

# The Acropolis

Philosophy for today



December 2021  
Issue 8

Anthology Edition

Philosophy, Psychology, History, Science, Art and more!



Illustration by Lady Bruniere



16 week course

# Philosophy for Living

Inspired by Philosophies of East & West



## What is The Acropolis?

In ancient Athens the Acropolis, literally meaning the High City, was the place which supported the highest ideals of the people. The founder of New Acropolis International, Professor George Livraga, chose this name to capture the key objective of philosophy; that we as individuals build a new high city within, that we discover the heights of our own potential, so that we may externally build a new high city, a new and better world, together. The Acropolis magazine is motivated by this objective and aims to share inspiring content, combining all the major endeavours of philosophy, art, science, education and culture.

## About Us

New Acropolis is an international organisation working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society.

For further details please visit: [www.acropolis.ie](http://www.acropolis.ie)







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## Editorial: Eclecticism as an Expression of the Best in Us

They say necessity is the mother of all invention and The Acropolis magazine was born out of a certain moment of necessity. When the Covid-19 pandemic first struck and activities could no longer continue onsite in our schools the necessity emerged to find ways in which we could continue to work with our members in useful and educational voluntary projects. With limited means of reaching out to a world in lockdown it also became necessary to find new avenues of sharing the philosophical ideas of our school in these new circumstances.

The necessity presented an opportunity: to revive our magazine which had existed in a previous form years before. But now, in a modern way, for a largely digital audience. The objective of the magazine itself has not changed, it is still representative of an eclectic vision of life; marrying all walks of society, disciplines of science, great philosophical teachings and memorable moments of history, as well as reflections on cultural offerings that share useful and inspiring ideas.

For 7 issues, in seasonal editions, The Acropolis magazine has sought to capture this eclectic approach, indicative of the tradition of a school of philosophy in the classical sense. Each issue has presented articles researched and written by our members in Ireland as well as by members of New Acropolis in other countries around the world. Following various themes we have captured the zeitgeist of a world caught in the tumult of global crisis and we have drunk from the well of ancient wisdom, relayed to us by the great thinkers of human endeavour.

Our sincere hope has been to communicate something of meaning, to offer articles that promote reflection, awaken new perspectives and help us to see the timeless elements of the human being and of nature. The aim of philosophy is ultimately to bring about hope, hope for the future based on a knowledge that empowers us to improve ourselves and the world around us. Philosophers never simply criticise the times in which they live, they hold a mirror to the world so that we can see things as they truly are, liberate ourselves from the prison of our own subjectivity and serenely, yet actively, work towards a future which is better for everyone.

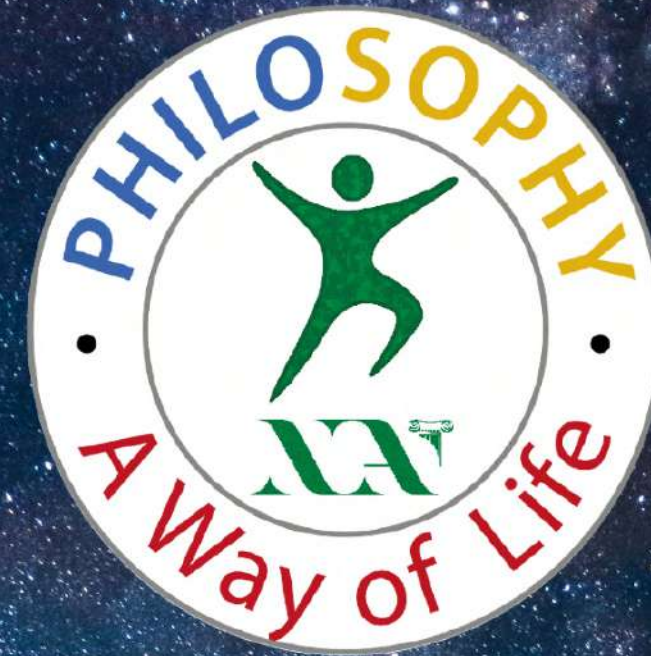
As such, transmitting eclecticism has been our key focus. How inspiring it is to observe the vast tapestry of life's own genius. Wisdom is a force that unites us, always. So it is logical that we rally ourselves around the best in all fields of human inquiry, not just the area we like or in which we excel. Whether it is science, art, psychology, politics or any other facet of culture, we seek to connect with the best, that which draws us closer to the archetype of the Good as Plato wrote about, over two and a half thousand years ago. It is the Good that elevates us to what is most noble and best in us, enabling the human being to overcome their petty self-centredness and egoistic tendencies towards division.

This has always been the role of schools of philosophy, hence New Acropolis following this tradition of classical antiquity, not out of a naïve romanticism but out of a practical necessity to offer another way of living, one which provides a viable yet non-materialistic alternative to the destructive model of consumerism that has ravaged our planet and left our young people feeling that there is no hope for tomorrow. The philosopher believes in hope, not out of wishful thinking but based on the understanding of history which demonstrates that the human being has an infinite capacity for good.

It is simply a reality that this capacity has to be awakened and strengthened through education. It is a patient proposition, absent of immediate results but offering a method of work which can bring about substantial change. Real change. Not only for the future but for now, as it is most needed for this current historical time. We don't have to wait for some miracle to come and make things better, we can start living in a better way right now. It is the choice that we make when we decide that we want to improve ourselves. It is a choice that many have made before us and their experience can help light the way, like so many stars painting a path in a sea of infinite mystery.

In that spirit, The Acropolis magazine was born – to share the best of humanity, to inspire an eclectic approach. In that spirit, read on.

Aidan Murphy



### Issue 8 - The Anthology Edition

Issue 8 has been designed as an anthology edition, to share some of the highlights of all the different articles published over the last year and a half. We've drawn from the many contenders compiled from the previous 7 issues and curated from that list a synthesis of what we felt best represented the eclectic style of The Acropolis.

It wasn't always an easy process as many subjects were worthy of inclusion but the final product is something we are all proud of. It has been a period of reflection, taking in all the lessons learned from the journey thus far and we end 2021 excited for the plans we have for 2022. To start something new, it's important to conclude that which comes before and take the next step with a sense of continuity. That's the fundamental sentiment we want to share as 2021 draws to a close.

The Acropolis Team

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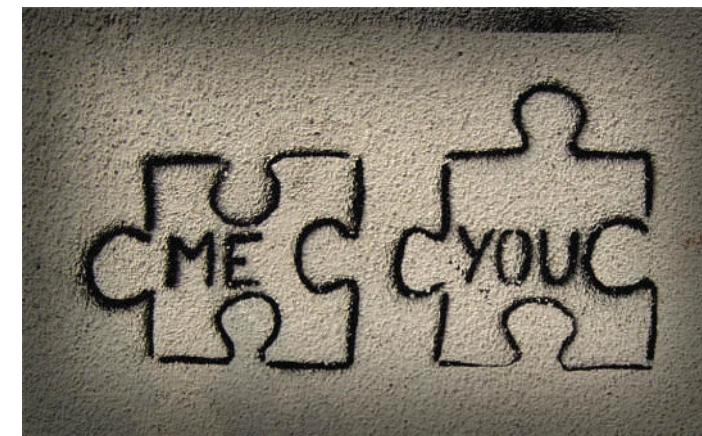
# The Cancer of Separatism

A look at what divides us and how we can come together

When we argued some years ago in our writings and lectures that a new Middle Ages was approaching, the prediction seemed exaggerated and almost fatalistic.

We also explained at the time that the repetition of historical cycles did not necessarily have to be seen as a calamity or regression, but as part of the natural course of life, which progresses gradually in a circular and spiral-shaped manner, touching similar points along the way, although at different levels of evolution.

Far from being fatalistic, let alone exaggerated, events today are proving the truth of those words. Now there are a great many authors and scholars who are talking about the phenomenon of a medieval period resulting from the last few centuries of our history, as a period of rest and recovery before a possible “renaissance”.



There are various characteristics that indicate the presence of an intermediate cycle of our civilisation. But there is one which is particularly relevant today, due to the serious complications it may bring if we fail to realise its true magnitude. I am talking about separatism.

Beyond its political meanings - although these are also included - separatism is a force that infiltrates all human expressions with a tendency to dissolve everything that has been achieved until now. It leads one cell to oppose another and results in an extreme form of individualism, which encloses each person within themselves, within their own reality.

Terms like freedom, independance, autonomy, free expression, self-determination and so many others are no more than synonyms of the process of separatism. Today nations are divided into provinces and regions, which claim absolute originality and self-sufficiency. But the process continues, and the regions and provinces continue to be

divided up into smaller segments, based on any differences or distinctions that can be shown. The next step will be for one town to become separated from another, and even within the same families we will begin to notice cracks that will inevitably result in clashes between the generations.

When, as the culmination of this process, the individual becomes the ultimate unit and becomes “separated” from all the rest, what will happen then? We will be in the heart of the Middle Ages. Everyone will have to look out for themselves even in the simplest of difficulties, and all the achievements of civilisation, founded on collective work and cooperation, will have disappeared.

Perhaps, in the present, we may find it difficult to imagine a world without communications, where roads are cut off, where there is no fuel or energy; it may be almost impossible now to imagine large houses in the middle of the countryside and the great cities abandoned because they have become uninhabitable... But as separateness increases, all of these trends are on the rise.

However, as there have been many other Middle Ages before, and as human beings have emerged from all of them, we will also be reborn from this strange period that awaits us. But to be reborn an awakening is necessary, a firm mind that allows us to recognise the mistakes of the present in order to transform them into future successes.

The human being is a social being. The family, the village or town, the Earth that witnessed our birth all give rise to feelings of affection that cannot be erased from human nature. Those bonds just need to be straightened in a healthy way. It is enough to remove the parasites from this plant of civilisation, so that the new Middle Ages can pass over us like a fleeting dream and, after that brief hour of rest, the dawn of a new world can re-emerge, powerful and radiant.

New and therefore better.

Delia Steinberg Gusmán





# Epigenetics

## *A new science of health*

With the discovery of DNA in the second half of the nineteenth century, scientists became convinced that human beings were the product of their biological code, that who we are and what we do is already predetermined in our genes. This idea of genetic disposition moved from the scientific world to popular culture with such phrases like “good genes” or “the selfish gene” to describe our behaviour, as documented in the book *Born That Way* which gives a detailed history of the rise of the idea that genes contain the codes that control life. However during the last twenty years scientists have discovered that we are not only biological robots but that through our conscious choices we can construct our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. This new field is called Epigenetics.

The word Epigenetics literally means ‘control above the genes’. Dr. Bruce Lipton defines Epigenetics as: “the science of how environmental signals select, modify, and regulate gene activity. This new awareness reveals that our genes are constantly being remodelled in response to life experiences. Which again emphasises that our perceptions of life shape our biology.” These new discoveries change what is called the Central Dogma of Molecular Biology, which states that the flow of information is only in one direction, from DNA to RNA and then to proteins, which are the molecular building blocks that provide for the cell’s structure and behaviour. The information is now in two directions, one from DNA and another from the environment.

The environment has two facets, one internal and the other external. The inner environment is how we think, feel and act. It is well known how the mind can affect the body as described in many Eastern and Western philosophies. How the mind affects the body in a positive way is known in the medical community as the placebo effect. The placebo effect is a phenomenon in which the body starts to heal itself even if it only thinks it is receiving medicine. Dawson Church described how our mental state can influence our genes, how being optimistic, regular acts of altruism and meditation have positive effects on us. Conversely, a mind that is engaged in a negative state, such as anger, hopelessness, blame, stress can lead to an unhealthy inner state and a detrimental impact on the body. This is referred to as the nocebo effect. The external environment includes our social networks and ecological systems in which we live. Diet, toxins, pollution and our relationships are examples of external environments that have an impact on gene expression.

The epigraph above from Plato explains that to reach a state of health requires not only physical health but an overall health within the human being, at the mental, emotional, energetic and physical levels. All these dimensions within the human being are connected and need to be in harmony to reach a state of overall health. Psychosomatic illnesses reflect this idea, if the body is in pain or tired it can affect our mood and thoughts. Likewise a mind that has mental clarity and a heart that is open, has a regenerating impact on the physical body.

In conclusion, the Epigenetics view of life is one where our genes no longer predetermine our destiny, that we blindly follow the “programming” of our genes, but whereby our thoughts, feelings and actions also have a say in our overall health. Epigenetics verifies what many ancient teachings explain, that health is a natural state of harmony at the different planes of our being and disease is when that harmony is lost. Health for the mind is clarity, for the emotions it is the expression of higher sentiments, for our energies it means to have a sustained rhythm and for the body it is to avoid excess. These are all activities of conscious development with very little to do with our genes, rather, the ways in which we choose to transform ourselves and lead a more fulfilling life.

