject area of modern psychology enables one to study the corresponding phenomena in theoretical, methodological and applied aspects and, in particular, within the boundaries of such branches of psychology as age-related, clinical, ethnic, cross-cultural psychology, psychology of personality etc.

Thus, contemplation appears to be an important constituent part of the known mental processes, states, and personality traits. A peculiarity of the process of contemplation is its awareness by the individual as a special state, despite the fact that the object of contemplation and the very “flow” of the process is not perceived. The functional feature of contemplation is an internal, hidden processing or correction or transformation of micro- and macro-meanings of human life. It is also noteworthy that the process of rethinking is mostly hidden and emotionally positive for the individual. Based on the foregoing, the process of contemplation can be qualified as an individual’s spontaneous psychological self-therapy.

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