

Spontaneous
Thought
in Science,
Philosophy
and
Contemplative
Traditions

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Mind Wandering in Comparative Perspective

Spontaneous thought

- Thoughts, feelings and images that pass through the mind of their own accord during waking time
- Takes up 47% of our waking time
- Often co-occurs and interacts with deliberate, task-oriented thought
- Closely related to dreams



Natural phenomenon

- Beyond our control
- Can give it free rein or suppress, restrain, modify or transform it
- Influence on productivity, health, well-being, and sense of meaning and identity



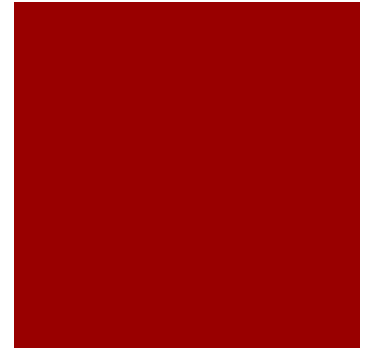
Sources of knowledge



- Modern neuroscience, cognitive psychology, philosophy of mind
 - What happens in the brain during spontaneous thought?
 - Is spontaneous thought good or bad for us?
 - What are the limits of the self?
- Contemplative traditions of self-cultivation
 - How should we relate to spontaneous thought?

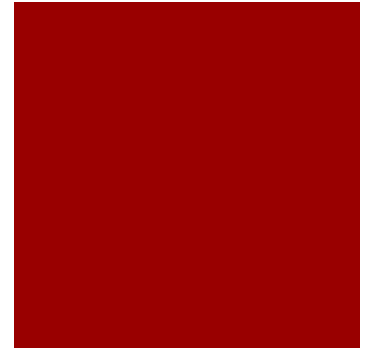
Modernity meets tradition

- History and the humanities will be used to challenge and complement prevailing ideas on spontaneous thought



Case studies

1. Cognitive science and philosophy of mind
2. Early Christian asceticism
3. Classical Yoga philosophy
4. Ancient Chinese thought
5. Late Chinese Pure Land Buddhism
6. Early science-inspired spiritual movements



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**Modern
ideas**



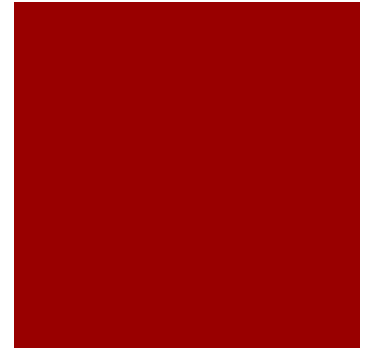
**Foundations
of great
civilizations**



**Eve of
the
modern
break-
through**

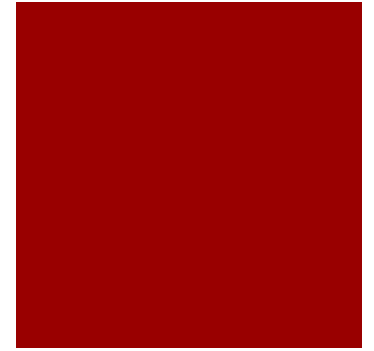
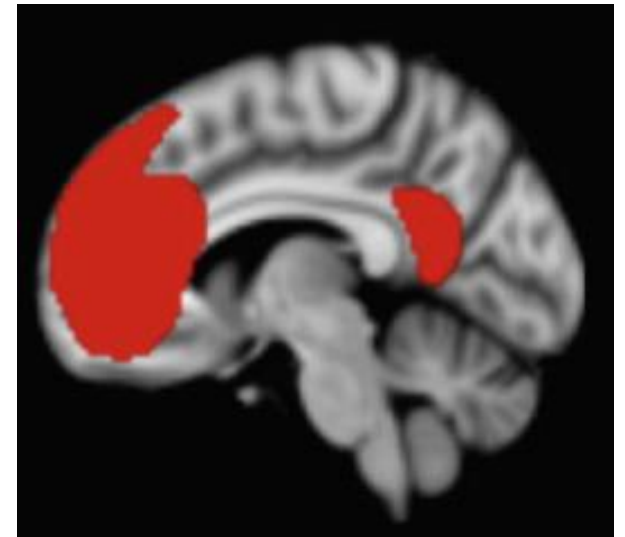
Spontaneous thought

- Non-deliberate
- Relatively free from deliberate constraints that bias the direction and flow of thought



Default mode network

- Activated when the mind wanders away from on-going tasks
- Linked to spontaneous thought



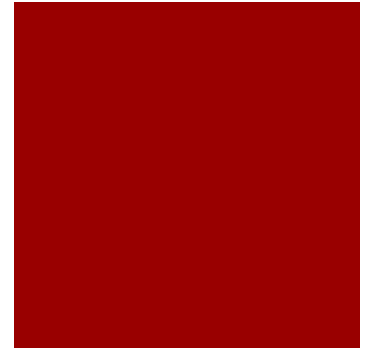
Limitations of neuroscience



- Neuroimaging techniques
 - Objective information on *brain* activity
 - No direct information on *mental* activity
- Self-reports
 - Shaped by age, gender and personal expectations
 - Shaped by the discourses of late modernity

