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NewAcropolis

Philosophy and Education for the Future

**Introduction to the
World of Feng Shui**

The Moral Struggle

'To be or not to be' Today

**Theseus and the Minotaur:
the defining human image**

PHILOSOPHY

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AND MORE



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Editorial

Metaphysical Goods

It is easy to understand theoretically how the sound of a violin is produced. But it is very difficult to turn this intellectual understanding into the actual ability to play the violin well. Similarly, as humanity, we have already grasped many profound concepts a long time ago, but in some cases it has taken us thousands of years to put these concepts into practice. For example, humanity has been aware of the concept of zero since the 3rd millennium BCE when the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians already used a placeholder symbol for it, but we did not harness its practical significance for a very long time. In the 6th century BCE, the Pythagoreans already promoted universal fraternity based on the idea of a common humanity, but we cannot say that we have had great success yet in putting this into practice.

The same can be said of another ancient concept I came across in our classes at New Acropolis: the concept of 'metaphysical goods'. To illustrate this, there is a well-known story about Socrates at the marketplace where he asks a young man: "Where can I find bread?" After receiving a polite reply, Socrates asks: "And where can I find wine?" The young man responds again with patient courtesy. "And where can I find the Good and the Noble?" The young man was perplexed and did not know what to answer. "Follow me to the streets and learn", said the philosopher.

This story, told by Xenophon, shows in a very simple way the distinction between physical and metaphysical goods. Metaphysical goods are not tangible goods, but they are 'goods' or 'values' that belong to a different 'dimension' of reality. They are very difficult to measure, to define and to produce. And yet, for philosophers like Socrates and Plato, these are the most important goods that we can produce, and that we are all looking to obtain. Examples of these goods are wisdom, benevolence, serenity, a sense of responsibility, understanding, compassion, etc.

We can see that most of these metaphysical goods can be called 'virtues'. Plato taught that if we only produced physical goods and had no virtues, then the material goods would corrupt us and lead to greed, envy, laziness, addiction, distraction, selfishness... On the other hand, if we had wisdom, generosity, perseverance, kindness, etc. we would not only be able to use the material goods wisely but also be more likely to succeed in all our endeavours.

Today, we consider the production of physical goods as one of the most important factors for the economic development and well-being of a country. But Socrates and Plato taught that the production of physical goods would not lead to the production of virtues whereas the production of metaphysical goods would naturally lead to material goods.

In the *Apology*, Plato writes: "Wealth does not bring about virtue [or excellence], but virtue makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively." And in the *Laws*: "All the gold upon the earth and all the gold beneath it does not compensate for lack of virtue".

So, these ideas are not new; they have been around for a very long time, even if they sound quite 'radical' today. But how much longer will it take us humans to apply these insights to the way we live? When are we going to realize that it is us, every single one of us, who must produce these metaphysical goods within ourselves? And when are we seriously going to think how we could provide an education that could bring out these 'meta-physical' qualities that are latent in all of us?

However, it is good to see at least that these ideas are still expressed today by well-known public figures, as the following quotes show.

Václav Havel: **"Without commonly shared and widely entrenched moral values and obligations, neither the law, nor democratic government, nor even the market economy will function properly."**

And from the same author: **"We still don't know how to put morality ahead of politics, science, and economics. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of our actions – if they are to be moral – is responsibility. Responsibility for something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success."**

Martin Luther King Jr.: **"Vanity asks, is it popular? Politics asks, will it work? But conscience and morality ask, is it right?"**

Helen Keller: **"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart."**

But the question remains: are we as individuals ready yet to put these insights into practice?

Sabine Leitner

The Moral Struggle

The true philosopher should think of his struggle as a moral battle.

The field of morality includes all those latent powers that are trying to emerge but are unable to do so, because they need our decisive and willing support. Morality is the sum of all our virtues, the combination of all our powers, active and latent; it is the armour and the weapons with which we enter the battle of life, from which we want to emerge victorious.

Morality, then, is the union of our physical, energetic, emotional, intellectual and spiritual potentials in their positive aspects.

Ours is a moral struggle to achieve the conquest of our human values. The effort and struggle that

precede any victory, whether great or small, are especially evident on the innermost planes of the personality.

There is no doubt that many efforts require the active participation of the body and the energy. But the root of that physical effort is always to be found in the things we know or the things we want; the forces of wanting and knowing are powerful motivations.

