WALTER TERENCE STACE
THE STACE ROAD, MYSTICISM AND EMERGENCE
&
SOME PERSONAL REMEMBERENCES

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* Stace was born in London, England on the 17th of November, 1866 and died on 2nd August, 1967, in Laguna Beach, California, USA. This minor essay is written as a remembrance of an unusually great scholar, whose 50th death anniversary falls early next month – but it is a result of a personal, ‘bitter-sweet’, journey to my once salubrious Island of Birth, Ceylon – now, Sri Lanka - during the last two weeks of last month.

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Remembrances – & a Return to Paradise

“Along this palm-fringed and mostly low and sandy shore the waves break—with not much change of level in their tides—loudly roaring in the S.W. monsoon, or with sullen swell when the wind is in the N.E., but seldom altogether calm. A grateful breeze tempers the 90° of the thermometer.”

Edward Carpenter: From Adam’s Peak to Elephanta – Sketches in Ceylon and India, p.24
(London, 1892)

After more than two decades, I recently made a pleasurable journey, back to Colombo, my Island in the Sun, where I was born almost the proverbial ‘3 score-years-and-ten’ ago, when it was still Ceylon (then), Sri Lanka (now), which I had left as a young school boy more than half-a-century ago. Much water, under the many bridges of the various countries in which I have lived, and learned, has been flowing – but the shores in which the mighty Indian Ocean lashes its golden sands, in Colombo, has always been, at least in my mind, home for me.

The city I went back to has changed beyond (my feeble powers of) recognition; I grew up, in the late ‘40s, through the ‘50s and part of the ‘60s, in a laidback Colombo, dotted with fruit and blossoming flower trees and its shores elegantly peppered with swaying, crooked, palm trees, with an occasional coal-belching train, moving along ‘ancient’ railway tracks laid out as the coast line, between the South and the capital.

To be sure, some of the ‘old’ landmarks have survived intact, and standing as oases, in the midst of the cataclysmic changes and confusing traffic that seem to have engulfed the city; the ochre-coloured Cargills building in Fort, the Prime Ministerial Residence (Temple Trees), a watered-down, pathetic, version of the ‘old’, charming, Green Cabin, the majestically resplendent Galle Face Hotel, a not-so green esplanade, known in my childhood as Galle Face Green, a deserted former Parliament building, an equally empty, majestically colonial Eye Hospital structure, in Maradana, the nostalgic – at least for me – Royal College buildings, a proud old boy of which I am (as well as of the adjoining Royal Primary School), the former, unmistakable in their outward red-brick appearances and further ‘down’, in Wellawatte, the Ramakrishna Mission, where the letter Swami Vivekananda wrote, in 1904, to my Maternal Great-grand father, Mr. Tampoe Sockanathan, still hangs, framed, in the entrance corridors of the premises.

I still remember, as vividly as my aged memory cells permit, the visit to the former Parliament, together with my Father, to see the lying-in-state of (the late) Prime Minister, D.
S. Senanayake (in 1952). I had *seen him*, in our house in Chavakachcheri, of which electoral constituency my Father had been a Member of Parliament (the youngest MP, in that and the 2nd parliament), when he laid the foundation stone for the *Kaithady Old People’s Home*\(^1\) (see Fig. 1) and his visit to the *Iranai Madu Tank*.

D.S. Senanayake had died of injuries sustained in a fall from a horse due to a stroke he allegedly suffered during the ride in Galle Face Green, after his routine exercise, one morning, in March, 1952.