Michael Ward

“The greatest mistake in the treatment of diseases is that there are physicians for the body and physicians for the soul, although the two cannot be separated.”

–Plato





Gutenberg Bible of the New York Public Library.

# The Gutenberg Printing Press

*Take a journey through the history of the printing press, the story of how some great historical figures brought the written word to the masses and changed the world forever.*

The world before the printing press arrived was very different to the one we know today. There were very limited printing capabilities in Europe and China, such as woodblock printing, but these early methods required skilled craftspeople, were very slow and costly, and consequently did not flourish. There were few books, no publishers, no newspapers, no bookshops, and no Amazon (except for the river). Most existing books and pamphlets were manuscripts, painstakingly hand copied, which could take months or even years to complete.

Books were expensive and rare. In the 14th century, a manuscript book cost the same as the price of a house. The largest library in Europe at the time was in Paris, and contained only 300 manuscripts. The vast majority of the public were illiterate. As a result, only a wealthy, elite minority, such as church clergy, could read and write, and usually only in Latin. There were no newspapers.

Information and ideas were communicated largely by spoken word, within small local groups. As a result, news often did not travel far outside the locality.

Under these conditions, suppression of dissenting voices by those in positions of power was commonplace. Censorship and other means were used to control the spread of ideas that were seen to be in conflict with the accepted norms of the day. For example, in 496 AD the Roman Catholic Pope Gelasius I issued a list of prohibited books that were deemed to be contrary to morality. Catholics were forbidden to read them.

## The Game Changer

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, and the beginning of the Renaissance, a young man from Mainz, Germany was about to change everything. In 1440, Johannes

Gutenberg invented the metal Moveable Type Printing Press. Gutenberg was a skilled goldsmith and entrepreneur. He combined several innovations to design his new printing process. These innovations included cast metal type (print characters), oil based ink, a modified screw press, and an efficient industrial process. Gutenberg borrowed money and by 1450 he was printing Christian religious pamphlets and books. He printed about 200 copies of a 1286 page bible that is now known as the Gutenberg Bible.

This massive effort over several years cost Gutenberg his business, as a result of a legal dispute with his investors. However, though his business venture failed, his new printing press was a success, and his printing process was copied by others. In the following years, printing businesses flourished across Europe. The Gutenberg printing press made printing much faster and much more affordable than previous methods. Distribution channels for books did not previously exist, so centres of trade such as port cities became the centres of printing. Venice, a thriving city state, became the heart of printing in Europe.

In time, the ability to print rapidly at low cost resulted in the founding of the newspaper publishing industry, now known as "the press" after the printing press. From the early 1600's, newspapers started to appear all across Europe, helping drive the growth of literacy and access to information for ordinary people. The concept of book authorship, or creator's rights, became important, and in time copyright laws were enacted to protect authors against piracy and plagiarism.

## A New Era Begins

The printing press changed books from being rare and expensive items in small libraries and monasteries, in the hands of an elite few who could read Latin, to becoming widely available and more affordable, in many languages. Printing facilitated the exchange of information and ideas, and powered periods of great social change in Europe, including the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. Printing and distribution of books and pamphlets enabled information and ideas to be spread widely and rapidly. This had a democratising effect on European society. The censorship or stifling of ideas, such as by churches or political elites, became much more difficult.

An example of this was the event that led to the Reformation. In 1517 Martin Luther challenged the Roman Catholic Church, and started the Reformation movement when he posted his "Ninety-Five Theses" on the door of Wittenberg church in Germany. The Theses document was afterwards translated, printed and distributed throughout Europe. Luther went on to publish a translation of the bible in a dialect of German which was understood throughout Germany. The widespread distribution of these and other printed documents that challenged the existing Christian church resulted in a split that created the new church of Protestantism.



Photo by Andrew Plumb

## A Welcome Revival

During the late Middle Ages (13th and 14th centuries) and continuing into the European Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries) European scholars experienced a reawakened desire to learn about Greek and Roman culture. However, few manuscripts were available in Western Europe. Great efforts were made to locate and translate those "long lost" manuscripts. The texts came primarily from two sources: texts in Arabic from the Islamic world, and texts in Greek from the Christian Byzantine Empire. During the Middle Ages, Greek manuscripts were brought to the Islamic world and translated into Arabic. These were later brought back to Europe, such as by the Muslim Moors who migrated to the Iberian Peninsula (now Spain & Portugal). After the defeat of the Moors, the Arabic texts were translated into Latin. A wealth of classical philosophical, cultural and historical writings was made available for translation and printing.

The European Renaissance was a period of great social change in Europe in culture, the arts, politics and economics. It has been characterised as a "rebirth" after many centuries of the Middle Ages period. The reawakened desire for knowledge and learning of the classical Greek and Roman texts was accelerated by the printing press. While the Renaissance predated it, the arrival of the printing press accelerated the change by making translated copies of manuscripts more available and affordable.





*'Luther hammers his 95 theses to the door' - painted by Ferdinand Pauwels in 1872*

Translation of texts from ancient Greek or Arabic to Latin played an important role. In 1439, a movement called the Neoplatonic Florentine Academy was founded in Florence. It was sponsored by the Cosimo de' Medici, a banker and politician, and head of the wealthy and powerful banking and political Medici dynasty. The Academy's goal was to bring the classical philosophy teachings of Plato to the Europe of the Renaissance period. The Academy modelled itself on Plato's Academy, a school of philosophy founded by Plato in Athens.

The Academy was led by Marcilio Ficino, a brilliant Neoplatonist philosopher, physician, scholar and translator. Ficino acquired all of Plato's works from the Byzantine Empire via the Medicis, and translated them from ancient Greek into Latin. The translated works were printed and published in 1484, thus bringing the ideas of Plato to a much wider world. The works published included the Dialogues, where Plato uses conversations between two or more speakers to explore philosophical issues. Ficino also published commentaries on Plato's works, in his role as a philosopher.

Aldus Manutius founded a printing house called Aldine Press in Venice in 1494. Between 1495 and 1505, Aldine Press printed more than one hundred classic Greek, Roman and other Italian texts. Manutius said that the reason for his efforts was "for the abundance of good books which, we hope, will finally put to flight all ignorance."

#### **A Book For Every Occasion**

Today, books are very affordable and accessible for most people, thanks to efficient printing processes. Most people can read - worldwide literacy levels are

approaching ninety per cent. The challenge in today's globally connected world is finding the time in our busy lives to read and learn from quality books. Work, commuting, family life, entertainment, and our smartphones are some of the myriad things that demand our attention and draw from our finite resources of energy and time.

An additional challenge today is the desire for an instant solution to our questions - how often do we "just google it"? We may ask why we should spend hours reading a book, when we might find the answer online in minutes?

Devoting the time and attention to reading a quality book is a rewarding experience. The many benefits of reading good books are known to include improved literacy and vocabulary, and better attention span. Reading also improves learning skills, provides us with knowledge, and opens us up to other points of view. It stimulates the imagination as we visualise while reading, creating the world from the page in our own mind's eye. It takes a little time and effort to read a book, and the discipline to silence that smartphone, but the rewards are lasting.

The old saying goes that "the pen is mightier than the sword". But is the printing press mightier than the pen? Perhaps one could argue that the pen and the printing press together have opened up a world of knowledge and ideas, ranging from classical Greece and Rome, to today's vast array of books on many subjects. We have Johannes Gutenberg, and many others, to thank for that achievement.

Tim Leahy



# Gothic Cathedrals

## Towering achievements where Man's reach far exceeded his grasp

The architecture of the Gothic Cathedrals is one of the glories of European civilisation. It was an attempt to lift everyday life up to the heavens. It was also one of the most remarkable adventures in architecture. However, some mystery still surrounds its origins.

The term 'gothic' might be considered pejorative because many were unhappy with the change from the established Romanesque architecture. Some saw this new style as quite barbaric, hence the reference to the Visigoths, who were associated at that time with barbarism, much in the same way as we would use the word 'Cretan' today.

As for when Gothic began to emerge, we need to go back to 1000 CE to better understand its origins.

There was a fear of the year 1000: there were predictions that it would be the end of the world. There was a psychosis about the end of the world, the apocalypse that was mentioned in the bible. A lot of superstition prevailed, a bit like the year 2000 with fear of the Y2K bug, and a lot of unrealistic fears around the turn of the first millennium. But, apart from the superstitions, there was also a real fear of invasions from the Saracens, Norsemen, and Vikings,

having already suffered murderous attacks from the Hungarians.

It was a fearful time. Man was searching for stability within himself. There was no stability on the outside. So this fear was favourable for the development of a mystical mentality. Man began to look toward heaven for strength.

For centuries the monastic schools had been the centres of education. They favoured introspective education, but after 1100 CE they began to decline and withdraw into themselves and they stopped diffusing knowledge.

Education then took on a different style, it opened up again, moving from monasteries to cathedral schools. This was driven by a rebirth in trade, travel, more wealth, and growth in the population. Education changed from contemplative study to a more verbal, dialectic type, open to knowledge outside of Latin Christianity. Around 1000 CE mainstream thinking was Platonic, by 1100 CE Aristotelean thought became accepted, with the study of nature, which was considered a perfect reflection of God. The Cistercian Order played a central role in the development of gothic architecture. They were an offshoot





of the Benedictine Order at Cîteaux in France that rose to prominence after the arrival of St. Bernard of Clairvaux in 1113 CE who became the chief spiritual leader of Christianity for the next 40 years. He reorganised the Cistercian order by doing two things. First, he re-established self-discipline in the life of the monks. Second, he introduced new economic and social conditions. The monks of aristocratic origin were set to spiritual exercises, and the lay monks undertook the material maintenance of the community. By 1145 CE there were 350 Cistercian monasteries, all built by the Cistercians themselves.

St. Bernard was responsible for launching the crusades and also for the formation of the *Knights Templar*. The crusades brought contact with the East and a new way of perceiving God. The knights discovered the actual lands where Jesus was born and lived. Christ became human, the universe became more logical. So there was a big shift in the way people began to see the world and God. Mathematics and geometry were rediscovered. Arabian engineering was very advanced at this time. Western clerics began to conceive of buildings different to Romanesque which had favoured meditation and introspection.

Gothic style appeared after the first crusade - particularly after the return of the original 9 Templar Knights - promoted by the Cistercians. The Benedictines and Cistercians were renowned builders of abbeys and monasteries.

Some scholars believe gothic was a natural progression from Romanesque, others that it is an entirely different school, that both operated side by side. Romanesque art and architecture were very sombre and bare, a

development of the Roman basilica, which flourished from the 9th to the 13th century after Pope Leo 3rd appointed Charlemagne as holy roman emperor.

Romanesque architecture is typified by a cruciform plan, ambulatories (walkways around the apse), heavy stone vaults carried on huge columns, and extremely thick walls. It is also typified by its massive strength and solidity, fortress-like, with small windows, and most recognisable by its semicircular arches. It was very consistent, with a slow development over centuries. The Romanesque is essentially static, steering forces that are directed downwards, while Gothic channels forces that are directed upwards.

Gothic is a system of building that rests on the pointed arch called the 'ogive'. The discovery of the ogive was capital, the physical and physiological action on man is extraordinary. Beneath it man pulls himself together, stands upright. Telluric or other currents can only enter man via a vertebral column that is straight and vertical. The human quality of the ogive was well known to the builders of that time, we see it in the shape and proportion of the ogive at Chartres Cathedral which is based on the traditional symbol of man, the 5-pointed star.

#### **The crossed ogive**

is built on the principle of the transformation of lateral into vertical thrust, the vault no longer weighs down but springs upwards under the lateral counter-thrust of buttresses. The Gothic monument requires perfect adjustment between weight and thrust. The activity in the stone is in a constant state of tension which can be tuned like a musical instrument.

#### **The flying buttress**

was the device that allowed medieval masons to transfer weight away from cathedral walls. Using flying buttresses, the cathedral builders were able to construct very high and elaborate stone vaults and ever-bigger windows. Gradually the windows began to take over from the walls.

#### **The stained glass window**

is one of the most important aspects of Gothic. When Abbot Suger decided to rebuild the Church of Saint-Denis around 1137 CE, he designed a choir that would be suffused with light. To achieve this his masons drew on the several new features which had evolved; the pointed arch, the ribbed vault, and the flying buttresses, which enabled the insertion of large clerestory windows.

Abbot Suger had a Theory of Light, parsing three different Latin words for light; lux, lumen, and illumination. He understood lux, external light, as physical, coming from the sun and nature, especially light shining outside the cathedral. But once it entered through the window it was transformed into lumen, new metaphysical light because the glass; now both wall and sacred boundary functioned much like the ancient temenos threshold of a classical sanctuary or pomerium. On one, external, side it was ordinary and profane light that shone on everyone, even the heretic and the wicked, but on the other, internal, side the light was now consecrated and holy. In Suger's vision, light was the primary source of faith and divine inspiration. This light was one agency of a powerful benevolent grace that fed the soul.