It is clear that the most fearsome struggles take place in the emotions and the mind. Bodies undergo great pain when they suffer; but it is not comparable to the intensity of pain in the subtle bodies, for which there is no quick and easy remedy.



Calm is expressed as serenity, as peace.

Many brave fighters know how important it is to remain calm in the midst of battle.

When the goal has not yet been reached, when we are still following uncertain paths with many byways and hidden traps, it is not advisable to lose control of ourselves or of the external circumstances.

The destabilizing element of aimless emotions, confused ideas and actions without continuity is the enemy that stands in the way of victory.

because there is space, there is light and there is time to understand and develop them.

Serenity is a state of the soul which is very close to victory, even if it is not the great victory.

As regards peace, it was honoured on ancient altars as the deity that followed in the wake of victory.

Victory gives rise to peace.

Our peace, for now, will be achieved by controlling our opposites. Calm victory, like all victories, cannot avoid inner struggles.

WE NEED TO KNOW THE TRUE NATURE OF SACRIFICE

Sacrifice is not about pain, but about courageously exercised willpower.

Without looking very far, there is one well known explanation: sacrifice as self-denial, as the ability to put one's own desires aside and place oneself at the service of others. But in addition to self-denial we have the concept of sacrifice as *sacrum officium*, a sacred duty, a sacred action or offering. Altars, now and at all times, are those places where there is an opportunity for worthy and useful work. Sacrifice as a sacred offering is about creating more space in the soul.

The sacrifice that leads to victory has a lot to do with purification: leaving behind the residues and rubbish that obstruct the personality; it is impossible to move forward if our feet are stuck in the mud. It has a lot to do with generosity: possessing in order to give; only one who possesses can give and only one who is capable of giving possesses. It has a lot to do with mysticism: seeing what is hidden behind the appearances, perceiving the laws of nature in every action, understanding the purpose that moves the universe and all living beings.

This is the victory we must achieve. The victory that rises up like fire after the dross has been burnt. The ever-burning fire on the altars has a base of wood, a fuel that sets it alight and a star that attracts it.

Delia Steinberg Guzmán
Honorary President of New Acropolis
International
(Excerpted from her book The Path to Victory)



Photo by Vishal Mehta on Unsplash

It is at these times that we are most in need of self-control. We have to know how to moderate the passions, clarify our ideas; we have to measure the movements of the body; we have to connect our actions. Everything must have an aim and, to ensure that the aim does not disappear from view, we need serenity.

Serenity does not imply insensitivity. It makes room for the best sentiments and enjoys them as long as they are expressed within ethical and aesthetic channels. It enables us to work with the best ideas

Growing Nihilism Among Young People

Nihilism is the viewpoint or belief that things and life in general are meaningless. It comes from the Latin word *nihil*, which means 'nothing'. Nihilism does not accept those moral and knowledge-based values that are owned by societies. Nihilism became known in the 18th century in Europe, when German writers and philosophers discussed the negation of Christianity and the European tradition in general. Although there is no systematic description of this view, many philosophers have used the term nihilism. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, who described how the Western world suffered a disintegration of its traditional morality and fell into decline. But in Russia, an entire nihilist movement appeared in the 19th century, after the term was popularized by Ivan Turgenev. The nihilist characters in his novel *Fathers and Sons* denied

everything and attacked the old, traditional values. Anarchists also explored the term and believed that it represents the suffering one feels under a tyrannical or oppressive system. Though nihilism was connected to political activism, most nihilists were not active on this level, and did not offer any alternatives to the ruling system, they just denied it.

Nowadays, nihilism is not a philosophy, but rather a feeling about life, a kind of apathy or pessimism. It is rising, especially among young people in the Western world, who feel there is no reason behind anything, societies are corrupt and human nature is wicked. Most of the young people who are nihilists feel alienated and demotivated, and sometimes display traces of misanthropy. Recently, the pandemic amplified the phenomenon, when young people were disconnected from their peers and left



alone with their problems and frustrations. The nihilists feel they cannot cope with the reality they are facing. Global issues like unemployment, rising costs, inequality, broken families, climate crisis, and so on make them feel depressed and powerless. They often turn to drugs and alcohol to ease the weight of their problems or at least forget them for a while. Feeling themselves unable to act in the ruling system takes away any hope that they can create a better future. So, instead of changing it,



Photo by Bernard Hermant on Unsplash

they go for quick, instant pleasures and become nihilists. In this way, they feel they have solved the problems. As in the case of the climate crisis, many people feel that the actions they take on a small scale, such as stopping eating meat or not using cars, except when it is really necessary, do not have a great impact on the whole system, where billions eat meat or pollute the air with their cars. So why they should worry about the future?