I ‘toured’ the ‘old’ capital, sometimes on foot (despite the traffic) and, at other times, by car, which held unforgettable memories – some sweet, others bitter – in its new and evolving incarnations. I suppose it was a bitter-sweet experience, as even the house where I was born – # 17, Madangahawatte Lane, off Arethusa Lane, in Wellawatte (not the one where I ‘grew-up in, at # 60 Nandana Gardens, which still stands, forlornly, perhaps as a reminder of ‘times-gone-by, untouched by the changes all around it) - was no more, having been replaced by an

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\(^1\) I am greatly indebted to my friend (and former student), Dr. N. Dharmaraj, who accompanied me during my Journeys in the Northern, Northwestern and (parts of) the Central Provinces, and for providing me with the photographs that have become figures 1, 2 & 3, in this document. *Sir John Kotelawala*, the third Prime Minister of Independent Ceylon, opened the completed building, in 1954 – which is also remembered by a plaque, on the ‘other’ side of the entrance door where Fig. 1 can be found.
ultra-modern apartment. I was reminded of some the lines in Shelly’s majestically poignant OZYMANDIAS, especially when I saw how these streets had been transformed in the name of modernism.

Fig. 2: The Chavakachcheri Railway Station
(Photographed from the Colombo/Kankesanthurai train)

Then, there were the journeys away from Colombo, to the ‘outstations’ (what is the generic term for them, now?), to the Northwestern, Northern, Southern, Western and the borders of the Central Provinces – to the elegant Ambepussa Resthouse (called something else, now - where my Father and I used to have a wonderful Ceylonese breakfast, on our way to his coconut ‘estate’ & paddy fields), via a stop at Sathiawady Motors (no more) in Kurunegala, to Pinnawela for the Elephant feeding & bathing shows, to the old Kadugannawa Pass, to Kegalle, to the cadju-sellers of Pasyala, to the Buddhist sites of Anuradhapura, to my old childhood haunts in the North.

Keerimalai, the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, B.A. Thamby Lane (named after another of my Maternal Great-grand fathers, who had been the first resident of Jaffna to obtain a BA from Madras University), the Kaithady Old People’s Home, the Thirukedheeswaram temple and Paalaru, Poonahari, the Murugandy tank and many places of childhood reminiscences in the town of Chavakachcheri (Fig. 2) – the Hindu Ladies College, the Chavakachcheri Hindu College – of which my Father had been the founder & Vice Principal, respectively, the ‘Chandai’, what remains of the ‘old’ Drieberg’s College, which I had attended for 3 months,
in 1958, and, of course, the site – devoid of any buildings, except the well (see Fig. 3) - where ‘our’ house, called *Saraswathy Gardens*, once was, to Puttalam and Chilaw (and the Muneeswaram temple) and Negombo.

The Islands, adjoining the Jaffna peninsula, particularly, *Naina Teevu* with its imposing *Naguleswaram Temple*, was part of this journey of remembrance.

The trip to Galle, in the Southern Province, where I also enjoyed the site, and sight, of the Test Cricket grounds, on the newly constructed Motorway, was most comfortable (unlike the sea journey, in an ostensibly ‘dilapidated’ and heavily ‘over-crowded’ boat, across to Naina Teevu!).

If ever there will be ‘another time’, I shall visit the Central & Eastern Provinces – particularly the Dalada Maligawa, the Botanical Gardens, Nuwara Eliya, Paasi Kudah, the Koneswaran Temple and Kataragama, too. But I doubt there will be a ‘next time’!

Even although I had gone to ‘old’ Ceylon for personal reasons, I did not forget that there was one important ‘mission’ that I had to undertake, for intellectual reasons, if not also for nostalgic ones. This was to visit *Colombo 14*, that which I knew as *Grandpass*, to ‘check’ whether *Stace Road*, as I had known it, existed as it was named, or to know if it had also
disappeared with the name-changes that had transmogrified other ‘landmarks’ in the Colombo in which I grew up.

Stace, the *Stace Road, Emergence & Objective Mysticism*

“There is the difficulty that mystics usually say that their experiences are ineffable, incommunicable, and indescribable; after which they quite commonly proceed to describe them. What are we to make of this? …… [We] shall not be in a position to discuss it until we come to deal, at a later stage of our enquiry, with the general relation between mysticism, language and logic.”


As one can realise, from a perusal of Figures 5 & 6, I was relieved to find that it had survived the justifiable, even if – for me, personally – regrettable changes that had taken place, in more modern times, a sentiment, I am sure, the civilised and scholarly Stace would have shared with me.