The light inside the cathedral was mediated by the gemlike windows and this transformed light took a third route. Once it passed through the physical eye of the believer it was

changed once again into illumination, now a spiritual light that elevated the mind and renewed the spirit within, as a metaphor for internal life-changing light. So, it was the rebuilding of the church of St Denis, by Abbot Suger, that was considered to be the birth of Gothic in Europe.

Gothic reflects the spirit of the 13th century, it was a small renaissance in itself. It was also a revolution, it was all about the verticality of man. Man became responsible for himself. We can say that Gothic equalled Enthusiasm, 'en theos' meaning 'God Within'.

As for the builders who sprang forth for this small renaissance, what were they trying to express? The builders were a part of brotherhoods, they travelled throughout Europe building cathedrals and churches. For them, it was a journey of growth, from man to individual, through action. Unity was the message of the builders, the building of cathedrals was an alchemical feat, the process of transforming lead into gold, within man.

They expressed the laws of nature through their work, all ideas need to be concretised, the mystery of creation shows that the spirit descends into something objective. The Cathedrals, therefore, are the representation of Heaven on Earth.

Sean O' Brien



# The Boring Tool

Boredom is something we are all familiar with, yet in our increasingly technology driven world, we are less and less able to engage with it and use this mental state as a means of creativity, learning and conscious development.

We are all aware of that compulsion to turn to our phones as soon as we find ourselves alone or waiting for the bus, or even at a restaurant if the other people have left the table. The phone has become the new cigarette we reach to relieve social awkwardness or boredom.

The word boredom has often been attributed as coming from the analogy of a 'boring tool', a kind of drill that works slowly and repetitively into hard rock. And this association seems quite fitting as we have come to see our phone as 'the boring tool' in many ways. It is the tool that we see as alleviating boredom but ironically it is the very thing we often find ourselves bored with. We scroll through images and content which at best only briefly engages our spontaneous attention but mostly we are simply scrolling for the comfort, in the superficial sense, that we are stimulated and not bored.

**"to fend off boredom and wanting continuous stimulation is what keeps us in an anxious loop of feeling bored, struggling to focus and ultimately unsatisfied."**

The late Mark Fisher, cultural theorist and philosopher in his blog K punk writes;

"...boredom was a challenge, an injunction and an opportunity: If we are bored, then it is for us to produce something that will fill up that space."

but he continues by saying, "Capitalist corporations go out of their way to invite us to interact, to generate our own content, to join the debate. There is now neither an excuse nor opportunity to be bored"

As Fisher points out, this space for boredom has been filled with technology, which makes it increasingly harder to think and use our own means and mental energies to engage in voluntary attention. Boredom at a basic level can be used as a positive force to start some action but this can lead onto higher levels of engagement which sharpens the mind through focus and imagination and thus brings about a more awakened consciousness and nourishment of the individual self.

What technology and particularly social media are so good at and why we are so accustomed to reaching for our phone as soon as we find a free opportunity, (but also when we should be paying attention!) is that it can pacify our spontaneous attention so masterfully. New content every second keeps at bay that state of 'boredom' which we have become so weary and anxious off. But ironically this petulant need of our ego to fend off boredom and wanting continuous stimulation is what keeps us in an anxious loop of feeling bored, struggling to focus and ultimately unsatisfied.

So not only do we need to train ourselves to stop reaching for 'the boring tool', we must also learn to see the state of boredom in a new way. By definition boredom is an emotional state experienced when we are not interested or engaged with our surroundings or actions. But learning to turn that around with attention and imagination we begin to appreciate these moments as opportunities for increased consciousness. Waiting at a bus stop can be used as a chance to observe the often missed passing of time and with attention we can learn to have an increased awareness of our surroundings, absorbing sights and sounds without judgement or objective thinking. This suddenly makes the seemingly banal, trivial or boring show itself to us in a new light. We can learn to experience these 'non eventful' moments as profound and poetic and witness the beautiful interwoven reality of our existence, which is far from boring.

Paul Savage



# To Be or Knot to Be

## *The legend of the gordian knot*

The Legend of the Gordian Knot tells us of an ordinary man named Gordias who rode into the centre of the Phrygian kingdom on his simple ox-driven cart, unaware that a recent prophecy would announce him, as the newest arrival in town, to be declared King. So the capital was renamed Gordium and Gordias went on, anointed by fate, to be a wise and just leader of his people. To commemorate his rule, his son, Midas, tied the ox-cart to a post as a tribute to the gods. The cart was secured in place with a knot so complicated that no one could undo it.

A part of us may want to yell, "That's cheating! Surely anyone could have just cut the thing?". Often our pride makes it difficult to discern the lesson we can learn from such examples, be they historical, mythical, or otherwise. In reality, many of the most complex problems we encounter have a very simple solution which we neglect to consider. The sword of Alexander symbolises intelligence, not the analytical mind that gets lost in the intricacies of the problem but that very discernment and imagination that allows for creative problem-solving.

For our own inner life, we have knots that puzzle us - behaviours, habits, shortcomings, limitations, a variety of knots that bind us, confuse us, hold us back, and often, seem to be tied so tight that nothing could separate and resolve them. The sword, also, has often been a symbol of will: the will to act. We can stare at a problem all day, analyse it until the cows come home and yet sometimes, the simplest action is the most effective. Of course, many knots require a different approach, many patterns of behaviour require progressive and gradual adjustment but we can all reflect on which knots require patient work and which can go the way of Gordias', with a simple, yet decisive action.

Aidan Murphy

**"The problem was deemed insoluble; many had tried and many had bloodied their fingers just searching for a thread, a loose end, anything to decipher and unravel the conundrum."**

Until, of course, the journey of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC brought him to the fabled site and the famous riddle. The problem was deemed insoluble; many had tried and many had bloodied their fingers just searching for a thread, a loose end, anything to decipher and unravel the conundrum. Another prophecy had been born, that he who should solve the Gordian Knot would go on to become king of all Asia. Alexander was ambitious and had a keen mind, not only in terms of intellect but of vision. After contemplating the problem a while, he unsheathed his sword and dispensed with the knot in a single, swift stroke. His empire would go on to cover most of the known world.



Alain giving a public talk lecture in Rathmines



# What's it all about?

We sit down with the Director of New Acropolis Ireland, Alain Impellizzeri, to discuss philosophy, society, religion...you know, the big stuff.

Alain has been the Director of New Acropolis in Ireland for over thirty years and has a lifetime's experience of providing an integral and practical philosophical education. Of Italian heritage, though born and raised in Belgium, now an adopted son of Eire, Alain has a unique perspective on the Irish mentality. I've asked him to help clarify a few things about philosophy, what it proposes and why it's important for the challenges we face today.

I begin the discussion asking how he explains what philosophy is for an Irish audience?

"The way I would explain philosophy is kind of situated in Socratic times, 5th Century BCE because the word philosophy is very big, it is the love of wisdom, so we can try to place it in that period in history where philosophy emerges with a certain purpose."

This purpose he describes as twofold, the first being to gain in clarity.

"The purpose is not simply to have ideas and to talk about them but to gain a certain level of clarity through dialogue which will help, obviously, the way we act in the world, that was one objective. The second was to fight the manipulations of the time, the Sophists they were called in Socratic times, today we would call them spin doctors. But clearly Socrates will arm the youth of Athens with an ability to think by themselves and for themselves. That's very important for me, the art of thinking but they

are thinking to gain in clarity not just to question for the sake of it while also to be able to not be caught by the spin and manipulation of these sophists. When I explain this I always say that philosophy is so contemporary because we have the same challenges today. This hasn't changed, time has passed but the questions remain the same simply because even if we have answered questions 25 centuries ago we still have to answer them for ourselves. Even if we read it somewhere else we have to find the answer for ourselves which is obviously quite important."

## Philosophy as a Way of Life

Philosophy is often synonymous only with thinking. But great ideas need to be applied, this is something we often miss out on in life so I asked Alain how to apply philosophy as more than an intellectual pursuit?

"I think the difference is that being a philosopher implies not simply to understand but to translate that understanding into a practice. Today there is a fascination with the Stoics for instance which is a good example and why are we fascinated by the Stoics? Because they give us practical advice for daily living and their advice, in general, is of an ethical nature. They say gain sufficient distance or independence from the world you live in so that you can act in it better. So the practice is how can I strengthen myself from a character point of view, from a moral point of view, how can I gain

"...being a philosopher implies not simply to understand but to translate that understanding into a practice."

courage, determination, perseverance, justice, kindness, generosity, they talk about a number of qualities. All of which require practice because courage doesn't emerge by chance, kindness just doesn't emerge by chance it needs to be practiced. But is there a book of practice telling us exactly what to practice? Not really, what there is is a method to practice. Some people have more or less courage, more or less this, more or less that so we're not all going to practice the exact same things yet the idea of practice is fundamental which is to translate what we understand into how we live it."

For Alain that's fundamental because we are confronted with so many tricks of the mind, including the power of the mind that convinces us that simply thinking about something is sufficient.



World Philosophy Day 2018

"Often enough once we think about it, we think that it is done. I thought about it, I got it, thank you very much. In reality that's not the case. How do we know that we have practiced? When life comes and knocks at the door and says here it is a little challenge, a little test. There we see if our inner strength really is there, whether we have practiced it or not. So practice is fundamental. There are many authors in the last maybe 20-30 years who have started to discover or rediscover philosophical practices because until about 30 years ago it was more an intellectual pursuit for a lot of people, too complicated.



Voluntary action in the community is a central aspect to the New Acropolis education

But when they started studying the classical schools, be it Eastern or Western and they realised that there was an underlying practice and generally speaking the first practice was of moral or ethical nature."

## I Think Therefore I Am, Right?

Feedback we often receive is that people think philosophy would be beyond them, that they wouldn't get it, that it's too dense or intellectual. Though clearly the practice that Alain is describing is more behavioural. So I asked him if this perception of philosophy as something academic was a barrier to people?

"It has had that perception, to be too intellectual. For me that's very relative. If you have a determination or desire to find answers to your questions you're going to find them. But if you prefer to have pre-packaged answers, like most people want - give me the answer and that's it, then philosophy becomes difficult. So I don't think it's difficult in itself, no. Above all if you have that desire, that determination or that need not only to ask yourself questions but to find answers and answers that can be applied then it ceases to be intellectual and becomes a way of life. For me it's more a perception and it's true that in academia we sometimes over intellectualise but not only for philosophy, for most things. I have colleagues who are in the technology side and they use a very funny, difficult terminology to talk about simple things. It's a form of power to keep that power, I don't think that's necessary really."

I commented that this is a global trend, the superficial desire for easy answers, what Alain called pre-packaged. We see it everywhere today and as the backbone of the modern online discourse. Entrenched in their opinions people are more concerned about being right than of discovering anything new. It is a problem Alain is well aware of.





Christmas hamper drive supporting homeless families in the community

"The thing is that we want an answer so that we can go back and be passive again. Because if you philosophise, if you learn about life, well there's no final answer about anything. There are elements that help you to progress in your own development as a human being but final, final answers, well I don't have those, I don't know what they are. What I know is that I can have some level of convictions based on my experiences, based on my reflection, introspection, I can understand them but also, I know that further practice will bring them to a next level and so on. To learn we have to accept to live with uncertainty, with apparent contradictions. If we're not able to live with apparent contradictions, to question is very difficult because we want to be at peace, not in peace. At peace means leave me alone, no problems, I don't want to think. In peace means I'm serene enough in the face of the challenges that life brings to me. Two different ways of approaching the same questions."

## The Religion Question

Another reaction people sometimes have to philosophy is that it is religious. Either that or it is heretical, depends who you're asking. To help clarify I asked Alain where he places philosophy in relation to religion, are they mutually exclusive or complementary?

"I think if you stop for one second both religion and philosophy are probably trying to answer the same questions, about why we're here, what happens when we die, what's going on, where are we going etc etc. The questions are similar, the approach to them is rather different. Religion will give an answer as a matter of faith which per se one has to respect because everybody has the right to their own vision of life, how they envisage where they come from and how they envisage where they're going and why. But religion as a way of approaching life relies on the concept of faith. Philosophy doesn't say yes or no it just simply says it's possible but I want to understand. Then we're going to start questioning, not just doubting but questioning, understanding so as to go beyond just faith. I think philosophy is closer to science than it is to religion in reality, because we're going to try and question, to

"To learn we have to accept to live with uncertainty, with apparent contradictions. If we're not able to live with apparent contradictions, to question is very difficult..."

understand, to test it in life. Religion tends to more accept the truth as it is given down to them by an authority, whichever authority that it is. And if that is what people want to do it is something to respect except when it becomes fanatic and they want to impose that, that theirs is the only truth and nothing else. Philosophically that can be uncomfortable for me because that brings division and separation and we know what challenges that brings. Per se philosophy is not against religion or this approach to the sacred, simply that there are different ways to do it and the philosophical one is, as I said, closer to science, more investigative, trying to understand, trying to practice it, trying to go beyond the perceptions that we have at first. Now, there are many things we don't know so we have faith about the possibility of something but we're going to try to understand them, to practice them. That's why you have philosophers who are atheistic that don't particularly have a vision of God and others who do so it's not black or white."