Jordan Peterson, the well-known psychologist, has said: “There is no acceptable reason for nihilism. This is not, for example, people suffering from clinical depression – there can be many reasons why someone becomes in this state. This is the cynical, arrogant, rational, hyper-intelligent nihilism that dismisses the world as worthless before it has properly examined it. The correct behavior is to investigate and if we do not find an answer, we ask the question whether it is because we did not search well or because we formulated our need incorrectly.” As a result of the rising nihilism in the Western world, more and more people are depressed, taking drugs and medicines, or commit suicide to escape from reality. According to Zygmunt Bauman, modern nihilism is a consequence of capitalism and consumerism that has created global uniformity. Traditional values have disappeared, as have transcendent meanings and local values. Instead, we all become average thanks to mass production. “Mass society produces mass people in mass sizes”, he states, and because of this, people feel rootless and lose their uniqueness and the meaning of their life.

The solution can be to rediscover ourselves and the world we are living in. Everyone’s life is special, just as there are no identical leaves on a tree. In the same way, all acts or thoughts matter and change the world a bit. Lot of bits will make a big change. Gratitude towards nature and the ancestors who have enabled people to live in the present can also help to liberate from nihilism that leads nowhere. If we think that we are on a path, even if we do not know where it comes from or where it leads to, it is our decision how we make our journey, whether in an exciting or in a boring way. Dedicating a life to aims that survive the present gives hope, a positive attitude and merit. In this way, one can leave behind the black hole of nihilism.

Istvan Orban

Esoteric Roots of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford

The Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, a beautiful building housing an enormous collection of artefacts from Egyptian statues to the 'Alfred Jewel' from 9th century England, amongst thousands of others, takes its name from an English antiquary of the 17th century, Elias Ashmole. A little research reveals that he was much more than a mere collector of antiquities. He was also an astrologer, alchemist, probable Rosicrucian and the first recorded Freemason in England.

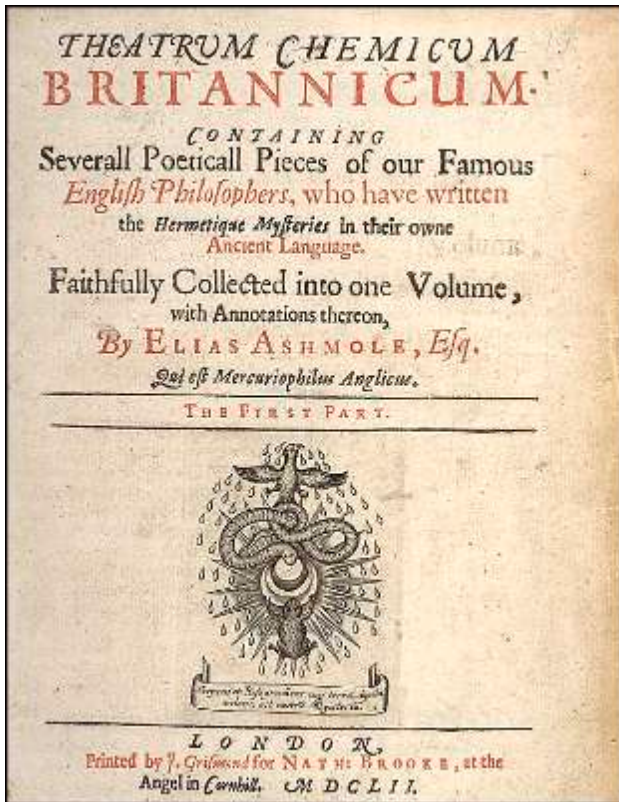
Nowadays, such descriptors would position a person on the fringes of society. But in those days, an interest in these subjects was widespread. Elias Ashmole was one of many early members of the Royal Society (Britain's major academy of sciences) whose interests revolved around esoteric and hermetic studies and the secrets of nature.