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2 *Stace* was also mentioned in the *LIFE* editorial of 23rd February, 1948 (p. 34), which was on ‘civilization’, which he referred to as ‘organizzed goodness’. He was bracketed with Toynbee, Twain and Emerson – making up a quartet of significant intellectual power! The photograph, above, was taken after his retirement from his *Stuart Professorship of Philosophy*, at Princeton University (in 1955); so he was at least 69 years old, at the time.

Why had I considered this ‘an important mission to undertake’? The answer to this (rhetorical) question is the subject-matter of this section of the note.

**Fig. 5:** The Refurbished *Stace Road* Sign

**Fig. 6:** *Stace Road, Colombo 14 (Grandpass)*
Professor Thomas Nagel of New York University was awarded the prestigious 2008 Balzan Prize for Moral Philosophy. In mid-2009, the Managing Editor of Economia Politica (EP), who was also a member of the selection board for the Balzan Prize asked me whether I could write an appreciative piece on Nagel for the issue of the Journal which was dedicated to the awardee and his scientific work.

Almost coincidentally, John Rawls’ undergraduate Senior’s dissertation, An Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin & Faith (Harvard University Press, 2009), edited by Thomas Nagel,
including a comprehensive, background, *Introduction* by Cohen & Nagel, was published around the time the Managing Editor of *EP* wrote me with the request. Imagine my surprise to find, explicitly stated, in this *Introduction* by Cohen & Nagel, (pp.2-3), that *Stace* had been Rawls’ undergraduate thesis examiner – giving him 98/100 for the work – and his Princeton PhD dissertation adviser!

I had known of Stace’s work, and referred to it – copiously - for at least a decade-and-a-half, in the context of my own research on the interlinking connections between varieties of notions of complexity, attractors of dynamical systems and their possible role in elucidating concepts of emergence. Stace’s powerful critique of the claims of British Emergentists – particularly of Lloyd Morgan, C. D. Broad, Sydney Alexander, etc. – and of reductionists, in general, and those who thought that a theory of emergence was, indissolubly, linked to concepts of novelty (and that any such concept, in a theory, made it a desirable framework), was made through his important 1939 paper in *The Philosophical Review, Novelty, Indeterminism and Emergence.*

‘Emergence’ is, now, a ‘buzz-word’, but many of those who adhere to this concept, in the context of theories of complexity, seem not to have any historical knowledge of the ‘emergence’ (sic!) of these theories at the hands of John Sturart Mill and G.H. Lewes, nor adequate technical knowledge of varieties of complexity theories – ranging from computational complexity to dynamic complexity and Diophantine & (Algorithmic) Information – or Kolmogorov complexity – theories. Stace, on the other hand, was fully informed of the works of John Stuart Mill, G. H. Lewes, Clerk Maxwell, Max Planck, P. A. M. Dirac, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr and many others, of the period between Mill’s *System of Logic* and the beginning of WW II.

The Cohen-Nagel work led me to investigate a ‘little more’, on the life & times of W. T. Stace.

I was, to say the least, most surprised at what I learned and immediately wrote to a very good and trusted, ‘old’, friend of mine, ‘Rajan’ Siva Supramaniam, requesting a verification of the continued existence of *Stace Road* in Grandpass and, if possible, to send me a few photographs of the road sign. He responded immediately, with three photographs: one, of a
dilapidated, almost ‘falling’, sign of Stace Road, but with a particular background and two of establishments on the road, with signs of their address⁴.

But the sign I saw erected at the site of the road, during my recent visit, was ‘new’ (see Fig. 4)! I inferred, therefore, that it was being ‘looked after’ and, somehow, someone, knew about the significance of W.T. Stace’s role in colonial Ceylon – but, perhaps, it was inertia, after all!

