

# The mind this enigma

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« We can only proceed to educate ourselves, from the known to the unknown. »

Antoine-Laurent De Lavoisier

Thank you for taking the time to read me, any reaction is welcome.

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## **Introduction**

«Man builds himself only by pursuing what is beyond him.»

André Malraux

The subject of concerns is the mind, this functional entity or should we say this fascinating concept. Free, curious and open thinker, with a scientific background, I would like to propose a vision of the mind simple and general, without prior cultural constraints.

How many of us have not asked themselves one of these questions. How do we define the mind? Is it limited to our body? What is its nature? Does he survive us? How does the spirit differ from the soul? Is man the only thinking being?

We do not know where the search for answers can lead us, but the objective is clear: to try to understand the interactions between the body and the mind as best as possible and then to broaden this analysis to our environment, near and far away.

From what angle should we begin this reflection at the crossroads of philosophy and science? With what degree of creativity?

In this quest, there are many temptations and pitfalls. How can we distinguish facts, their interpretations from preconceived ideas? Let us not be afraid to broaden the scope of our research, let us not limit ourselves to our education, to our perception of time and space.

Finally, let us be wary of theories, dogmas leading some ones to think that they alone hold the truth.

There are many subjects that can be studied, so we must arbitrarily limit ourselves. The choice of topics must be balanced, it will bring commonly accepted models closer to others, less intellectually comfortable, sometimes ignored.

For each topic, we will limit ourselves to the main data and theories and to a few authors, able to summarize their work in interviews or in books intended for the greatest number.

We will begin with a short study of the different thesis proposed by major religions and philosophical schools, in connection with the understanding of the human spirit.

We will then summarize the main contributions of astronomy and matter science to our understanding of the universe, from the infinitely large to infinitely small.

We will then move on to the life and behavioural sciences: biology, neuroscience, psychology and psychoanalysis, then observe the actions of other living beings.

Next we will study the altered states of consciousness such as dream, coma, near death experience raising such new exciting questions.

Finally, we will address less established, more controversial, but increasingly well-documented topics. That are astrology, intuition, synchronicity, telepathy and reincarnation.

We will conclude this exploration by grouping in our view the key elements by theme. We will be able then to get to the heart of the subject, the analysis and the interpretation of the data collected.

By connecting points sometimes distant, we will try to answer boldly to the questions raised.

This book is intended for any curious person, open to new ideas and without any a priori.

Good and surprising reading.

## **Chapter 1: Thinking ways**

«Nothing exists before taking shape in our thoughts»

William Shakespeare

To every Lord all honor, let us begin by defining the spirit, the seat of our thoughts, and then approach religions and philosophy.

### **1.1) Mind**

How to define the mind, term with multiple meanings sometimes even contradictory.

Larousse proposes several definitions: the intangible part of being, the seat of thought, ideas or the principle of the psychic life, the soul of the deceased and the immaterial being.

This word has many synonyms: intelligence, thought, consciousness, unconsciousness, understanding or breath, soul, genius, angel, demon.

In neurobiology, the mind is described as an intrinsic property of the brain, we talk more about consciousness.

In psychology, it designates mental processes and in philosophy, the faculty of thinking. In spiritist philosophy, this is the intelligent principle of the universe.

In metaphysics, it is the immaterial element embodied in man, the spirit symbolizing all the mental faculties: perception, affectivity, intuition, thought, concept.

In religions, it is the vital principle of the human being, surviving us and timeless.

For us the mind assimilates itself to the consciousness, unconsciousness and memory, it manifests itself mainly by the emotion, thought, reasoning, intuition and the dream.



## **1.2) Mythology**

As archeology shows, the prehistorical man asked himself existential questions. In the Middle Palaeolithic period (-300.000 to -40.000 years), both the Homo sapiens and Homo Neanderthal already bury some deceased in individual graves.

100.000 years ago, Homo sapiens laid down his dead in the position of sleep, surrounded by various useful or symbolic objects and watched them around a fire.

More recent archaeological remains, such as Sumerian tablets, Egyptian hieroglyphics or Indian anthems confirm this behaviour, bringing us more precise testimonies. Mythology was born, trying to explain the creation of man and his environment.

The subjects covered by the myths during different periods and in different civilizations largely coincide with the great questions to which religion, philosophy and science try to answer in turn.

The topics cover both the birth of the world, of humanity and the role played by the gods from the beginning to the end of the world, such as: the birth of Zeus and his fight against the Titans or the myths of the Sun or, the man made from clay by the goddess Mami and the descent into the underworld of Dionysus.

Today, these stories are perceived as beautiful stories, but some of us have kept this curiosity and wonder in front of the mysteries and beauties of the universe.

In a sense, we can say that myths announce the advent of modern religions.