How did the foundation of the Ashmolean come about? In the 1650s, Ashmole helped a collector called John Tradescant the younger to catalogue his vast collection and financed its publication. Eventually, Tradescant bequeathed his collection to Ashmole (having lost his only son and heir some years previously), who had amassed many curiosities of his own. In 1677 Ashmole presented his 'Ashmolean Museum' to the University of Oxford, on condition that the university would erect a suitable building to house it. The building was duly

designed by Christopher Wren (a founding fellow of the Royal Society) and the collection was finally installed in 1683. Other floors of the building were devoted to a chemical laboratory and a school of natural history.

This was quite a remarkable achievement for the son of a saddler, although at the age of 25 he married a very wealthy lady and was thus able to retire and pursue his own interests. However, the money alone does not explain his influence and high society connections. From an early age he was recognised as an exceptionally talented individual.





Ashmole lived during the time of the English Civil War and fought for Charles I on the Royalist side. When the king was defeated in 1646, he retired to Cheshire. In the same year he was admitted as a Freemason at a lodge in Warrington. This was the first documented admission of a Freemason in an English lodge. Obviously, he was not the first Freemason, as there were other freemasons present at his initiation. One of these was his friend Colonel Henry Mainwaring, who was a 'Roundhead' Parliamentarian. This is interesting, because it illustrates the fact that, in accordance with the Freemasonic principle of the Universal Brotherhood of Man, two people of opposite political views could be friends. This tolerance of different views has always been a hallmark of esoteric philosophy in all places and times.

It was during this period that Ashmole devoted himself intensely to the study of alchemy. Prior to that he was already learned in astrology, and later, with the restoration of the monarchy, was often consulted on astrological matters by Charles II and members of his court.

During the 1650s he published three alchemical works: *Fasciculus Chemicus*, *Theatrum Chemicum*

Britannicum and *The Way to Bliss* (1658). It is said that a certain William Backhouse of Swallowfield made Ashmole his "alchemical son" and, in 1653, confided in him the secret of the Philosopher's Stone. Ashmole himself is then said to have passed on this secret to Robert Plot, the first Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum. This shows how closely bound up with alchemy the museum was in its origins.

At the same time, Ashmole was deeply involved in his antiquarian studies with John Tradescant the younger. The interest in antiquarianism was another feature of the 17th century and reflected an interest in the past as a repository of wisdom. His friend John Aubrey (another Fellow of the Royal Society) was one of the great early researchers of Stonehenge and Avebury, the one who noticed the so-called 'Aubrey holes' at Stonehenge. The interest in the ancient past was also related to a mythical vision of history which continued to inspire intellectuals, poets and artists over the coming centuries. Thus, the interest in the past was related to a projection towards the future.



Portrait of Elias Ashmole (1617-1692), From Wikimedia.org

The same double role of alchemist and antiquary had also been a characteristic of Ashmole's hero, John Dee, whose spiritual diaries he acquired later in life.

In 1660, the English monarchy was restored in the person of Charles II, who became the Patron of the Royal Society. Ashmole was rewarded for his loyalty to the Royalist cause by being appointed to the post of 'Windsor Herald' of the College of Arms, in which position he devoted himself to the study of the history of the Order of the Garter and published a major work on the subject: "The Institutes, Laws, and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter" (1672), a work which is still regarded as the most complete history of the Order to this day.



Coat of Arms of Elias Ashmole

His own coat of arms is further evidence of his occult interests. In 1661, he was granted permission to make changes to the original coat of arms, which figured a greyhound, and the result can be seen in the illustration.

At the top we see the figure of Mercury (patron of alchemy), holding the caduceus, with its two opposing serpents crowned with a winged disk, symbol of the harmonisation of opposites. Below are two celestial twins symbolising the sign of Gemini (ruled by Mercury), with the motto below, "Ex Uno Omnia", "From One, All", which presumably refers to the idea of unity in multiplicity, the idea that all things come from the One, which is at the heart of all esoteric philosophy.

Finally, I will briefly mention his connection with the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, a mysterious movement that arose in 17th century Europe and which, according to Frances Yates, was a continuation of the occult philosophical movements of the Elizabethan age, whose central figure in England was John Dee.

The basis of Rosicrucianism is to be found in the two 'Rosicrucian Manifestos' (the *Fama Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* and the *Confessio Fraternitatis*) which first appeared in Germany and then spread to the rest of Europe in the early 17th century. They proposed a 'universal reformation of the world' and invited all men of good will to join in their efforts to bring this about.