![Mysticism and Philosophy](image)

**Fig. 9: Cover of Mysticism and Philosophy**

The basic personal and professional facts of Stace’s life are widely available in the public domain; so, I shall not reproduce or repeat them, here. There are, however, a few interesting personalities and events, in relation to colonial – pre-Independent, i.e., pre-1948 – Ceylon that may be useful to mention.

First of all, Stace’s second wife, whom he married in 1925 (or 1926)⁵, Blanche Bianca Beven, was from a distinguished Burgher family of Negombo.

Secondly, Stace’s long career in the British (Colonial) Civil Service, of 22 years, from 1910 to 1932, culminated with him serving as the Mayor of Colombo, in 1931/32. He was offered

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⁴ For obvious reasons of ‘privacy’, I am not able to reproduce any of them in this document.

⁵ The exact date of his second marriage can, of course, be checked by means of publicly available records, to which I have, unfortunately, no access, just now. The ambiguity above is due to the fact that the two years are recorded in the *Wikipedia* (1925) and the *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century British Philosophers* (1926), entries for Stace.
the option of retiring in the later of these years which he accepted and, then, moved to Princeton, first as a Lecturer in the University’s Philosophy Department later, as the Stuart Professor of Philosophy and, after retirement in 1955, as an Emeritus Professor.

Thirdly, Stace had sensed the ‘winds of change’ sweeping the Island, already in 1927, when the Donoughmore Commission, under Lord Donoughmore, was formed. The members of the Commission interviewed and deliberated for four months in 1927/28 and the Island was, effectively, run on the basis of its (flawed, but well-intentioned) recommendations, with a ‘mixed’ State Council, from 1931 to 1947, the eve of independence from British colonial rule on 4th February, 1948 (although the parliamentary elections had taken place in the later months of 1947, but after Indian and Pakistani independence, in August, 1947).

Fourthly, sensing that times were to change, in British colonial policy, Stace prepared himself well by obtaining an ‘Honorary’ D.Litt at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1929, for which he submitted as a Thesis, The Theory of Knowledge and Existence, which was published by Oxford University Press in 1932.

In a sense, then, from the time of his second marriage to Blanche Bianca Beven – whether it be 1925 or 1926 – to his/their departure from Colombo, to Princeton, Stace seemed to have prepared himself for a post-civil service academic career. He was eminently successful in this endeavour – particularly because Stace spent this time, and some years before, in studying the Buddhist and Hindu scriptures and classics, and did seem to have a mastery of these two great religions. I myself am of the opinion that this aspect, although evident in all his post-WW II work, is most clearly evident in his 1952 booklet on The Gate of Silence. I have, personally, found it an excellent preparatory reading for a subsequent understanding of Arnold’s The Light of Asia.

He was also extremely well read and familiar with the more popular, but enlightened, literature on the history, topography, culture and civilization of Ceylon6.

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6 I found it surprising, therefore, that his reference to Carpenter’s wonderful book, From Adam’s Peak to Elephanta (1892) is ‘second-hand’ (cf., Mysticism and Philosophy, p. 27, f. n. 12).
Finally, to some speculations – in a Stacian vein – on his stimulating discussions and codification of the notion of a mystic, his mystical experiences and mysticism, in general. I consider his contribution to an understanding of mysticism, which he developed with uncanny prescience, to be based on content of the three books of 1952 and the two of 1960 (1961).

The classic Mysticism and Philosophy has both dates – one as ‘Copyright © 1960 by W. T. Stace’ and the other as Macmillan & Co Ltd, London, 1961’. I am in the privileged position of owning a first publication – I do not know whether there was a second edition of this classic – copy of this important book. Figure 8 is the cover of the theoretical work of 1952; Figure 7, on the other hand, is a popularised version of the sustained theory that one can find in Mysticism and Philosophy (see Fig. 9). Incidentally, Stace’s writings predate the era of justifiable gender neutrality.