## No Individual is an Island

One of Alain's big inspirations has always been Plato's The Republic, the heart of which is a social message of collective living, justice and the common good. So I asked him what is the role of philosophy in the social arena?



Umbrella of Virtues public event – philosophy in the streets of Dublin



New Acropolis Ireland, Lower Rathmines Road Dublin

"Most philosophers have brought about the necessity to understand the principles of life. The more you investigate you see there are two ways of approaching it. One is an individual path of self-enlightenment like Buddha, but most of us are not Buddha. That's why Buddha says don't believe because I say so just practice it and, in that practice, help each other. Plato would say that a just person makes a just society, so if we say know yourself, become a better individual through that process of self-knowledge that will automatically have an impact in the world we live in. Why? Well, today science clearly has discovered the principle of solidarity. The principle of solidarity contradicts the concept of the law that the strongest dominates. Like in the vegetable world, the strongest tree survives, the others die - today there is a lot of research suggesting that trees are actually helping each other, there's a network that interconnects all that together and so and so forth. So there's two models, one model is what the Buddhists would call the model of the head, "me myself and I" or there is the model of the heart which suggests the idea that we are interconnected and that there's a fundamental solidarity as part of the human condition."

Alain chooses the solidarity model because he understands that it reflects better how nature works, how life works, that everything is interconnected. This is the approach which he then relates to collective living and our social responsibility towards each other.

"I think we're all interconnected, my body, every single organ and cell in my body is interconnected. It's one body although each of them have different functions and that's fundamentally forgotten. We have to relearn that we are individuals and yet we have social responsibility that is to say that we are part of a collectivity. That concept of the common good - which people talk about - we have great difficulty to practice it because to practice a common good we have to give up something a bit. We have to give up something so that the common good is first or it

is brought forward but today we are convinced that it's me first, second, third and so on so the common good becomes very difficult."

Alain observes how the concept of the common good does resonate with people, at least at an emotional level. Conceptually it's fantastic but in reality how well do we understand what it takes to live together? An example he uses is the hugely topical environmental subject.

"We think that technology and external circumstances are going to resolve it. Not many stop to think, 'well maybe we should live differently. We should consume less.' That implies that we have to give up something for the common good, in this case the good of the planet therefore the good of humanity. Until we have overcome this idea that while we are the center of our universe we are only a part of the universe, that the universe is one or at least is interconnected or is governed by the concepts of solidarity, to live in a society which is more just, more serene, fairer is going to be very difficult. For me as a philosopher it's a dimension that is important and fundamental, we cannot disconnect self-knowledge with our civic responsibility and being part of the world."

As a non-profit worldwide organisation New Acropolis embodies this emphasis of a social philosophy that brings about individual and collective development through the renewal and cultivation of timeless values. This is a philosophy to be practiced, a philosophy for living. Alain has dedicated his life to it, three decades here in Ireland and the next generation of philosophers will continue for the decades to come.

Aidan Murphy





# Synchronicity

Carl Jung helps us joined the dots

Over dinner one evening, Albert Einstein shared his theory of relativity with a young Carl Gustav Jung and planted in his fertile imagination the concept of laws governing space. Dr. Jung wondered if similar principles could be at work in the relative dimension of time, and over many years of practicing clinical psychology, along with his own deep inner reflection and introspection, he observed a phenomenon of meaningful coincidences which he would eventually define as an acausal connecting principle, or, synchronicity.

The basis of his theory suggests that while causality explains how things are clearly and visibly linked by cause and effect, that there must be another law of life that is at play when two events occur, seemingly unrelated but linked by meaning. Those moments when we think of someone and then they appear or call us out of the blue. When we are struck by a sudden sense of concern for someone, only to later find out that they had an accident. When something is brought to our attention and then that word or idea starts popping up everywhere. These are basic examples which Jung explained as being curious in isolation but when such occurrences start stacking up, beyond the statistical probability of chance, their significance suggests more than mere coincidence. We enter into the realm of synchronicity and the events,

while not linked by direct causation, are linked by meaning. Jung wrote that synchronicity does not explain these phenomena but does help us to understand them. Of the scientifically-inexplicable, so-called parapsychological phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, or déjà vu, Jung wrote; 'They are not scientific concepts which could be taken as statements of principle, for no one has yet succeeded in constructing a causal bridge between the elements making up a meaningful coincidence'.

If they are not scientific concepts, what is their worth? Jung saw them as observable insights into the workings of nature, ways to derive meaning from the apparently chaotic, to bypass the limits of reason and connect with an intuition of something greater than the perspective of our ego. This theory was not openly accepted in its time, as anything that deviated from recognised science was considered pseudo-scientific quackery. Yet Jung was tenacious in his research of the area, conducting experiments in astrology, divination, and other occult traditions to build a compelling body of work in support of his theory. Today the theory is much more widely recognised as valid, though the same challenges could be discussed around the resistance that materialistic science has in understanding the immaterial or metaphysical



**"Jung saw them as observable insights into the workings of nature, ways to derive meaning from the apparently chaotic, to bypass the limits of reason and connect with an intuition of something greater "**



dimension of life. Outside of psychology, quantum physics is beginning to close the gap between the hyper-empirical science of the 19th century and the esoteric traditional sciences of antiquity.

As for CG Jung, a pioneer of the soul, he faced much derision from his peers with admirable courage and strength of character, his interest being in connecting with living principles, not the recognition of his contemporaries. The journey of individuation is often a solitary one but it is a path filled with meaning. Synchronicity helps us to connect the dots: even if understanding eludes us, we develop a vision of a great network of interconnectivity – that all of life, the whole universe, and even we minor threads in its vast tapestry, are woven together by a force of intelligence that directs us towards purpose.

Aidan Murphy



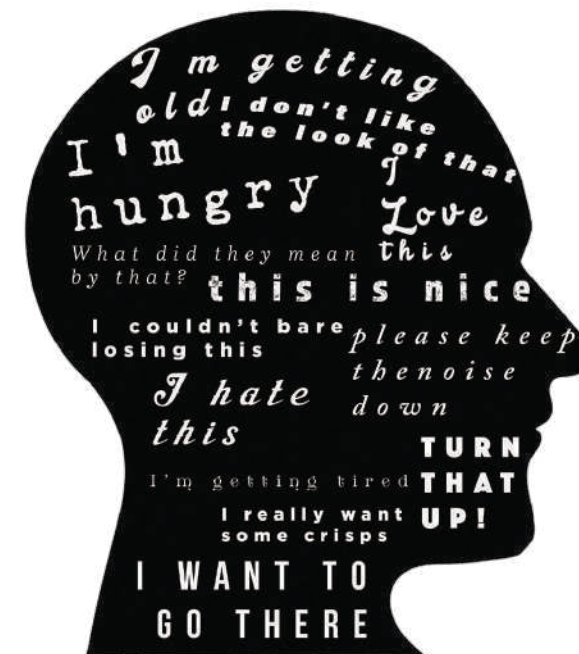
# BUDDHISM

## and the 5 aggregates

Buddhism suggests that by understanding all aspects of ourselves, referred to as the aggregates, we can then control and direct ourselves to practice 'karma yoga' - an action which causes the least possible negative consequences for ourselves and others.

These five aggregates, according to Buddhist teachings, define what a human being is, and like everything in the world, are in constant change. They are categorised as Form, Sensation, Perception, Mental Formation, and Consciousness.

Buddhist teaching describes the aggregates as the five elements that sum up the whole of an individual's mental and physical existence.



The first aggregate, Matter/Form, relates to material and physical form and includes the 6 sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin and the mind (perceiving ideas and thoughts).

The second aggregate, Sensation, relates to the senses and are differentiated into pleasant versus unpleasant, or pleasure versus pain. This includes sight (beauty versus ugliness), sound (harmonious sound versus noise), smell (sweet versus foul), taste (appetizing versus unpalatable), touch (pleasant versus unpleasant) and mind (positive and negative thoughts).

The third aggregate, Perception, occurs when our six faculties come in contact with the world. The first three aggregates are very much linked and intertwined, and are sometimes described as passive - we constantly sense and perceive things throughout the day, in an involuntary manner.

Our perception/feelings are constantly changing, the way

we react to situations changes. One day we may hear a sound that we usually love, but today we perceive it as annoying. The sound hasn't changed, our faculty to hear hasn't changed, but our perception has.

But it is also considered that we can train each of these faculties and can progressively master them. The most importance is given to the mind.

Before describing the fourth aggregate, we will look at the fifth aggregate, Consciousness/ Awareness, underlies our sensations and perceptions and is associated with the sensory organs; the consciousness of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. Buddhism suggests that consciousness is dependent on the other aggregates, it can't exist without them. For example, eye-

"When we create this sense of Self, we create clinging and desire, which is the source of suffering."

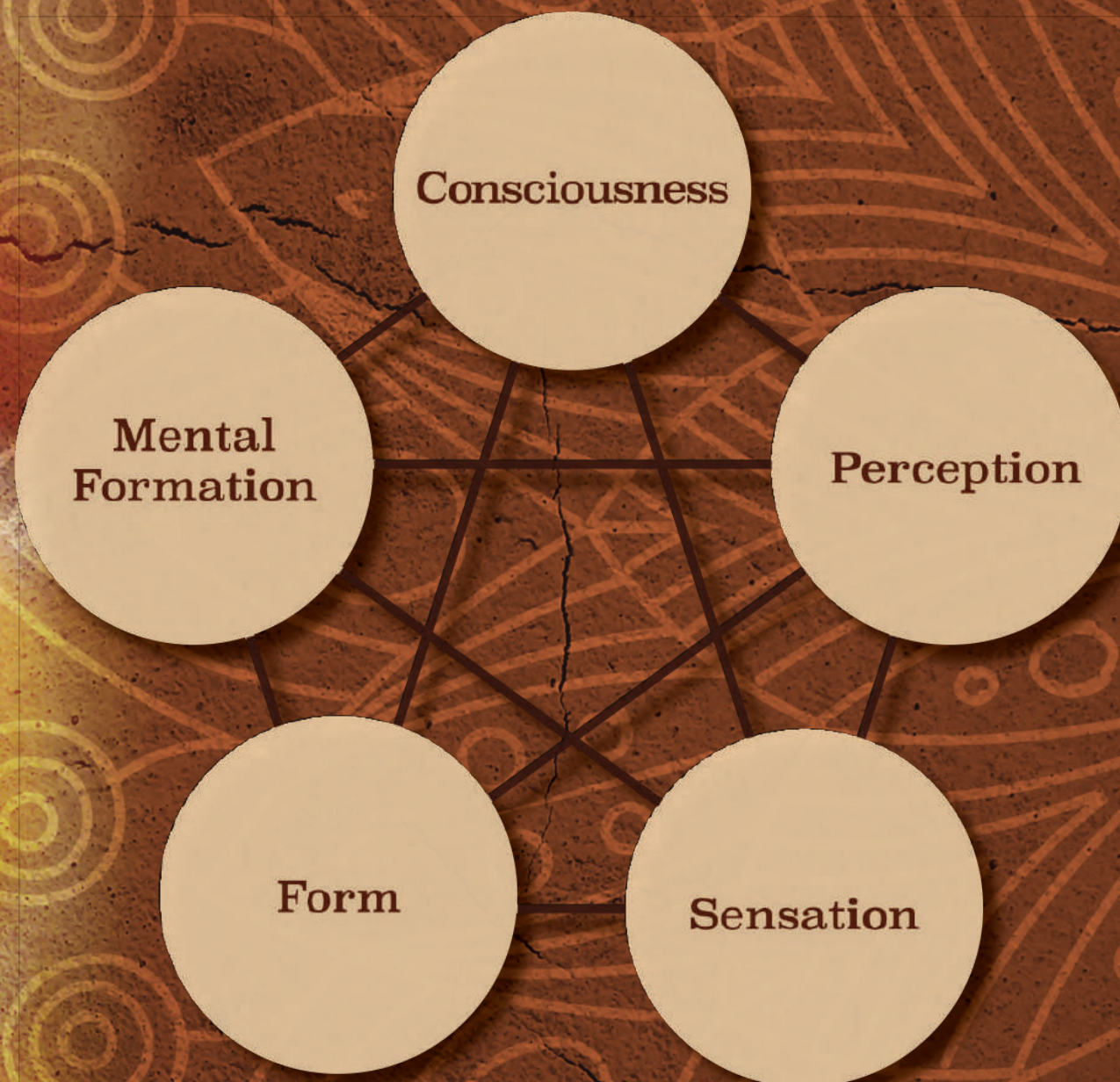
consciousness exists because we have eyes, sight and therefore things that can be seen.