Frances Yates, in her work 'The Rosicrucian Enlightenment', writes that "Elias Ashmole took the trouble to copy out in his own hand an English translation of the Fama and the Confessio, and to add to these copies an elaborate letter in Latin, also written in his own hand, addressed to the 'most illuminated Brothers of the Rosy Cross' petitioning to be allowed to join their Fraternity..."

I will leave you on this note of mystery and invite you to research more in the bibliography below.

Julian Scott

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'To be or not to be'

Today

'*To be or not to be, that is the question*'. How many times have we heard, seen, or read this sentence? From Laurence Olivier to Bugs Bunny, so many have tried their hand at interpreting what is quite possibly the most famous soliloquy in literature. *Hamlet's* themes, characters, and iconic lines have permeated various forms of art and entertainment, and yet we still must ask ourselves if we really understand the meaning behind those words and the reason why they stuck so deeply, so stubbornly, in the back of our minds.

When the prince of Denmark asks *The* question, he's thinking about life and death and pondering a state of being versus a state of not being. This simple question about human existence goes directly to the heart of the play's meaning.

Shakespeare's tragedy follows Prince Hamlet's quest for revenge against his uncle Claudius, who murdered the king and seized the throne. Throughout the story, Hamlet makes excuses for not killing his uncle and turns away when he has the chance - 'Conscience does make cowards of us all.'



The soliloquy happens in Act III, Scene I, when Hamlet has to decide what to do after discovering who's responsible for murdering his father. Convention demands that he kill Claudius, but this would make him a murderer as well and that conflict is the core of the play.

In essence, the soliloquy "To be or not to be" encapsulates the fundamental question of whether it is nobler to endure the troubles of life or to seek release from them. Hamlet considers the various pains that human beings face, such as the injustices of the world, the disappointments of life: "the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the pangs of despised love, the law's delay, the insolence of office and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes." With this, he ponders the value of life and questions whether it is better to endure the pain and suffering of existence or to escape it through death.

Hamlet's introspective musings reveal his deep melancholy and his philosophical nature. It's not that he's contemplating suicide as much as reflecting on life, and the meaning of being. By the end of the soliloquy, Hamlet decides that too much reflection is what would prevent the action he has to rise to.

In simple terms, Hamlet knows he has to act against his uncle's criminal betrayal, and he crosses a threshold when he decides to begin his quest for revenge. At this point, we may ask, why is this meaningful today?



Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet. From Wikimedia.org

In a society brimming with FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and productivity anxiety – that feeds on the “side-hustle” and the “work while they sleep” mentality whilst pushing *carpe diem* as a free licence for hedonism, and self-care as a next-day delivery – acting, with all its connotations, doesn't seem to be a problem.

The conclusion of Hamlet's soliloquy is that he has to act *to be*, but not all acting is *being*. Most of us have had or will have moments of crucial action in our lives, moments when we know that something is wrong and that something must be done. And that's the rub, it isn't easy to follow that impulse that demands action from us. Usually there is no turning back when we commit to the inner voice that calls us out.

One of the many reasons why Shakespeare's work is enduring is because he raises a mirror to our soul. No one has stated it as clearly as The Bard. Time and time again, from the Bhagavad-Gita to the Lord of the Rings, we have travelled alongside our heroes through their journeys into *being*. We take them with us for when we decide to *be*.

Ana Luisa Lellis



Charles Kean (1811–1868), as Hamlet in 'Hamlet' by William Shakespeare Samuel John Stump (1778–1863). From Wikimedia.org

Introduction to the World of Feng Shui

Feng 風 meaning wind, and Shui 水 meaning water, are the two Chinese characters which make up the term Feng Shui.

They are two elements that can bring about growth, happiness, abundance and life. And their absence or excess could equally cause death, destruction and misery.

Feng Shui is an ancient practice that interconnects multiple fields of Chinese esoteric knowledge and thought, such as astrology, metaphysics, numerology and geomancy.

In the West, it is most popularly known as Chinese geomancy or the Chinese art of placement. Historically, as well as in its contemporary form, it is used to orient buildings and selected spiritual spaces such as tombs and temples.

Its roots go back more than 6000 years, with the first known evidence dating back to the Yangshao (5000-3000 BCE), where buildings were aligned with the asterism Yingshi. Before the invention of the compass, Feng Shui relied on astronomy to find correlations between humans and the universe [6].

