

The Acropolis

Philosophy for today

Includes:

Embracing our
mortality

Carl Jung

Martial Arts

Philosophy of
History

Art - Culture - History - Philosophy and more

Free please take



July 2024 - Issue 18



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



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Editorial : 2024: New Acropolis' commitment to making the world a better place

Our late Honorary President Delia Steinberg Guzmán used to say that "life is a moral adventure because, whatever the destination, it must be part of what is right and good. We set off into the future to realise our dreams, but we cannot abandon our ethical conscience. It is a spiritual adventure because it allows us to reconnect with our human essence by calling on philosophy, which aspires to moral dignity, and to the perception of the sacred."

A healthy philosophy of life and the precious intention to do good, based on good feelings and refined moral ideas, can give us the courage we need to face up to situations that are already difficult to resolve and to avoid the more serious ills that depend on us. This is clearly the spirit in which our activities took place throughout 2023 in the 500 New Acropolis philosophy schools in 55 countries on 4 continents.

This promise to make the world and human beings better is reflected in our quantitative commitment in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering (1).

- In the field of philosophy, we carried out 9255 activities to promote philosophy, with 173,571 people taking part in our philosophy programmes, and the total number of people interested in these philosophical activities, both face-to-face and virtual, was 5,202,007.

- In terms of culture, we carried out 4,238 cultural activities during the year, with 93,407 participants. And we now have 450 libraries and reading programmes.

- In terms of volunteering, we carried out 16,962 activities with 54,683 participants who contributed 552,316 hours of volunteering. For example, the number of people who benefited from our volunteering activities during Mother Earth Days was 276,949.

At the end of July 2023, to encourage sport and volunteering in Brazil, we also organised the second International Volunteer Olympics, with the New Acropolis "School of Sport with Heart", in collaboration with the Brazilian Pierre de Coubertin Committee and the San Francisco Xavier City Council. Music and gymnastics have succeeded in turning sport and art into magnificent tools for individual and collective self-improvement.

At our General Meeting in Brasilia, the current International President, Carlos Adelantado Puchal, emphasised that we are making all these efforts because we believe that theory must be put into practice, and because through our studies we see that the material world is a reflection of the possibilities of the spirit. This demonstrates that the invisible is the great driving force of the visible. The activities we engage in are not mere distractions or ways of passing the time. They allow us to enjoy the best of the past, to appreciate the present moment and to project

ourselves energetically into the future. They nourish the hope that it is possible to improve, and this is our contribution in a world that is increasingly irrational in many respects.

Like all philosophers in a classical tradition, we believe that it is through our actions that we show who we are.

Year 2024 (Synthesis of New Acropolis activities worldwide in 2023)

Alain Impellizzeri
Director New Acropolis Ireland

Over the course of 2024, The Acropolis Magazine will publish and distribute four quarterly editions delving into many essential aspects of culture and society.

We believe a healthy society is one that is educated, diverse and open to ideas and timeless values. With this in mind, the magazine is a publication outlet for our members who wish to use this medium as an opportunity to research and explore various themes, topics and reflections in life.

All articles in the magazine are contributions by members of New Acropolis. Research and views expressed in each article are those of the individual authors and may not represent the collective views of New Acropolis.

We hope you enjoy!

Editorial Team

Alain Impellizzeri – Director

Pascale Naveau – Editor

Paul Savage – Design

Tim Leahy – Contributor



Harmen Steenwijck - Vanitas Still-Life - 1640

Live and let die

Embracing our mortality with some words of wisdom

Memento mori is a philosophical concept embodied by the Latin phrase that translates to "Remember you must die." This idea underscores that age or financial wealth does not alter the inevitable; death is a great equaliser. It does not discriminate, claiming both paupers and kings alike, from Diogenes to Alexander the Great.

Contemplating death can inspire a more worthwhile and rewarding life, as it reminds us that life is a gift. When we confront our own mortality, we become more empathetic to ourselves and those around us, understanding that everyone, including ourselves, will die someday—it could even be today. This wisdom has been prevalent throughout history among thinkers and artists, including ancient Greek philosophers, Roman Catholics, Tibetan monks, and early Jewish writers. They have all employed the concept of memento mori to reflect on values that helped shape their lives in harmony with the laws of the cosmos, nature, and the soul.

Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, two Roman Stoic philosophers, were influenced by the wisdom of contemplating death to fully appreciate the gift of life. By contemplating death, they realised how short our time here could be and were motivated to use it fully. Seneca said, "Those who finish things every day are never short of time."

It is said that during Roman triumphal processions or other grand occasions, Roman emperors would have a slave or servant whisper in their ear, "Memento Mori" or "Respite post te hominem te esse memento," meaning "Remember that you are mortal." By acknowledging their vulnerability to death, they aimed to cultivate humility, perspective, and wise leadership. This practice helped them govern with empathy, restraint, and accountability, avoiding the pitfalls of hubris and excessive pride.

The philosophy of memento mori dates back to ancient Greece and Rome but gained popularity during the 17th-century Baroque Dutch Vanitas art period and earlier at the end of the Spanish Golden Age from 1556 to 1598. Vanitas, a Latin word for "vanity," in this context refers to the futility of life. This genre of art used symbolism to show the transience of life and the futility of pleasure against the certainty of death, thus exposing the often false importance put on ambition and materialism.