In Buddhist terms, 'we' or the concept of 'I', is neither any of the aggregates nor a combination of them, including consciousness. This means that we are not any of the aggregates and we are also not consciousness.

Returning now to the fourth aggregate is where it gets more interesting because here we make active changes to the way we interact, think, and perceive the world. The fourth aggregate, Mental Formation, or 'Volition', is where karma is generated. The Buddha describes it as follows: "It is volition that I call Karma, having willed, one acts through body, speech and mind" "Volitional actions produce karmic effects"

We label everything that we perceive and experience as good, bad, and indifferent, and we act based on the labelling that we apply, pleasure versus pain. We can also realise that these perceptions are expressed in duality: we cannot have one without the other, otherwise,





*The five aggregates, according to Buddhist teachings, define what a human being is, and like everything in the world, are in constant change.*



*Blind Men Appraising an Elephant by Ohara Donshu, Edo Period (early 19th century), Brooklyn Museum*

something I don't want to hear, we judge and discard it. But maybe they are right in their observation, only bringing something to our attention. To understand this better we can consider the parable of the seven blind men and the elephant.

Imagine seven blind men, perceiving an elephant: one man feels the trunk, one man feels the ear, one feels the belly, one feels the tail, one feels a leg and one the tusk. Each one describes their perception, one describes it as a snake, one a tree trunk, another one that it must be a wall. Each perception is reasonable, but it is not true because it does not have a complete view of reality. We believe (and insist) that our perceptions of reality are the truth, but would it not be better to join them with others, and therefore get a little bit closer to reality? Also, once we realise that all of our perceptions are limited, most arguments will stop. Our perception through the aggregates leads us to a sense of 'Self', or to the 'I'. Like 'I am sick', 'I am angry', 'I am tasting something sour' - we appropriate it or we integrate to our 'Self'. Or we identify with it: we create this illusion of a Self that is angry or busy, or cold, or has the flu, or is tasting, or smelling things.

In Buddhism, this is called 'conceit', meaning this is 'me' or this is 'I'. I am cold, I am old, I am calm. It is also called 'vision of ourselves' or the 'Ego'. When we identify with 'I' or 'me', we create separation: us and others.

When we create this sense of Self, we create clinging and desire, which is the source of suffering. And to change this vision of life, for Buddhism, the shift happens in the mind, practising the eightfold path and starting to:

1. become aware of the constant changes and
2. accept changes and detach from them (detachment simply means to not apply any judgements or labels).

The less 'Self', the less clinging we have, the more content we become. And it is from that point that we can make wiser choices because we are not influenced and distracted by what our mind is producing.

Monika Edin

there is nothing to compare to it; they are a pair.

For example, we appreciate health when we have been sick or unwell. We know and recognise justice because we observed or experienced injustice. However, we keep expecting only the beautiful, the pleasant, but without its opposite, we cannot recognise the ideal.

Mental formation is where dukkha (suffering) arises. The judgements or labels we apply, are based on what we know, the associations that we make. Usually, they are habitual, automatic: events and experiences trigger feelings of being pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The challenge lies in being able to break our judgements and change our mental formation.

To change our mental formation it is suggested that we first acknowledge that our judgements are limited and they are also changing. There are many simple examples: some people love pineapples, others don't like them and yet others are neutral towards them; today we may enjoy walking along a beach that buzzes with people and activity, tomorrow it may be an annoyance to us. Or someone says something to us, we immediately apply a label/judgement - this is something harsh, unfair,





The vast mathematical knowledge available in Alexandria, meant it could construct such architectural wonders rare to the age. Emblematic to the city was 'The Great lighthouse' which is believed to have stood at 400 feet high, with a huge brass disc at its head, which reflected light out to sea. -Engraving of the Lighthouse of Alexandria, via the Wellcome Collection, London



hope to tolerate each other without making the effort to understand each other will inevitably lead to frictions, as we don't understand the other person's view.

In Alexandria, there were different opinions, different religions, different ways of doing things but these differences were seen as a source of knowledge, opportunities to enrich oneself, and not perceived as a threat. Tolerance is the first step but on its own, it will not bring about a positive change in our society. It is not only to look at our differences and learn from them but also to recognise what we have in common, to be in solidarity. As human beings, we have more in common than what separates us. We have the same DNA, we share sentiments of love, generosity, goodness, and we all have dreams for a better world. These sentiments and ideals unite us in their universal nature. The Neoplatonists would advise connecting with that which is universal in ourselves so that we can recognise that universal aspect in others, to recognise our commonality and differences at the same time. This can be a challenge for the human being because the mind tends to think in black and white: either you are with me or against me. To be in solidarity is to accept the differences and at the same time to work together to find common solutions and not to allow the differences to dismantle the unity.

In Alexandria, we have the opportunity to learn from their history, from their experiences of what went well and not so well. It was not perfect, no city or time in history is but even through their mistakes there is an opportunity for learning. It is a model of tolerance and solidarity as other civilisations have been throughout humanity's history such as Ashoka in India and Moorish Spain, to name just two examples. In facing the current challenges in our world today the qualities of tolerance and solidarity are indispensable to rekindle unity among all people.

Michael Ward



Ptolemy I, successor of Alexander the Great. Is believed to have been tutored by Aristotle and The Museum – Library of Alexandria was likely created during his reign the 3rd century BC. - image:pngegg.com

# Alexandria

## A Culture of Tolerance and Solidarity

When we think of the great cities of the classical world we often think of Athens or Rome but one that shone just as bright was Alexandria. This Egyptian city which hugs the coast of the Mediterranean was founded by Alexander the Great and was famous for its reputation of discovering knowledge in all its different aspects. At the heart of this project was the greatest known library and museum of antiquity. Due to its geographical location, it was a meeting point of trade, not only of physical goods but of metaphysical goods also, of different ideas, different values, different cultures which contributed to an openness in seeing points of view that were different from their own.

This openness and sharing of ideas led in part to an era of new discoveries; Eratosthenes being the first person to calculate the circumference of the Earth; the mechanical inventions of Archimedes such as the compound pulley and the irrigation screw which bore his name; Heron publishing a well-recognised description of a steam-powered device called an aeolipile, to name a few. In philosophy the school of Neoplatonism in Alexandria combined the teachings of Plato and other philosophical traditions in an eclectic way, integrating the best of all these different elements to create a unique whole.

Neoplatonism encouraged a dialogue between different traditions, where everyone could learn from each other,

where no ideas were excluded simply because they were different. The possibility was always open that someone else's understanding of Man and the universe may be perfectly valid, contributing to the whole. What later emerged in Alexandria, which would result in its bright flame being extinguished, were fanatical groups opposed to this eclectic approach of the Neoplatonists. A fanatic sees only one point of view and is unable, or unwilling, to see other points of view, and thinks their view is right and the others are wrong. Fanaticism can be religious, political, scientific or artistic, it is not specific to a discipline, but rather a way of seeing the world.

What can we learn from this ancient city? Today in our world, when we open newspapers or look at the different news feeds, they reveal partisanship in politics, science and our society. Everywhere we turn, there is an unwillingness to understand the other person's or group's point of view, little desire to work together to get closer to the truth, or to find the best long term solution that satisfies the common good. One lesson we can learn from Alexandria is tolerance, to see that there are other points of view, different from our own. Tolerance can be accepting others' right to be different, to have different views, but it does not necessarily mean we make the effort to understand them. We can be satisfied with putting up with each other, enduring or tolerating each other as long as we don't disturb each other. The





# Pallas and the Centaur

*Pallas and the Centaur* is a painting by the Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli. It was probably depicted in 1482 and now hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Tuscany.

Interestingly, this painting has been proposed as a companion piece to another classic work from Botticelli, his *Primavera*. They were displayed for many years side by side in a city palace in Florence.

Both paintings were commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici, also known as *il Magnifico* - the magnificent - as gifts on occasion of his cousin's marriage in 1482. Lorenzo was a Florentine patron, political leader and grandson of Cosimo de Medici, the founder of the Neoplatonic Academy of Careggi (near Florence), led by the philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499).

What an intense and delightful experience it must have been to gaze at both paintings alongside each other... To immerse oneself in the gentleness and sweetness emanating from the faces of the feminine characters depicted in both artworks, while in the same breath noticing a striking difference: the compositions in the background.

Sometimes Botticelli would put great amounts of attention to the background to add layers of symbolism along with the focus of the artwork, as seen in the *Primavera*, for example. In the case of *Pallas and the Centaur*, however, the setting is stark: relatively empty and very dark. Why did Botticelli keep it so simple on this occasion? Perhaps he wanted us to focus almost exclusively on the two figures in the foreground.

*Pallas and the Centaur* shows a tall and beautiful woman grabbing a centaur by the hair. The woman has been identified as the Greek deity Athena, specifically by her epithet of Pallas, which identifies her as a goddess of wisdom. The olive branches that cover her clothing also reinforce that interpretation. She wears a dress decorated with the three-ring insignia of the Medici family.

Athena is the multifaceted goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, civilization, law and justice, mathematics, strength, war strategy, the arts and crafts. She is known for her calm temperament. Portrayed as a shrewd companion and patron

goddess of heroic endeavour, she is noted to have fought for justice, rejecting any battle that lacked purpose. How much this attitude could help us fight for Truth!

Art historians have also suggested that the woman could represent an Amazon warrior named Camilla. The Roman poet Virgil wrote about Camilla in the *Aeneid*, and described her as chaste, pure, and powerful. It's possible that Botticelli painted this woman to be both figures simultaneously - mixing Greek and Roman themes together was something he did often.

In Classical mythology centaurs were not evil creatures. They were, however, subject to their own desires. They got drunk and ruined parties, and were often overcome by lust, passion, or greed. Combining man and beast, they symbolise the feral instincts of humanity and therefore, the work is to be understood as an allegory to virtues that act as a brake on a bad-tempered, passionate temperament.

*Athena Pallas*, on the other hand, was the goddess of wisdom and a symbol of rational logic. She was also the patron goddess of Athens, the city of Socrates and Aristotle. With that in mind, this ceases to be a painting about mythology and becomes a tale of morality. This is the story of virtue conquering passions.

In a time where the Catholic church wielded immense power and influence, Botticelli's purpose wasn't to convince people to worship Athena; it was to communicate how reason, wisdom and ethics are stronger than passion, lust, and greed. The use of Classical mythology and Classical philosophy to reinforce a morality both pagan and Christian was a very Renaissance thing to do, and Botticelli did it better than nearly anyone. This mythical scene was to be the last of his Medicean period, moving on from this point to more religious-based work which continued until the end of his career.

Lilian Salaber





# The 12 Days of Yule

If you ever wondered why there are '12 days of Christmas', the answer most likely lies in the pagan celebration of the solstice, known as Yule. The word Yule is the anglicised form of the Norse word Jul (or Jöl), the name for the midwinter festival oriented around the shortest day of the year, the northern hemisphere's winter solstice.

For the people of Germania, Scandinavia, and Anglo-Saxon England, understanding the cycles of nature and the sun, in particular, was critical to survival, and celebrating the winter solstice is an ancient pagan tradition, predating Christianity by several thousand years. The Stonehenge structure in England, dating back to 3000 BCE, is known to have a mysterious relationship with the solstices, as does the Newgrange monument in Ireland from the same period.

The word solstice, derived from the Latin sol, meaning 'sun', and sistere, meaning 'to stand still', refers to the point at which the sun 'stops' to change its direction having reached the furthest extent of its north-south traverse. During Yuletide (the time of Yule) the Nordic peoples celebrated the 'return of the sun' as the days began to grow longer again. As a period of rebirth, they also commemorated the dead and offered sacrifices for fertility, hoping for a good harvest in the year ahead. The Yuletide festivities are understood to have taken place over at least 3 days and involved slaughtering animals for the feast, gorging on food, especially meat, and drinking to excess, with singing and good cheer. During Yuletide, no work was done, and quarrels or fights were set aside so that the period could be kept holy.

Gradually Yuletide was extended to span a full 12 days and nights, blending several other traditions. The 12 days between the winter solstice and the beginning of the next solar year were considered a sacred period, belonging neither to the old year nor the new year. These are the days of least sunlight and the Celts believed that the sun stood still for 12 days, so they lit fires to conquer the darkness and banish evil spirits.

The Druids are believed to have created the tradition of the yule log, a bough of a large tree that was kept burning continuously for the 12 days between the solstice and the start of the solar year. Remnants of the previous year's log were used to start the fire: in effect, the 'light' was kept throughout the year and ensured continuity of good luck from year to year, from family to family, and from generation to generation.