Tombs at Puyang (around 4000 BC) contain mosaics of a star map of the Dragon and Tiger asterisms, and Beidou (the Big Dipper, Ladle or Bushel) is oriented along a north-south axis.[6]

The Cosmic Trinity

At the heart of Chinese metaphysical science is the triad of Heavenly Luck, Earth Luck and Human Luck, which have an effect on one's Destiny. The Chinese character for Luck can have up to four meanings: Luck, motion...

Heavenly Luck is predetermined (Destiny): you can't change it, but through your Bazi (Four Pillars of Destiny) you can understand and learn from it. Earth Luck quality can be developed through working with the environment (through Fengshui – art of placement). Human Luck (choice/effort) is within your control – developing virtue. [5], [7].

In the West we also have many expressions for luck. 'Good luck', 'I'm out of luck', 'I'll make my own luck'. Even Seneca quotes "**Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity**". At the centre of the triad is the human being who with this knowledge can align himself in harmony with the triad of luck to produce favourable outcomes.

Yin-Yang

Another fundamental principle of Feng Shui is the concept of yin and yang. Most people will have seen this symbol. A white teardrop with the eye of a black dot and on the opposite side a white dot with a black teardrop. The eyes represent the points of balance and harmony. They are complementary forces as opposed to two antagonistic forces. One attracts the other and one exists because of the other, and one is incomplete without the other [1]. E.g. male and female, sun and moon, light and darkness, fire and water, north and south. Feng Shui uses these concepts of yin-yang to understand and bring about harmony in the environment.

Qi

These are two forces of nature that can guide the vital breath. The intangible that exists in all living beings, plants, environment, inanimate objects and the universe is called qi (Chinese: 氣 or 气, romanized: chi) [4]. The idea of chi is essential in the

practice of acupuncture. The acupuncturists recognise that the body has channels of energy called meridians. This is different from the vascular system (blood) or nervous system (electrical impulses).

In a healthy body qi moves freely and smoothly. If it runs too fast, slow or is blocked, the qi becomes stagnant and diseases ensue.

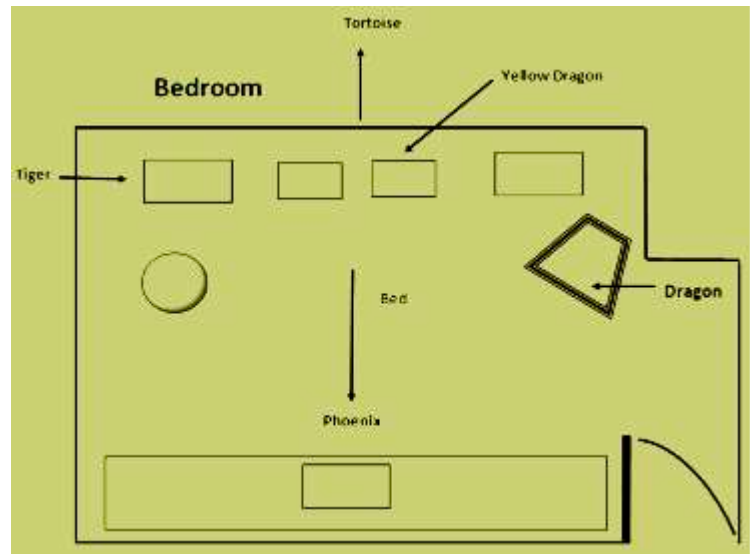
Feng Shui mirrors the same principles. The openings in the house – doors and windows – represent the mouth and nose through which the house breathes. If the openings in the house are blocked, then the flow of qi will be restricted. If the interior of the house is incorrect this could unnecessarily move the qi too quickly. Employing the principles of Feng Shui, one learns to control and channel the flow of energy both within and outside a home for the benefit of the occupants. Sometimes Feng Shui is referred to as ‘Acupuncture in Space’ [1].

The Art of Placement

This practice considers all environments: the outside, placement of buildings relative to their surroundings; the inside, placement of furniture relative to the room.

The principles of placement are represented by the symbolism of 5 animals. The object placement determines the favourable flow qi in the space for the occupancy of the owners.

The Tortoise: Characterised by its strong, supportive, secure and stable nature. Beds and desks



should have a solid wall behind them, which represents your tortoise.