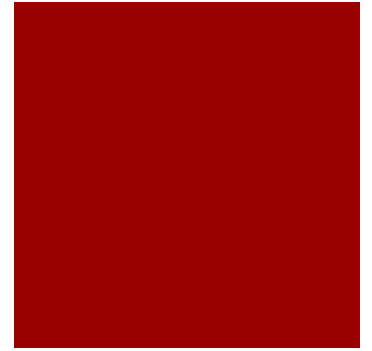
Alternative viewpoints

- Prescriptive language, religious doctrine, philosophical speculation
- Detailed discussions of spontaneous thoughts
- Mind-sets that have not been shaped by modernity



Contemplative traditions

- Spontaneous thought challenge their practices
- Their practices are believed to have a positive impact on spontaneous thought



The literature

- No studies comparing different cultures
- No studies comparing different periods



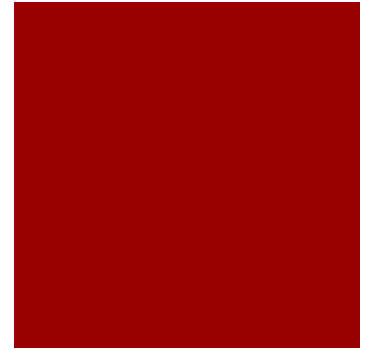
From tradition to modernity



- Break
 - Secularisation
 - Globalisation
- Continuity
 - Ambivalence towards spontaneous thought
 - Does spontaneous thought belong within the self?
 - Contemplative practice → modern meditation

Methodology

- Parallel close reading of texts
- Analysis of concepts and discourses
- Includes contemporary science and philosophy
 - text-based methodology
 - focus on meditation and mental exercises



Methodology



- Conceptual schemes within each case
 - Vocabulary
- Discourse strategies within each case
 - Texts and contexts
- Comparing conceptual schemes and discourse strategies across all the cases
 - Common features
 - Contrasting features
 - Cultural, historical, and psycho-biological explanations

Modern vocabulary



- Spontaneous thought
- Stimulus-independent thought
- Task-unrelated thought
- Self-referential thought
- Autobiographical thought
- Daydreaming
- Fantasy
- Mind wandering

no external stimulus

**speaker-oriented
content**

use of imagination

digressive nature

Modern discourses

- Neuroscience and cognitive psychology
 - costs and benefits of spontaneous thought
- Philosophy of mind
 - selfhood and agency



Traditional vocabulary



- Greek *logismoí* ‘thoughts’
 - includes both deliberate and spontaneous thought
- Sanskrit *citta vritti* ‘fluctuations of the mind’
 - all mental activity except the experience of the Self
- Chinese *qíng* 情 ‘emotions’
 - not including non-emotional thought
- Chinese *wú-wéi* 無為 ‘non-action’
 - deliberately following or merging with a natural flow
- Chinese *niàn* 念 ‘thought-instant’
 - building on a Buddhist analysis of moment-to-moment change

Similarities and contrasts

- All cases discuss issues relating to the self
- The notions of self differ from case to case



Challenging modernity

- Limited focus on costs and benefits
- Too strict distinction between spontaneous and deliberate thought
- Lacking sensitivity to altered states of mind
- Euro-centric perspective



Practical impact

- Performance pressure, emotional stress, concentration problems
 - Part of the problem: distraction, rumination
 - Part of the solution: rest and creativity
- Empathy and self-insight
 - Mental processing
 - Free association



Ecology of mind



- Spontaneous thought \leftrightarrow deliberate thought
- Spontaneous thought \leftrightarrow dreams of the night
- Spontaneous thought \leftrightarrow natural, cultural, social environment

Brain and self



- Mind wandering in neuroscience, cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind
 - 100 most frequently cited scientific and philosophical articles
 - Cognitive science focuses on costs and benefits, while philosophy focuses on selfhood and agency
 - Modern research is influenced by contemplative traditions

- *Jessica Andrews-Hanna, Svend Davanger, Sebastian Watzl*

Eight kinds of thought



- *Logismoí* in the Desert Fathers
 - Evagrius Ponticus (4th century)
 - Thoughts disturb prayer and contemplation
 - Stemming from demons (or angels or humans)
 - Linked to brain areas
 - Eight types of thought → Seven Deadly Sins
 - Emptying the self vs. mind in constant movement

- *Augustine Casiday*

Fluctuations of the mind



- *Citta vritti* in the Yoga literature
 - Yoga Sutra and Yoga Bhasya (4th or 5th century)
 - Influence of modes of attention on spontaneous and deliberate thought
 - *Citta vritti* ‘fluctuations of the mind’
 - *Bhavanga* ‘the mind in its rest state’

- *Jonardon Ganeri*

Emotions and spontaneity



- *Qíng* 情 and *wú-wéi* 無為 in ancient Chinese thought
 - *Qíng* 情 'emotions'
 - resource vs. obstacle
 - training, refining, embracing vs. bypassing or getting rid of vs. harmonising them
 - *Wú-wéi* 無為 'non-action'
 - ideal about following or even merging with the flow
 - aligning the self with the Way 道
- *Erica Brindley*

Absorption and the wandering mind



- *Niàn* 念 in Pure Land Buddhism
 - Eliminating all distractions
 - Recitation aiming at complete absorption
 - Devotion to Amitabha Buddha
 - Accepting spontaneous thought
 - Word play: *niàn* 念 ‘mindful absorption; spontaneous thought; recitation’
- *Jennifer Eichman*

Esoteric science

- Spontaneity and spirituality at the turn of the twentieth century
 - Spiritual movements mixing contemplative traditions with modern psychology, medicine or esoteric science
 - Theosophical Society → America, Europe, Asia
 - Quiet sitting 靜坐 and body practices → East Asia



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