The first day of Yule, December 20th, is known as Mother's Night (Módraniht) and celebrations honour feminine ancestors and goddesses: the mother figures. The second day of Yule, December 21st, is known for The Wild Hunt. This is the night of the solstice, when Odin, as God of Death and Transition, rode through the sky, accompanied by furious winds, thunder, and lightning, collecting the souls of the dead. People stayed indoors, feasting, not venturing out for fear they might be swept up by the hunt. The Twelfth Night, December 31st, brings the festivities to a close and is associated with Wassailing, the wishing of

good health in song, and the drinking of wassail, a warm alcoholic concoction (which in more recent times has become a Christmas tradition of carol-singing and the drinking of mulled wine punch).

During these 12 days of celebration, there was lots of close family contact with each day seen as representing one of the 12 months of the year. With the return of longer days and the ending of the solar year, they celebrated the start of another cycle of life, death, and rebirth. It was also a period of reflection with some traditions assigning individual days to focus on one of the Nine Noble Virtues

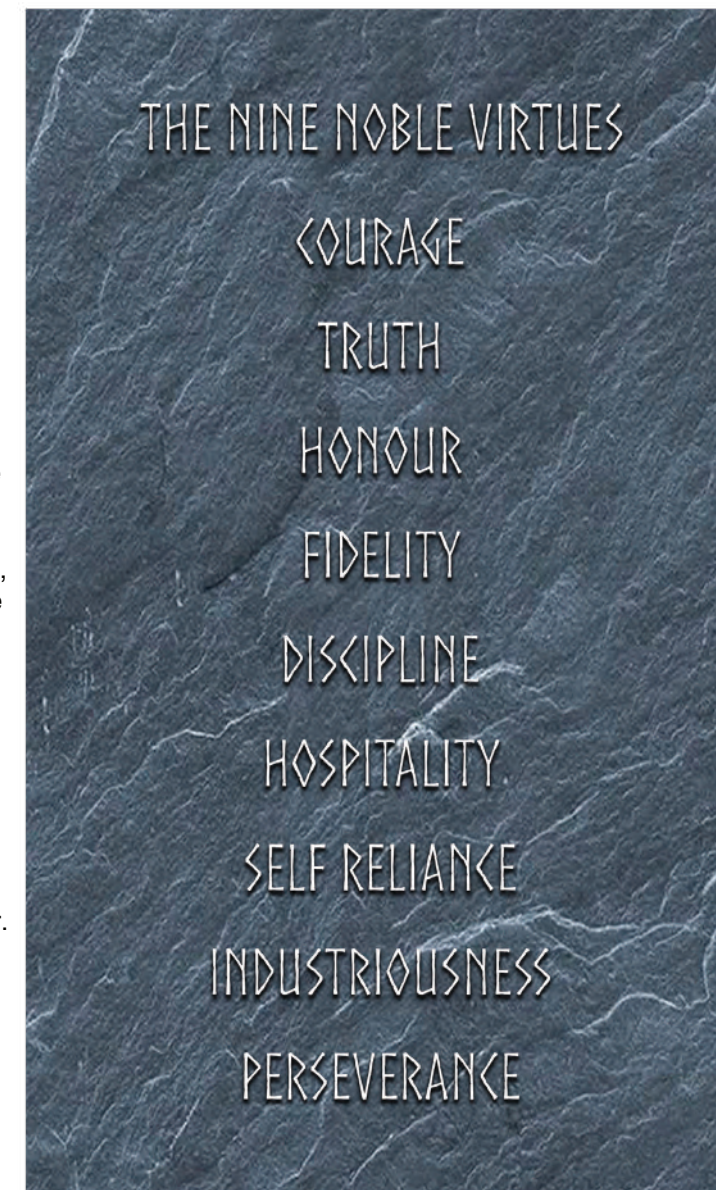
from Norse religion, considered to form a spiritual law and moral code by which one should live life.

Today's Christmas traditions may have borrowed much from ancient Nordic traditions of Yule but did so without retaining their meaning. In our increasingly materialistic and commercially-driven Christmas season, we might ask ourselves what is it that we celebrate at this time of year, and what is the meaning behind our so-called customs. Certainly, we no longer depend upon the solar cycles for survival like our ancient northern ancestors, but we are still part of the natural world and we have been reminded that we are still powerless over the forces of nature.

In this time of crisis, many are re-evaluating what is important in life and the type of society we want. In our reflections at the end of this year, we might draw from the ancient Yule tradition of accepting the cycles of nature and life, celebrating the promise of a new year,

the value of togetherness, focusing on the noble virtues and the development of our moral character.

Martin McGranaghan







Finding

Meaning

in

Uncertain

Times

On the subject of his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl recounts how a journalist asked him how he felt about his book being a successful bestseller. He replied that he did not see this as a success or achievement but an indication of the lack of meaning in people's lives. This book was published over seventy years ago but the question of the meaning of life persists, where and how do we find it, is there meaning to life, and if there is how do we find it?

A person living in Europe during the Middle Ages had a shared belief system given by Christianity. This belief system offered a meaning to life, how to behave, why we are here and where we go after death. With the decline of religion and the rise of science during the Enlightenment another vision of life arose which was the scientific vision. It was very successful in explaining the physical world and how it works, resulting in great technological revolutions. Science explains well the 'how' of things but is relatively silent on the 'why' of things. The 'why' addresses the purpose and the meaning. As science became more successful and popular in the nineteenth century, some philosophers and writers saw the vacuum of meaning starting to emerge in society. Nietzsche famously said: "God is dead...and we have killed him". This is not a statement of victory but of concern: in the search for the means to develop better technology we are losing the meaning in life. A new 'ism' came about during this time called Nihilism, which is a view of life where everything is relative, there is no morality and there is no inherent meaning in life. This Nihilistic attitude in facing life is something that has not gone away. It has continued to spread and develop and is with us today in our society.

The Nihilistic view of life is not the only one. There is another view of life which is affirming, to accept that life is not perfect, that there are challenges, suffering, doubt, things go wrong, but within that there is an opportunity to grow individually and collectively through adversity. There is no inner growth without inner resistance, and the challenge of COVID-19 and others afford us the opportunity to put ourselves to the test like all the great heroes from mythology. There has never been a time where people did not face the unexpected; it is part and parcel of living. Finding meaning in the challenges and opportunities of daily life is one of the things that can help us.

What does the word 'meaning' mean? It is intimately related to purpose. The purpose is the aim, or end-goal, and having this purpose in sight gives meaning to experiences to reach the goal. Once the purpose of something is clear, it then gives a means or meaning to achieve the purpose. How does one find meaning or purpose in life? Some look for the ultimate purpose first, the large purpose so to imbue everyday life with meaning. The Greeks called them ideals, in India they called it Dharman and Carl Jung referred to Archetypes of the Collective Unconsciousness. Another view is to find purpose in the small things of everyday life, which will help clarify and construct the large meaning and purpose in one's life. The best approach is to combine the two views at the same time. How can we find

meaning in daily life? A few keys offered from wise sages throughout humanity's long history can help:

### Clarify Ideas

Life is abound with different opinions on what is right and wrong, what is beneficial and unwholesome, what is just and unjust. This can create uncertainty and doubt and stifle one's action. How does a craftsman decide if an idea for a design is good or not? The craftsman builds or manifests the design and tests it. The same with the ideas we have, to put them to the test, and observe them in action. If they are good for us and for others and promote a spirit of unity then we are going in the right direction. These ideas will give meaning to our actions.

### Take Responsibility

Taking responsibility is not something typically promoted in our society today; instead society encourages us to be a passive observer in the events of life. When we are responsible for something, something bigger than ourselves, it gives our life a purpose and meaning. Responsibility takes us outside what is known and comfortable into the adventure of the unknown and uncomfortable so as to truly experience life.

### Question with Courage

To find meaning is to explore the unknown territory of life, to let go of preconceived ideas and validate what we think we know. As Socrates said: "The unexamined life is not worth living". Are our current values and opinions elevating us or are they limiting us? These are not easy questions to ask oneself and it requires courage to face oneself and to be honest with oneself. This Socratic dialogue with oneself has a purifying effect, letting go of an old way of being to embrace a new way of being.

### Be Patient in Action

Meaning may not appear immediately but takes time to discover. It is to have the patience to wait for the small mysteries of life to unveil themselves to us. When something is done well, with the right attention, with the right thought and efficiently then there is a sense of satisfaction. Through conscious repetition and observing oneself and life around us, daily actions give small pieces of wisdom. These aggregate pieces of daily wisdom give our actions a deeper dimension.

These keys are a partial list but will help to unlock some of the meaning that is inherent in yourself, others and life. In paraphrasing Viktor Frankl, man should not ask the meaning of his life but recognise that it is life that is asking him, that life is questioning him and to life he can only respond by being responsible.

Michael Ward



# Confucius

## Philosopher, leader, citizen



To the west, Confucius is often known as a wise man, with simple yet profound aphorisms that offer a deep source of self-reflection. Beyond this, what do we know of the man and his works? What his story and legacy tells us is that aside from memorable words of wisdom, Confucius put forth an enduring model of social order, manifesting in individual, ethical excellence. This high ideal came at a time when China's long standing feudal system was in decadence and in need of correction. Confucianism greatly influenced China for nearly two and a half thousand years reigning as the chief political, ethical and spiritual practice of the people until the rise of the communist party.

The historical account of Kong-Fuzi (known in the west as Confucius) is peppered with legendary embellishments highlighting his great standing in the annals of humanity's sages. Of noble birth and destined for greatness, a pair of dragons held vigil over his cot. Even as a child he was a wellspring of knowledge and held deep and complex discussions with the elders of his town. His precocious and evolved intelligence led to him reading and assimilating all the classical wisdom of his time so that it was said he had no masters, only disciples.

Historical details demonstrate his keen aptitude for and interest in politics. Being a public servant was the highest honour for him and to lead and shape his country's future was his greatest aspiration. At the age of 17 he had a senior position in local government and by 25 he founded his own school where philosophical teachings were available to all people, regardless of their class or status. For a feudal society this was revolutionary.

After a fabled meeting with the Master of Tao, Lao-Tzu, Confucius' own reputation spread far and wide. Where the Tao promotes an understanding of material life being insubstantial and that wisdom is achieved only through the transcendence of duality, Confucianism (while not dismissing the spiritual and ephemeral aspect of life) seeks a more practical path. Confucius believed the path to wisdom lay in order, ethics, politics and virtue and that the formation of the human being is here, in the world we live in. He believed we should seek to resolve the inner challenges preventing us from living in harmony with others before concerning ourselves too much with the mysteries of the universe. Or in his own words:



*"Before you serve the Gods, concern yourself with serving those around you, making the noble, courageous, honest, just and virtuous; and once you accomplish this, devote yourself to the Gods."*

Later, Confucius rose through the ranks of political service in the capital of his state Lu, eventually serving as Minister for Justice, the highest political office outside of royalty. His methods helped to grow his region in prosperity and civil obedience. Lu became a shining beacon of morality as well as an economic powerhouse. Rival states grew jealous and plotted against Confucius, seeking to sow discord between him and the Prince of Lu, who had become his disciple. Despite Confucius' best efforts to instill in the Prince a noble and upright character, he was easily seduced by the lavish gifts and concubines sent to him by his clever enemies. Corruption soured the Prince towards his former master and Confucius was banished from his home.

Being a great and wise individual, Confucius took his crisis and converted it into a huge act of generosity, travelling the country and sharing his teachings with all. From kings to peasants, he advised all indiscriminately and when asked to stay and settle in any region he refused, assuring his requestors that his sacred duty was to be available to all. A champion of the people, an untiring reformer, Confucius died at the age of seventy-three, leaving a legacy of justice and fraternity that continues to inspire us to this day.

At the heart of Confucianism is the concept of Li, a rationalised order based on Natural or Universal Law, comparable to Dharma in India or Maat in Egypt. Li can be understood as a system of regulation and evolution. When applied to the individual it is ethical development awakening the human beings' virtues of Justice and Goodness. In the political arena, Li is the harmonisation of these individuals so that, guided by virtue, people are united and verticalised towards a higher collective ideal, namely, the common good. In this way, Confucianism transcends the barriers between individual and society, between ethics and politics and marries them in a single ideal of living. For Confucius, these ideas were inseparable; ethical people would lead to a Just society and noble rulers would elevate the people to aspire to noble ideals.

"If you guide the people by governmental measures, and if you regulate them by threats of punishment, people will try to avoid prison, but they will lack a sense of honour. Guide the people by Virtue and regulate them by the Li, and people will have a sense of honour and of respect."

Beyond the maxims captured in his Analects, which remain a tremendous source of wisdom, his political philosophy should also give us serious pause for thought and trigger a deep reflection on our current relationship between the individual and society.