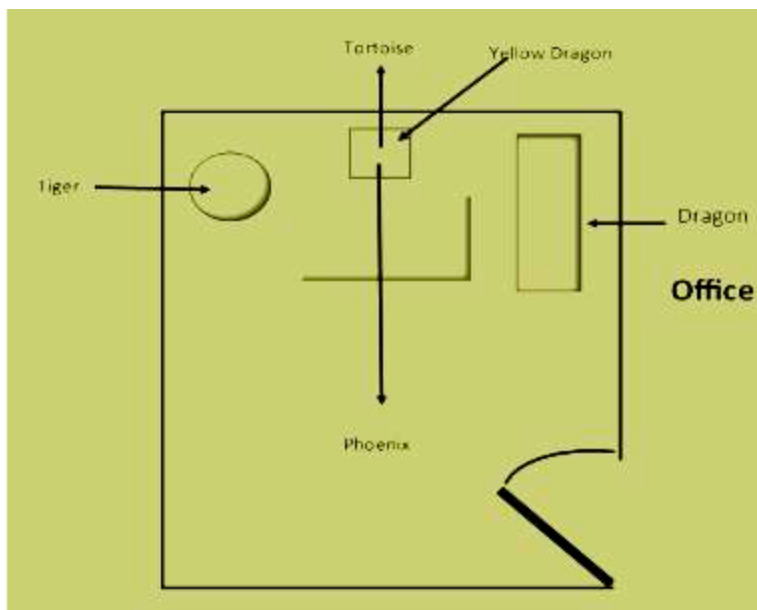
The Phoenix: Described as a red bird flying up high and ahead of us. Representing the open space in front of us. Giving us space to see ahead. Enables long term planning. Allows us to see ahead in distance and time.

The Dragon: The space on the left represents the dragon. The masculine energy, logic, order, materialism, organisation and finance.

The Tiger: Holds the right position, represented by the female energy, intuitions, imagination, creativity and taking physical action.

The Yellow Dragon: Holds the axis that connects all the other points and positions of the other animals. Represents steadiness, alertness and readiness for action.

Jim Pang



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Humanity's Relationship with Trees: a History of Climate Change

The notion of climate change is not as recent as it may seem. We can find its roots way back in the 15th century, a time of European explorers and ocean travels, opening new routes of communications with the Far East as well as discovering the so-called “New World”: the American continent. This continent, even though it was inhabited, was discovered for the first time by men with a very different way of life and mindset from those of its indigenous inhabitants.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, new European settlements sprouted all along the African coast and the west coast of North and South America. At the same time Europe was not only going through religious turmoil, but also a scientific shift. It was

then that the cycle of water, deforestation and climate was at the forefront of colonisation. New theories regarding the importance of trees being responsible for rainfall and heat and humidity were used as an excuse to occupy and work the land, in the belief that cutting down trees and establishing farmlands would bring a better climate, similar to Western Europe. Here we have the first theory of man-made climate change. The colonisers justified their occupation and taking the land from the indigenous people on the grounds that they would be using and transforming it, while the native people, allegedly, were not.

The 17th and 18th centuries saw a series of trial and error experiments regarding the transformation of



those lands and the impact of mankind. As the scientific method became more and more current and measuring equipment improved, scientists were able to record the temperatures, precipitation and humidity levels. They were able to see the direct and indirect effects of man's modification of his environment on the local climate, but also on neighbouring regions. The notion of climate spread to larger areas and by the end of the 18th century people started talking about a global climate.

where certain European countries, such as the UK and Ireland, were left almost without any primal forests. With the discovery of greenhouse gases in the early 19th century and a better understanding of their consequences in the 20th century, we are now experiencing another level of man-made climate change.

Today the tree is having a renaissance and many are being planted, although nowhere near enough. It is estimated that close to a trillion trees are needed in



Photo by Matt Palmer on Unsplash

At that time, trees were still a crucial element in a country's economy and climate. Regulations were implemented to monitor and maintain the health and size of forests in order to have enough rainfall and avoid droughts and famines. But for economies to grow, more and more wood was needed to fuel the furnaces and build pretty much everything, whereas in the 19th century, coal became the new charcoal and gradually became used in the furnaces and steam boilers instead of wood.

With new modes of transportation using fossil fuels, the once deadly local famines caused by droughts could be helped by the supply of food from elsewhere. Little by little, the once crucial roles of forests to bring rain was pushed aside, to the point

order to capture a large enough part of the carbon released into the atmosphere. But such new trees must also be chosen wisely for the preservation and restoration of the land and its wildlife. And last but not least, trees are essential in our lives, if only for the shade, the scent and the beauty they bring: they are simply a bridge between Mankind and Nature.