## **1.3) Religion**

### Religiosity

Man is naturally attracted to the mysterious and invisible that he feels in the beauty of nature, the elements and himself.

Religiosity\* attempts to link attraction and respect for the hidden, the unknown with the visible, the observed.

(Words marked with \* are defined in the lexicon)

Religiosity has given birth over time, places and civilizations to the different religions we know today.

In Europe, it was in the 16th century that the term religion spread. It can be understood as a set of practices and beliefs, centered on the salvation of the soul and based on respect for a strict social order leaving relative autonomy to its followers.

### Common grounds in religion

Appearing in different places and in different ways, based on different practices and beliefs, all religions nevertheless have certain similarities. Indeed, each one:

- Explains the origins of the world by the crucial role played by one or more gods.
- Affirms the existence of an afterlife for our spirit, leaving our body at our death.
- Recommends a set of collective rites and rigorous individual practice.
- Establishes sacred places, essential reference points for believers.
- Develops a sense of belonging, the social cement of the religious community.
- Is based on respect for a hierarchical institution and strict observance of rules.

### Some figures

75% of human beings declare to be believers counting for 6 billion people. The Abrahamic religions have 4 billion followers: 2.3 billion for Christianity, 1.7 billion for Islam and 15 million for Judaism. As for the Dharmic religions, they total a little more than 1.5 billion faithful: 1 for Hinduism and 0.5 for Buddhism.

## Judaism

Judaism is the oldest of the monotheistic religions, it refers to Abraham, presented in Genesis as the ancestor of the Arab and Hebrew peoples.

In Abraham, God chooses his people of the faithful and makes a covenant with them. This chosen people receives the Law: the Torah and the Promised Land: Israel. In return, God is not only the almighty Creator but also a living God demanding absolute obedience.

Moses received the Torah of God on Mount Sinai in the 13th century B.C. The Decalogue is one of the most important passages of the Law, it is considered as the founding charter of Western civilization:

1. I am your God, 2. Do not make idols, 3. Do not swear in vain, 4. Remember the Sabbath\*, 5. Honour your parents, 6. Do not commit murder, 7. Do not commit adultery, 8. Do not steal, 9. Do not be a false witness, and 10. Do not covet the good of others.

In Judaism, the fulfillment of the commandments is given more importance than the reflections one can make on God, nature or man.

It is a guided study of the texts leading to orthopraxia\*: a conduct in conformity with rites rather than orthodoxy\*: a doctrine erected in truth.

## Christianity

First a Jewish sect, Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century. In the 11th century is split in two, giving birth to the Catholic religion among the Romans and the Orthodox religion among the Byzantines. In the 16th century a new split took place: The Reform leading to Protestantism.

The Catholic and the Orthodox Churches are ecclesiastical: clerical hierarchy, ministries, mediating role of the priest and monastic life. On the contrary, in the Protestant religion no priest intervenes between Jesus Christ the Saviour and every believer, his simpler organization being limited to ministries.

Christianity also refers to Abraham. It is based on the Bible, composed of the Old and New Testaments. The first text corresponds to the Jewish Bible and the second relates the life of Jesus Christ, incarnation of God on earth and founder of Christianity.

Everything we know about Jesus Christ comes from the testimony of four disciples, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. In Him they recognized the Messiah, the Son of God, and wrote their Gospels in the light of His resurrection. Among the most important texts of the Bible, the Gospels recount the words, gestures and teachings of Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith expresses the fundamental link between the human being and his Creator. It is because he comes from God that man recognizes Him as his Creator, Lawgiver and Saviour, but also as his origin and end.

Man will leave this life when his hour comes, exercising his relative freedom and responsibility during this time window in between his birth and death.

## Islam

Islam is the youngest of the Abrahamic religions, it is at the beginning of the 7th century that the angel Gabriel asks Muhammad to transmit the word of God to his brothers.

For political reasons, from the beginning Islam is divided into three currents: Sunnism, Shiism and Ibadism. The first is the largest with 1.5 billion believers followed by Shiism with 150 million adepts. They are distinguished both by their doctrine, their interpretation of the Koran but also by their conception of the authority.

The Koran is a unique book whose author is God who speaks through the mouth of his prophet. Before being written, the revelations of the Prophet are oral, the divine Word descends on Muhammad who then repeats it.

The Sunnah specifies and completes the Koran, it consolidates the words and teachings of the Prophet, gathering in the form of stories the authentic traditions.

The practice of Islam is based on faith, a moral code, ritual obligations and a juridical set that take up the duties of each according to his social status. Every Muslim has five obligations:

1. The profession of faith, 2. Ritual prayer, 3. Fasting of Ramadan, 4. Almsgiving and 5. The pilgrimage to Mecca.

To these fundamental duties is added that of the Jihad of Defense and spread of Islam. It can take different forms such as small Jihad, an inner struggle in which the believer avoids everything that can turn him away from his submission to God.

