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What Was I Thinking?

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What Was I Thinking?

We might be surprised if we notice the kinds of thoughts that occur at times when our minds are not fully occupied. When I fold laundry, walk from one place to another, or engage in habitual activities that require little conscious attention, various thoughts come to mind. Some of the thoughts that spontaneously arise might be helpful while others are not. At some point I become aware that the thoughts are leading in a direction that is either compatible or incompatible with my values, so I must decide whether to continue the line of thinking or to direct my thoughts elsewhere.

For example, having read some of the typical “bad news” available in the media earlier in the day, and being temporarily only slightly occupied with a particular task, I might find that in my mind are thoughts of using violence to resolve world problems. Once I become aware of what is in my mind, I can recognize the thoughts as typical of some generally accepted cultural norms, but opposed to my values. It is not surprising that such thoughts would arise, but once I have acknowledged them as not being of any real assistance to me in dealing with reality, I need to either accept them as irrelevant fantasies, or move away from them as counter-productive.

Spontaneous thoughts that are entertained for a period of time generally elicit sensations at the level of spirituality, revealing our values in relation to those thoughts. When my head feels as though it is being squeezed, and the thoughts are similar to those that have proved fruitless in the past, I know it is time to change the subject. When thoughts come to mind that plod rather than exhibit creativity, when they move from one kind of negativity to another rather than draw my heart towards positive decisions, I need to initiate a change.

Mental activity of itself has no moral or value component and is not the source of our decisions. Mind is not the same as heart. In our minds, we can think and imagine anything, from a car fueled by water, to a national government that awaits our every reasonable suggestion, to a unified religious belief held by all people around the world. In making decisions, more is involved than mere mental activity, since we can think of walking out into traffic at one moment, and think of not doing so in the next moment. It is we who make decisions, not our minds. We organize our thoughts according to categories of our choosing, and make decisions informed by reason but not made by reason alone.

We do not need to control our every thought, but we surely want to have the final say over all our decisions and actions. Love, for example, is not a thought, but a choice. Some of our thoughts arise spontaneously. According to their content, we ignore some as being of no use to us. Others we perceive as worth our efforts to guide, to ponder, and to consider thoroughly. Some thoughts we count as inspirations, others as distractions, and still others as attacks. Spontaneous thoughts deserve occasional reflection on our part, so that we can maintain a high degree of freedom in making decisions.

“What was I thinking?” is a double-meaning question. If we ask the question as an objective enquiry about content, our goal is to remember a thought, as when we try to recall a dream shortly after awakening. We want to look at the thought in order to learn from it, or at least to consider its possible value to us. The same question can carry a sense of a negative judgment, repudiating a particular thought: What **was** I thinking? Either way we use the question, we indicate clearly that thinking is something that we judge, not something that judges us.

We, thought-full humans, are indeed “wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139)