Florimond Krins

Theseus and the Minotaur: the defining human image

Edward Burne-Jones's illustration of *Theseus and the Minotaur in the Labyrinth*, 1861. From Wikimedia.org



The image of Theseus, hero of Attica, standing at the centre of the labyrinth, holding a magical thread (called a clue) brandishing his sword, about to face destiny in a moment of reckoning with the Minotaur, is perhaps one of the most defining scenes from mythology with a symbolism both rich and complex.

What this scene reveals is worthy of meditation and there are several useful keys of interpretation available to us. To

begin, let us recall that according to Joseph Campbell, the mythological realm pertains to the inner, to the psyche and to the causal.

“The first work of the hero is to retreat from the world scene of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside...” (Campbell, cited in McInnis, 1975 p.12)

What is being explained is that the characters and elements

represented belong to our inner world and are aspects of us. This defining scene is the crescendo and climax of a story which can be understood as the ‘last degree’ of relation between our spiritual and material natures (McInnis, 1975).

The labyrinth, stage for this decisive moment, can be explained as a complex structure from which it is nearly impossible to escape. Historically, several were reported to exist in the ancient world and it is recorded that some initiatory temples were actually built in a labyrinthine form. Symbolically, however, it represents the whirlpool of everyday life, what in the East may be termed ‘Maya’, the great web of illusion and sensation which ensnares and encases the human spirit. In a Neoplatonic key, the labyrinth is the place that the soul ‘falls’ into (Cirlot, 1971).

Theseus, our hero in the scene, embarks on a quest to discover the centre, the centre of life in

the middle of the labyrinth where he encounters the Minotaur, a monster. J.E. Cirlot, in his excellent dictionary of symbols, suggests that the inversion of an animal head over a human body denotes the extreme, yet logical conclusion of human life if baser forces dominate. Conversely the hero can be understood as the logical conclusion of human life if the spiritual forces dominate (Cirlot, 1971).

Cirlot also explains that the 'tribute' of seven Athenian men and seven Athenian women paid



An image of the Minotaur painted on the tondo of an Attic drinking vessel. From Wikimedia.org

to the Minotaur to satiate the monster's appetite symbolises the 'payment' or loss of our higher values and virtues. It is the hero who seeks to end this tragedy and to do so the conquest of the Minotaur must be complete, there is no room for negotiation. At the centre of life, then, and of ourselves, we find a symbol of a 'pair of opposites' and a tension certain to resolve in conflict. It is the severity of the encounter which demands the emergence of a heroic impulse and it is the severity of the encounter which

creates an opportunity to propel the heroic, spiritual consciousness of man through that 'last degree'...

"The Minotaur in the labyrinth forms the point at which the hero blends his essence with chaos so that he may amalgamate the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos" (McInnis, 1975).

Now let us try to shed more light on the scene by considering other elements present. The (clue) magical thread of Ariadne can be understood as memory, which is the gift of the soul. When we recognise ourselves in the Labyrinth, facing a battle with adversity, it may be helpful to remember that we are always in fact holding onto a clue which is the recollection of our soul (Cirlot, 1971).

At the decisive moment the hero is also brandishing a sword which, according to certain versions of the story, after slaying the Minotaur actually transforms into a torch, a beacon of light. We might be reminded of the perennial idea, that light is born in the darkness and perhaps, rather than banishing the Minotaur we are being asked to seek it out, to discover the essence of life at the centre, who we truly are, in order to bring light into the world.

However, caution is needed because when Theseus first enters the Labyrinth he does so as part of the Athenian 'tribute', as food for the monster and symbolically as a 'best intention' or 'virtue' destined to be devoured. Seeking



The Minotaur in the Labyrinth, 16th century engraving. From Wikimedia.org

the Minotaur is not feeding the monster but moving towards it, looking it directly in the eye, knowing it, being tested and being victorious.

This encounter at the centre, the replication of this defining scene, happens at some level whenever our consciousness becomes aware of the play of forces within us. The goal we must remember is an ascent up the spiritual ladder, which must be fought for. Using the difficulties of life to liberate the heroic impulse and the necessary Will to face down our animal nature and propel ourselves towards the world above the labyrinth and its spiritual light.

Siobhan Farrar

Reading List

Cirlot. J.E. 1971. *A Dictionary of Symbols. Second Edition.* New York. Philosophical Library.

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