### Hinduism

Dharmic religions were born in India, the two main ones being Hinduism and Buddhism. They are based on the concept of

Dharma: the Cosmic Order and the principle of Reincarnation: the actions of previous lives determine future ones.

With no founder or clergy with millions of deities, Hinduism, dating from about the 20th century BC, is one of the oldest religions. It is a complex and diverse religion, respecting the castes of Indian society.

The main sacred texts are the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, containing hymns, incantations, philosophical elements and rites on which the faithful base their beliefs.

Considered polytheistic, Hinduism has however a supreme God: Brahma, present in every piece of reality and existence of the Universe. Brahma is impersonal and unknowable, it exists in three forms: Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu, the Protector and Shiva, the destroyer.

Since Brahma is all, we are all divine, the Atman (or oneself) merging with Him. All reality outside Brahma is considered pure illusion. The spiritual goal is to become one with Brahma, thus ceasing to exist in the illusory form of the individual self.

The cycle of life leads to the realization of the Truth: only Brahma exists and there is nothing outside him. The reincarnation of a person is determined by his karma, a principle of cause and effect governed by natural balance.

### Buddhism

Buddhism was born in India in the 5th century BC following the enlightenment of Siddharta Gautama: Buddha and his teaching for several decades. It is neither a religion nor a philosophy in the strict sense. It is sometimes described as the science of the mind or awakening.

The Buddhists speak of the Way of liberation from our human

condition, obtained by the true view and the right practice, accessible to every man who is ready to follow it.

The four noble truths summarize the essentials of Buddhist knowledge or the true view:

- The Dukkha: all life implies suffering and dissatisfaction.
- The Samudaya: the origin of suffering lies in ignorance and desire.
- The Nirodha: the end of suffering is possible.
- The Magga: the road to the middle path: the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path, true guide of life or the right practice:

- Understanding the Four Noble Truths.
- Refrain from selfish, malicious, hateful thinking.
- Do not unnecessarily lie, slander, insult, talk.
- Refrain from killing, stealing, committing adultery.
- Avoid any activity harmful to the humanity or the environment.
- Prevent any ill will from appearing.
- Pay attention to the 5 attachment aggregates: material, felt, relational, mental and conscious.
- Strive for supreme detachment.

Buddhism differs from other religions in many ways:

- It does not believe into a creative, organizing power of the Universe,

- Everything is part everything else,
- Everything is therefore interdependent, encompassing both the living and the mineral.
- Buddha did not present himself as a God but as a mere mortal,
- Teaching the path to enlightenment based on one's own reflections and experience,
- While advising his disciples to test his teaching rather than to regard it as an unchanging truth.
- Buddhism initially has no form of clerical organization.

Buddhism shares with Hinduism the idea of reincarnation: succession of lives allowing us to rise gradually to reach the ultimate stage: Nirvana.

Buddhism is more like a philosophy in search of knowledge and understanding, advocating detachment and altruism, than a religious obedience based on faith.

#### **1.4) Philosophy**

Philosophy is a way of seeking wisdom, based on reflection and theoretical research. It is inseparable from the quest for truth and the awareness of our ignorance, the philosopher is interested in all areas of knowledge.

The subjects studied are numerous and many philosophers have influenced our vision of the world. Such, for example, Plato and Aristotle since antiquity, Schopenhauer and Sartre for contemporary philosophy, passing by Spinoza and Descartes among the moderns.

The theories and concepts developed during these centuries cover a broad spectrum of subjects. We will limit ourselves to a



few, studied in pairs and in direct relation to the study of the human mind.

### Me / Other

The definition of “me” varies depending on the analysis angle.

- Ontological: A principle that makes the person’s own unity, beyond the diversity of his thoughts, feelings and actions.

- Psychological: Awareness of the person individuality, either by himself, the self being the subject of his thought, or by another who takes him as his thinking object.

- Psychoanalytic: Part of the conscious and preconscious personality, distinct from the Id and the Superego.

- Philosophical: The synthetic principle of our intellectual functions or, conversely, reality of our actions, states and thoughts.

According to Plato, this conscious dimension of the self leads to introspection: «Know yourself». Rousseau for his part invites us to become authentic again, sincere by the «Return to introspection». As for Nietzsche, he reminds us that being oneself is not given but a goal to achieve.

Other means what is not me, that is to say another conscious being, another me. Philosophy studies the mode of relations to others between two distinct beings, both similar and different.

For Sartre, others can be considered both a source of conflict, a loss of freedom «Hell is others» or on the contrary, as a way to the knowledge and the constitution of the self: «Others are the indispensable mediator between me and myself».

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