Stace’s foil, in his sustained efforts to ‘legitimise’ mystical experiences and, thus, mysticism, is no less an intellectual giant than Bertrand Russell – particularly the book of essays by the Lord on Mysticism and Logic. In my opinion Russell’s views on Mysticism and Logic were jaundiced; witness his dismissal of the notions of the infinite, the infinitesimal and the non-Archimidean ordering principle in any kind of metamathematics – and this long before the algorithmic results of Gödel and Turing made the axiomatic methodology of his monumental joint work with Whitehead, Principia Mathematica, obsolete.

Stace begins his synthesis – for that is what it is – of the psychological underpinnings (I could even say, ‘cognitive psychological’) basis – of mysticism, independent of subjectivity, but not necessarily, for that reason, objective (in the sense of being determined by external factors), of mysticism by two postulates (if I was not sympathetic to Stace’s stances, I might even refer to them as the axioms of his philosophy of mysticism – but I am, fundamentally,

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7 It is not without significance that Dirk Van Dalen titled his acclaimed, and almost exhaustive, two volumes on Luitzen Brouwer – the founding father of ‘modern’ intuitionistic constructive mathematics - as, Mystic, Geometer and Intuitionist: The Life of L. E. J. Brouwer.  
8 I shall concentrate on Stace’s frameworks in his last strictly theoretical book, Mysticism and Philosophy. However, it must be remembered that his theoretical philosophy of mysticism is as constructively empirical and experimental as the latter-day Kwame Anthony Appiah’s attempts to argue that Ethics should an experimental science (see his Experiments in Ethics, 2008; incidentally, it is worth mentioning that Appiah is a notable successor of Stace, in the modern philosophy department at Princeton University)
on his side, even if it is with some reservations): the first postulate is exemplified by the story of *Mohammed’s Donkey* (see Fig. 7); the second is the *Naturalistic Principle*.

But these postulates are supposed to be activated in solving the problem of Mysticism and Philosophy, p. 14; italics in the original):

“What *truths*, if any, about the universe does mysticism yield which the mind could not obtain from science and the logical intellect.”

I want to add two qualifying *caveats*, here.

Firstly, I equate ‘science’ with applied mathematics (in the old-fashioned sense) and physics; secondly, I assume there is, similarly, an equivalence between ‘the logical intellect’ and ‘classical mathematics’ (of Russell’s *Logicism* or Hilbert’s *Formalism* or Bourbaki’s variant of arid, *non-recursive formalism*)\(^9\).

The first caveat means I interpret (sic!) Stace’s mystical experience in the sense in which Dirac used his concept of *beauty* to justify (at least some) of the mathematical formalisms he adopted to, in physics, in general, and in quantum mechanics, in particular. As for the equivalence with applied mathematics, I do so in the sense in which Eugene Wigner\(^10\) argued, in his *Richard Courant Lecture*, at New York University, *The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences* (1959).

The second caveat enables me to interpret Stace’s *mysticism* in terms of Brouwer’s *intuitive mathematics of constructive methods*, which gave pride of place to the role of the *mind* in devising concepts for finite man\(^11\).

It is this second caveat that enables me, also, to work within *Herbert Simon*’s kind of *Classical – or Cognitive – Behavioural Sciences* and, hence, allows me to make eminent sense of the kind of rational behaviour underpinning *mysticism* and *mystical experience*.

\(^9\) I could easily add the noble figure of G. H. Hardy and his notion of *rigour in proof*, here – although I am of the opinion that this is similar to Dirac’s way of using *beauty* to justify his mathematical formalisms.

\(^10\) Whose brother-in-law Dirac was, and with whose wife - i.e., also Wigner’s sister - I was personally acquainted with, and whose company I enjoyed very much.

\(^11\) Cf., again, footnote 7, above.
Finally, I would like to mention that the *epistemology* of Brouwer’s kind of intuitive constructive mathematics *and* Simon’s classical/cognitive behavioural sciences enables me to make sense of Stace’s *mystical experiences*.$^{12}$

The first postulate above, is well-known precept of all the religions Stace gave an outline exposition of, in his 1960 popular work on *The Teachings of the Mystics* (see Fig. 4; see also the Zen Buddhistic statement of this postulate, shown in Fig. 7, below) – in particular, book knowledge, to be useful, must be combined with a sympathetic understanding of the topic under discussion and should be coupled, if possible, with an experience that, in real time, is actual.