Aidan Murphy



## *Confucius Says*

*Those who would perfect their work must first sharpen their tools.*



*A person who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it is committing another mistake.*



*I hear and I know. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.*



*It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop.*



*Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.*



*To move a mountain, one begins by carrying away small stones.*

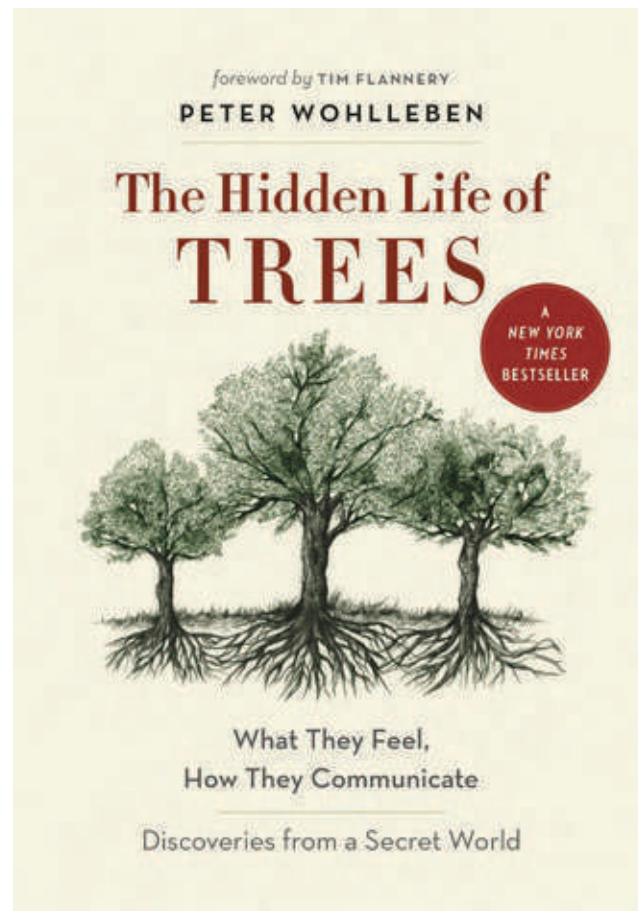


*Plant a thought, reap an act. Plant an act, reap a habit. Plant a habit, reap a character. Plant a character, reap a destiny.*



*Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in getting up every time we do.*





“We read in fairy tales of trees with human faces, trees that can talk, and sometimes walk. This enchanted forest is the kind of place, I feel sure, that Peter Wohlleben inhabits. His deep understanding of the lives of trees, reached through decades of observation and study, reveals a world so astonishing that if you read this book, I believe that forests will become magical places for you, too.”

Foreword by Tim Flannery,  
internationally acclaimed author, scientist and explorer.

Some time ago we came to the conclusion that fairy tales are the fruits of human fantasy, unable to rationally explain the mysterious world in which they live. We became enchanted by the positivistic and materialistic worldview and forgot our bonds with nature, visible and invisible, crumbling our imagination. Today our science begins to rediscover some of this profound wisdom safeguarded in the myths and legends of all people, that we live in a world animated by a limitless and beautiful intelligence beyond our comprehension. The science seems to give a voice to this knowledge, long forgotten, a reminiscence that we are part of a living macrocosm called nature, universe, cosmos or more.

This book talks about the hidden, unexpected life of trees. Peter Wohlleben skillfully presents the most recent scientific discoveries through enchantingly human analogies to help us understand the impact of these discoveries not only with our intellect, but with our heart. He is a commercial forester by trade. Through his work he got to know his forests more intimately, becoming an ambassador of natural forests and sustainable methods of forestry. An unlikely combination you may say? Perhaps it is, but the paradoxes of life often bring us to unexpected destinations.

He came to discover a deeper reality of forests by trying to make them more productive, commercially, realising with time that a healthier and thus happier (i.e. more natural) forest is also more productive. He highlights the need to reject contemporary commercial forestry practices which he challenges as unnatural, disruptive and violent (such as girdling or ring-barking, i.e. the complete removal of the bark of a trunk, resulting in slow death) and to develop more natural approaches. One such project is in the Eifel Mountains in Germany, to rebuild a naturally-grown forest.

Discovering this book, the research and projects to reform forestry was quite fascinating to me, and hopefully you will feel the same. Yet I couldn't but wonder how little attention is given to this in mainstream science, education and media.

We have always known that the workings of nature are complex, and its genius never ceases to amaze us, but did you know that trees are social beings living in communities and raising families? Did you know that trees communicate in far more complex ways than we could have imagined? Did you know that trees had to become great organisers if they are to carry out tasks such as blossoming? Did you know that trees feel pain?

One of the fascinating things that Wohlleben explains is that the natural forests are large superorganisms, in which each tree plays a role and is closely connected to other trees. They are collaborators, supporting their own species as well as other species. Only a forest can provide a microclimate suitable for tree growth and sustenance. Trees don't follow the Darwinian

hypothesis “the survival of the fittest”. Quite the opposite, we find in the original forests an astounding example of natural collaborators.

There are examples of beeches who kept a tree stump alive for centuries. The neighboring beeches nourished the stump with sugar through a fungal network around root tips to keep it alive. It was also found that stronger trees tend to support weaker or sick individuals by feeding them and as well as that they build affectionate relationships. A tree recognizes its parents. Great silver beech trees are reluctant to abandon their dead. Some trees develop such strong connections that they die at the same time.

Another discovery was that trees communicate in various ways, using a sense of smell, taste and sound. Trees are far slower than us humans, appearing motionless. But even with their snail-like tempo they still communicate. In African savannah, acacia trees would release gas to warn other trees of feeding giraffes, while releasing toxins to make its leaves inedible. A giraffe would walk 100 yards to feed on those acacia trees who were too far away to be warned. Trees use their root network supported by fungi which earned the name of “Wood Wide Web” in the scientific community. Trees also use a “voice” to broadcast news and “speak” at 220 Hz.

What is invisible to the eye is how much coordination is required for all trees to blossom at the same time. Like a Swiss clock. We are only now starting to grasp that this is not a product of chance.

The author has managed to open a door to the wonder-full world of forests - making us realise that our destinies are bound together. There are more living organisms in a handful of forest soil than human beings on the entire planet Earth. Isn't that amazing? While this book is fascinating, it is important to go beyond this mere fascination to arrive at true investigation and introspection. What would be one learning to take away? I would say unity and interdependency.

Isn't it remarkable that our forests are examples of solidarity, altruism, collaboration, and partnership, reminding us of our own nature?

After reading this book you will not see trees the same way, and hopefully, you won't see people the same way either. To the philosopher nature is a book of wisdom, if one chooses to learn from it. We can use the power of our intelligence and imagination to overcome illusory divisions and separation from others and nature.

Ivona Ward



**In both Buddhism and Stoicism there is a real emphasis on living the practices and making them part of your daily life. Like paying attention to tying your shoelace.**

# The Proof is in the Pudding

## Philosophy as a way of living

We all know the phrase, "the proof is in the pudding." You don't want a chef to tell you how great his food is. He has to make it to prove himself. The same should be applied to philosophy. What's the point of a degree in philosophy if you're not living it. Epictetus supported this belief saying, 'A builder does not say, "Listen to me talking about the Art of Building"'. In this way our knowledge shines through in the things we do. And if pudding is the proof of a chef, what is the pudding of a philosopher and how do we make it?

For the Stoics, philosophy was primarily about the Art of Living. But this is not as easy as Seneca observed, 'Just as some dyes are readily absorbed by the wool, others only after repeated soaking. It must soak in, not just giving a tinge of colour but a real deep dye, or it cannot deliver on any of its promises'.

In both Buddhism and Stoicism there is a real emphasis on living the practices and making them part of your daily life. Like paying attention to tying your shoelace. It's funny to look back and see that the mind's initial reaction to laughing at this was a mask of fear at the prospect of breaking the endless stream of thinking. This is what's meant by the phrase, 'when you're washing your hands, wash your hands'. Be at one with the task and stop thinking about what you're going to have for dinner or what you're going to watch next on TV.

Most of the time as we move through the world we are responding to an unconscious belief system that's causing emotions to arise and for us to act in different ways. We're buying food in the supermarket and we look at the floor instead of chatting with the cashier. We might tell ourselves we don't want to bother them, or if we talk to them today, then we'll be compelled to talk to them tomorrow. All these thoughts are flashing through our minds often without us even being aware of them, telling us that danger is lurking in the tall grass. And often these thoughts are misleading, or blown out of proportion.

So how do we become aware of these unconscious systems? We need to take conscious action and move towards the uncomfortable feelings instead of away from them. We need to step out of our comfort zone and engage in the battlefield of life. Through action we can see reality more clearly and begin to dissolve the fantasies created by our mind. Soon those uncomfortable feelings become a guiding force, and we can use them as opportunities to learn and not to run for cover.



**"Just as some dyes are readily absorbed by the wool, others only after repeated soaking."**

**—Seneca**

Part of this is also accepting that things can and will get bad. There's no use being calm only when surrounded by candles in the comfort of your own home. As Seneca said, 'The sea is calm now but do not trust it. Pleasure boats that were out all morning are sunk before the day is over'.

As humans we have the ability to change by looking at our first response. First we monitor, then we make changes. For example, the next time you're driving and someone cuts in front of you, observe the instinctive reaction to lash out and shout back at them. Create some space between you and the reaction. When you do this you'll find yourself suddenly in control, and realising that you don't have to get angry. It's not a given. Even better, once you use this as a practice you can welcome the bad driving of others with humour as they are helping you on the spiritual path. As the Dalai Lama said, 'Without an enemy's action, there is no possibility for patience or tolerance to arise'.

Conor McMahon





# The Universe as an Answer

Founder of New Acropolis Jorge Angel Livraga (1930-1991) invites you on an exploration of the great enigmas of life and how the very Universe itself may already hold the key...

We often speak about the stars, the planets, the animals, the sky, the Earth, water or snow and we forget the real sense and meaning of the word Universe. Man asks himself questions about the whole of Nature, of which he himself is a part, but he tends to lose the central idea to which it refers.

'Universe' means that which is going in a single direction, so what we must discover is where it is going. This was perhaps one of the first approaches that humanity had. All the ancient civilisations asked themselves, through their religions, their metaphysics and their philosophies, where the universe is going and why; but the new materialistic-type ways of seeing things, especially in the post-Cartesian age, present us with a different point of view, and then man begins to analyse the characteristics of the universe, its size, form and weight.

Man claims to know the universe, because he has given names to the stars and measured the distance from the Earth to the Moon; or because he knows the list of chemical elements and the characteristics of the physical forces, and yet, in that detailed kind of knowledge, although there has been a specialisation of knowledge in

each of the areas, these areas have become increasingly separate from one another.

In mineralogy, for example, we are taught the different characteristics of the rocks and the orogenic movements that have brought about changes to the Earth's surface; but we are not taught about the fundamental meaning of material things.

Let us suppose that we pick up any object and drop it suddenly; we will see that it falls and always looks for the lowest place; there is always a natural attraction between this little piece of matter and that big piece of matter where we are. This material attraction is untiring.

What can we extract, then, from the nature of the mineral world? We can extract a tenacity, a search for destiny; and which of us can say that we share with the stones that search for destiny? In general, when we meet a difficulty, we tend to fight it for a while, and if the difficulty does not give way, we give way. The things of Nature, the stones, for example, have the tenacity of being beyond time and of always looking for their final destination.

Our children are taught the different characteristics of plants, about the process of photosynthesis, but it is not mentioned that, beyond every phenomenon of light absorption and conversion into energy, exists the capacity of the plant to know how to wait and to know how to grow. A little seed, buried in the earth in winter, under the snow, patiently awaits the advent of spring. When it arrives, that little seed rises up and seeks the air and the sun. It is another teaching of tenacity, of verticality and from a philosophical point of view, we are interested in the final meaning of the action of things.

We also have water; water will run off in search of the sea, it evaporates, condenses and becomes The universe has a

Obviously, in the new centuries, alienated by psychology of Man has forgotten the interpret them. The themselves so the distance between the they tried to understand in the Universe. Through astrology and others, they tried natural phenomena and see in they were connected with this phenomenon which is called Man. And that gave the man of antiquity the sensation of being accompanied by intelligent beings, and of being himself an intelligent being.

Our present problem is that we feel isolated in the midst of the universe, in other words, since we are so much in contact with artificial elements, we have lost the ability to seek a purpose in things, and the dramatic part of this is that we have lost the possibility of finding a purpose in our own lives. As we live only from instant to instant, we have lost a teleological sense of life, of our ancestral roots and of the purpose that life has. And in this way we become beings of a moment, subject to time, feeling certain that we have been created by chance and that we are going to disappear at any moment; and this subconscious thought overwhelms us and damages us. Instead of trying to interpret Nature, we try to create a series of intermediary elements which are absolutely artificial.