![A donkey carrying a pile of holy books is still a donkey.](image)

*Fig. 9*

Before I comment on the second postulate, I must remind the ‘interested reader’, that ‘elusive character’, that the *standard model of physics* still is unable to incorporate *gravitation* and that Newton, at least in the 3rd edition of the *Principia*, exclaimed, after enunciating his laws of motion, *Hypothesis Non Fingo*!

His second postulate is akin to the way Herbert Simon constrained, *externally*, his fertile notions of *bounded rationality* and *satisficing* and mathematical constructivists – like Brouwer and Bishop - refused to *internalise* a definition of *algorithms*.

To this extent – at least – W.T. Stace was exploring an *experimental approach* – in the later sense of Anthony Appiah - to *Mystical Experiences* and *Mysticism*, based on a notion of

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$^{12}$ This is the way I have interpreted the *Hinayana* *eight-fold path* to *Nirvana* and the way to becoming a *Bodhisattva*, in *Mahayana* Buddhist practice.
rationality similar to that of Herbert Simon and a path towards a realization of that which may lead to enlightenment – say Nirvana or attaining the status of a Bodhisattva – in the algorithmic (primitively undefinable, but experientially recognisable) sense of a Brouwerian, or Bishopian, constructive mathematics.

Two penultimate observations should be made, at this point.

First, I believe Stace, in his impressive attempts to make Mysticism and Mystical Experience experimental sciences, would have endorsed Errett Bishop’s credo (enunciated on p. 2 of his 1967 book, Foundations of Constructive Analysis; italics added):

“Mathematics belongs to man, not to God. We are not interested in properties of the positive integers that have no descriptive meaning for finite man. When a man proves a positive integer to exist, he should show how to find it. If God has mathematics of his own that needs to be done, let him do it himself.”

Stace’s philosophy of mysticism and the epistemology of mystical experience was, similarly, that which was for finite man – not God’s, or for God. Stace’s man, who had mystical experiences, was finite. Hence, for Stace, the mystical experiences were finitely describable (although the case for ‘potential infinity’ is not to be neglected).

Second, I laud the Sri Lankans, and ‘their’ government, for persevering with the Stace Road – perhaps for the wrong reason, or, more likely, for no reason at all. Still, Walter Terence Stace is as worthy of remembrance as Leonard Woolf, if not more so, at least in the sense of contemporary relevance. After all, he spent a considerably more number of years in colonial Ceylon and learned to appreciate and respect its rich culture, the fascinating – even if, some of the time, sad - history that seemed a natural endowment of the Island, and, above all, its religious civilisation.

Finally, I end with pertinent quotes, by two mathematicians, which substantiate, unintentionally, Stacian methodology of mysticism and mystical experiences:

- “[T]he laws of nature, Dirac says, control a substratum of which we cannot form a mental picture without irrelevancies. … Mental pictures, the little models we construct in our minds, are oversimplified and padded with irrelevancies.”
Alan Turing’s practice exemplified this Young-Dirac-Stace philosophy and epistemology; only the Bourbakists, the Russell of *Principia Mathematica* and the von Neumann of *quantum mechanics* and Hilbertian formalism were exceptions to this ‘rule’.

“To the philosopher or to the anthropologist, but *not* to the [classical] mathematician, belongs the task of investigating why certain systems of symbolic logic rather than others may be effectively projected upon nature. Not to the [classical] mathematician, but to the *psychologist*, belongs the task of explaining why we *believe* in certain systems of symbolic logic and not in others, in particular why we are averse to the so-called *contradictory systems* in which the negative as well as the positive of certain propositions *are valid*.”


This is, after all, the message on *Buddhist Logic*, hence of Stace’s *methodology of mysticism* and *mystical experience*, at least as I read it, in one of the five great epics of the Tamil language, *MANIMEKALAI*!