The leaves of trees have their respiratory pores on the lower part; why not on the upper part? Simply because the dust would cover them. By being on the lower part, they are saved and can breathe. Is this chance?

Is it chance that the colour of butterflies' wings blends in with the flowers and the foliage so that the birds cannot catch them? Is it chance that the tips of owls' wings are smooth, so that they do not make any noise in their nocturnal flight and are thus able to catch the rabbits by surprise? Is it chance that those rodents have their ears

pointing backwards, so they can capture the slightest sound of any predators that might be coming in their pursuit? Is the number of colours into which the spectrum is divided when it is touched by white light also chance? Is the way in which we classify sounds also by chance?

It is obvious that the entire universe is coordinated in such a way that it has a wholeness about it, a kind of pyramidal sense of existence, where things, even though they are multiple, are going in search of a single end; they are all going towards of a single thing and they are all single intelligence.

aviators understood that planes in the V at the front is replaced the back; it has been the speed of the all together in the such a way that the the middle and the slipstream.

happens by chance. able to understand it. examples showing how cannot assert that the incidents is mere chance, we have to recognise that the intelligence has planned everything. And if we accept this universal planning, we would have to ask

ourselves why, for what purpose? It is inconceivable that everything is planned for no reason, it is more logical to think that it has been designed for a purpose; and if it has been designed, it is good to try to discover what answer the universe can give us, for what purpose it was designed, where we are all headed, where we come from and where we are going.

There are seven principles or seven fundamental laws, in accordance with the natural divisions of the whole universe.

## 1. Unity

The first principle, the highest of all the principles of Nature, is the principle of unity. The whole of Nature is co-ordinated, in other words, it forms a vital unity and nothing is excluded from it. When things are alive, they do not destroy others, but make possible the life of all. When the wolf pursues the deer on the steppe, it does not catch the youngest, but the oldest, the sick one, the one which could transmit its illness to the rest of the herd. In other words, even what seem to us to be acts of destruction, what might seem to be acts of cruelty, are made in such a way that the species can be perpetuated.

There are no doubts in Nature, no dialogues of oppositions. Everything is given perfect expression and is going in a single direction.

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2. Illumination

The second principle is that of illumination; all things in Nature have that principle, whether it is a physical or a spiritual illumination. The realities exist, but they need an intellectual or spiritual light to enable us to distinguish them, and when we sometimes say that there are no truths, that there is nothing on which we can rely, that we are alone, it is because we are in darkness and we need to rediscover the principle of illumination.

3. Differentiation

This principle brings as a consequence the third one, which is differentiation. All things in Nature are differentiated. There are no two things that are absolutely equal, or the same. This principle exists even though sometimes we may not see it; all things are different; even the grains of sand that we step on on the beach and that seem to be all the same are not the same. If we look at them attentively with a magnifying glass, we will see that each of them has its little difference, its little characteristic. Hence, we have to be careful when using the words sameness or equality. We can be equivalent, but not equal; we can be similar, but not equal; and that does not separate or divide, it does not destroy human beings; it enriches them, like a mosaic of different colours which can have similar tones, but are never exactly the same. The concept of equality is a human invention; in Nature equality does not exist.

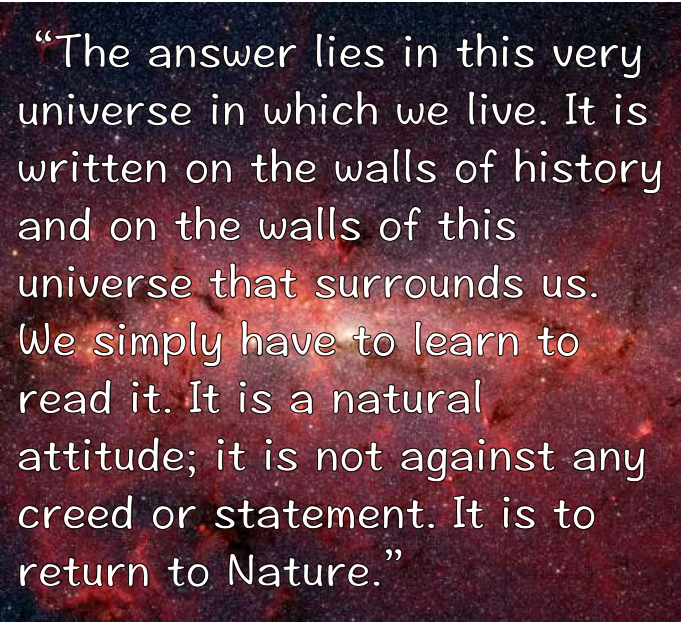
4. Organisation

The fourth principle is the principle of organisation. Things are organised; we all see a tree, a solid trunk that rises above the earth and supports a tree-top full of branches and birds' nests; but we do not see another inverse tree-top which lies beneath the earth and which also with its wooden branches supports all the rest and sinks deep into the earth; and although it has no birds, it has worms and insects, and nourishes everything. In other words, everything is perfectly organised, everything is designed in such a way that there is support and cooperation between one thing and another. And the mistakes we humans tend to make are due to a lack of organisation.

Organisation is not a massification, it is not the imposition of some people over others; organisation is supportiveness. The hands are opposite and yet they organise themselves to pick something up; if we had the two hands on the same side, we would have difficulty in picking anything up. So, it is necessary to recognise this principle of organisation, even when we are opposed in something. This principle allows us all to work together, without ceasing to be who we are; this is something we should apply in our lives, in the here and now.

5. Causality

There is a fifth principle, the principle of causality: all things are the cause of something that follows them and the effect of what went before them, all of us descend



from something and give rise to something: anything, taken at any point, is the result of something and the cause of something else, even apparently inanimate things. Nothing is only a cause or only an effect, they are linked together. From day comes night, from night comes day.

6. Vitality

The sixth principle, that of vitality, tells us that all things are alive. Absolutely everything. Until the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, people used to speak about living beings and inanimate objects. Still today, due to inertia, we continue to repeat this because we say that something is alive when it moves or when it flies or when it grows. Since the beginning of the world things have not only been alive when they act, they are also alive when they resist. All things are in constant movement, even if we cannot see the molecules or the atoms revolving in the air, which make up our hands, our bones. Everything is penetrated by vitality; this vitality which in the East is called "prana", a life that enters into all things, that never stops, so that even the things which we call dead are not dead, they have simply changed condition, shape, or way of living.

7. Periodicity

Finally we have the principle of periodicity. Since we were born we have noticed that in Nature there is an alternation between night and day, summer and winter, and so many other states which in this way oppose one another and alternate with one another; and yet, we do not realise until we read Plato, until someone teaches us or until we ourselves awaken to that reality that we, too, are within that periodicity. All these cycles include a great cycle which we call human life. But why stop there? Why not understand that this human life is a short day of being awake within a great life? That after this physical life there is a spiritual life and that it is like a dream, and that then we will have a physical life and a spiritual life.

The law of cycles embraces all things and never stops, everything is cyclic: the planets revolve cyclically in the



sky, and the tiny particles also move within the atoms.

This periodicity allows life to be continuous and pulsating. We have to try to take from Nature what is not easily destructible. We have to look after something, not only our physical part, but the other parts, too. Because, to what extent do we look after our psychological part? To what extent do we give food to our mind, every day? To what extent do we have spiritual food? We have to look after our dreams. We have reached such a point of materiality that we take care that a jug or a car does not get broken, but what about a dream, a hope, an effort? What happens with the crystal birds of our dreams when they are broken? They are smashed to pieces and injure our hands.

We have to have the courage to pulverise our broken dreams, and with that glass dust of our dreams, to create new birds. It is time that we understood that we do not just have to drag ourselves through the world as if we were tortoises or snakes, but we have to learn to fly with the power of wings.

Philosophy is not mere speculation; it is not to sit in a corner and watch life pass by, nor is it a discipline of sorrows and withdrawal. Philosophy is to have a strong attitude in front of life, it is to understand the spirit of things, it is to be able to conquer the fear within ourselves, to conquer death, to be able to connect with others, with the deeper part of everyone. Because we do not see each other; sometimes it is said that when Man dies, he passes into the invisible world; however, Man is always invisible; he is behind the things that he does, behind his own body, his own words, his own acts. Man is a great question, a great enigma.

The answer lies in this very universe in which we live. It is written on the walls of history and on the walls of this universe that surrounds us. We simply have to learn to read it. It is a natural attitude; it is not against any creed or statement. It is to return to Nature.

We have discernment and yet we lack it in many things; who wants a car that only works from time to time? No one. And yet we accept ideas that are sometimes good and other times not, principles that apply sometimes and sometimes not, honesty which applies sometimes and sometimes not. We have to go back to having that common sense that we use on the physical level. In the spiritual part we have to go back to requiring from ourselves, from the world around us, absolute values that are easy to understand, to handle, to assimilate, that allow us to have an exact understanding of the universe.

We need a new science, a science that will move away from the vice of vested interests, a science in which there is no sense of violence. We need art that will allow us to be united once more with beauty, which is not based on anguish, but on true investigation. We need a politics that can lead men to live together in harmony and to be elevated, rather than leading us into conflicts or artificial coexistence. We need, in short, a New World. But this world already exists: it is the universe itself, it is Nature. The only thing we have to do is to live intensely the moments which destiny has offered us. To be like a key which is inserted into the lock of the universe and springs open the door of history, to pass to another dimension, to pass into that world which is awaiting us, that world which must be not only new, but better.

Jorge Angel Livraga



# Our Recommendations

Over the last 7 issues we have published a number of film reviews, highlighting examples of cinema that portray meaningful stories to inspire us. Here now is a summary of those recommendations, for any occasion that you may be searching for something to watch which is more than just entertaining but also shares beautiful and thought provoking ideas. Popcorn optional.



**Bacurau**

A modern Brazilian western with a dark twist, *Bacurau* tells the story of the titular town, invaded by an evil force seeking to hunt people for sport.

Beyond the violent premise lies an intriguing social commentary, a cautionary tale of the ignorance displayed when one people seek to dehumanise another, seeing them as inferior.

We have seen this dynamic play out in real wars. When a large invading country's initial arrogance is soon replaced with shock as they realise the people they attack have a history and a resilience that they didn't expect.

The film is a lesson to investigate, to look below the surface, and not be so quick to think we are superior to others because of our advances in technology.



**Cast Away**

This is the story of Chuck Nolan, played by Tom Hanks, who finds himself stranded on a desert island after a deadly plane crash. With no hope of rescue Chuck must learn to survive on his own.

Before the crash Chuck was a victim of time, rushing through a busy life that was leaving him behind. In his new life as a deserted survivor he starts to rediscover the things he had taken for granted.

The film is also about a man who essentially dies and comes back to life. The story plays out the idea that we must die to the self, or the false self we have built.

It also encompasses the idea that the worst thing that happens to us can also be the best thing. We can never really judge an event as bad, because it's the struggles that can lead us to inner growth.



**Groundhog Day**

The film is a fantasy comedy starring Bill Murray as TV weatherman Phil Connors doomed to continuously relive his least favourite of all days - Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney.

Even with all the certainty of knowing exactly what comes next, true happiness eludes Phil until he accepts his reality, strives to be the best that he can be, and commits himself to take care of others.

He masters the art of consciously repeating things in order to progressively improve as an individual. This is the timeless wisdom of all the great philosophers who suggest we too can come out of our mechanical and habitual 'Groundhog Days', through conscious, selfless action and develop our own capacity for self-transformation. It is a message worth repeating, over and over.



**The Last Samurai**

Nathan Algren, played by Tom Cruise starts out as a traumatised veteran of the American-Indian wars, plagued by his conscience. Commissioned to help train Japanese forces to quell their own indigenous uprising, he is confronted by the demons of his past in a foreign land.

Captured and taken in by the Samurai, Algren is introduced to a new vision of life, one which slowly heals his beleaguered soul.

Embracing the way of the samurai, Algren rediscovers his identity as a warrior and a human being, disciplining his mind and conquering his vices.

Algren's arc is uplifting and compelling as he discovers a better way to live and then dedicates himself to transforming accordingly, in service of others.



**The Dig**

The importance of history is one of the core concepts of *The Dig*, the link with the past as a means of understanding where we come from, while at the same time the events occur on the cusp of history in the making with WWII looming on the horizon.

The dialogues play out in deep, reflective scenes illustrating the characters coming to terms with the scope of history, their own mortality, legacy and even the expanse of the stars, an unknown terrain yet to be discovered.

*The Dig* goes deep and through the magic of cinema unearths an expansive yet intimate journey which resonates with the innate quest of the human being to connect with the mysteries of time, life and that which lies beyond.