This theme of vanity is also referenced in the Old Testament in Ecclesiastes 12:8: "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity." In some versions, "vanity" is translated as "meaningless," conveying that human action is temporary, while faith is eternal.

The Vanitas movement is characterised by symbols such as skulls, sand timers, and watches, all relating to the transience of time, with decaying fruit and mirrors symbolising ageing, temporary beauty, and wealth. A notable example of Vanitas artwork is "Vanitas" by Dutch painter Harmen Steenwijck, painted in 1640.

Even today, in non-European cultures, memento mori is acknowledged and integrated into certain societies. In Mexico, "Día de los Muertos" (Day of the Dead) is a major celebration where people remember the souls who have passed. It is not a morbid affair; rather, death is approached playfully with imagery of skulls and flowers. This holiday is an opportunity to savour life, friends, and family, and to honour those who have passed. It recognises that everyone will die someday, and it emphasises the importance of appreciating life in the present.

From a modern perspective, memento mori may seem like a morbid subject, but it is quite the opposite. It encourages us to savour the life we have and make every moment count. It reminds us to reflect on our limited time but also our current attitudes and actions which are often influenced by fleeting desires and concerns. By reflecting on our own mortality, we connect to something beyond our ego or trivial matters, gaining perspective on what is truly worth cherishing and acting upon and also what we should leave behind. As Marcus Aurelius said, "You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do, say, and think. Let us prepare our minds as if we have come to the very end of our lives."

Memento Mori

Accepting for sure that the day will come
into the ground I will succumb
Will have given it my best, this time around
departing with a broad grin
to fertilise the ground.

Why would the Soul want to be glum?
Returning to where it has come from
A well earned rest from emotional lust
And from all this bluster - just cosmic dust.

I have had a good run up to this day
hard working industries, busy making hay.
But I will not complain nor will you hear me sigh,
When that day comes courageously I will die.


So often we're tormented by heaven or hell,
but some have taught me how to die well.
And I have been preparing daily
Living that old phrase 'Memento Mori'.

So if at my funeral, do not cry
just smile and whisper,
'Cheerio... Bye bye!'

David Murtagh



**Courage is
knowing what not
to fear
Plato**



"By confronting and assimilating one's 'shadows' and repressed aspects, individuals can achieve a sense of wholeness and authenticity."

Baona - Getty images

Shadow Play

*Exploring Carl Jung's seminal work **The Undiscovered Self***

Carl Gustav Jung (1875 – 1961) was a leading Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Jung was a prolific writer, publishing at least twenty volumes in his lifetime. Towards the end of his life he wrote "The Undiscovered Self", an exploration into the depths of human consciousness and the collective psyche. Originally published in 1957, this timeless work continues to attract readers with its insights into the individual's quest for meaning and the challenges of living in the modern world. Jung wrote "The Undiscovered Self" during the early years of the Cold War, not long after the end of World War II. The political climate at the time was dominated by the East-West, communist-capitalist divide, which was symbolised by the political metaphor known as the "Iron Curtain". The spectre of the H-Bomb and fear of nuclear war was ever present.

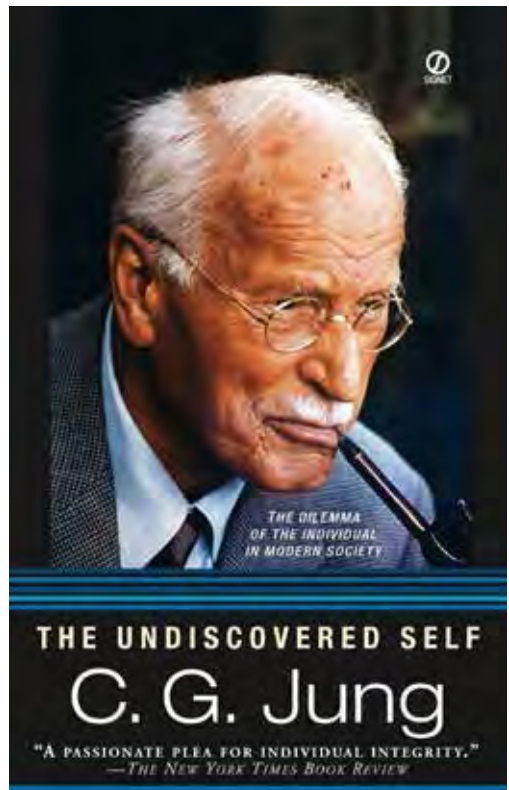
The book consists of seven essays. A number of key themes are explored by Jung in these essays:

Individual versus Society: At the centre of Jung's thesis is the idea that modern society has separated individuals from their true selves, leading to a sense of disconnection and alienation. Jung examines the tension between the individual and society, highlighting how 'modern' civilisation has led to this alienation of

individuals from their authentic selves. He explores the pressures of conformity and the loss of individual autonomy in the face of the norms and expectations of modern society. Through his analysis, Jung advocates for the importance of balancing individuality with social responsibility, encouraging readers to strive for self-awareness, while navigating the complexities of the collective in society. Only by gaining this awareness and understanding of one's unconscious mind and true, inner nature - "the undiscovered self" - can we as individuals acquire the self-knowledge that is directly opposed to ideological fanaticism. But this requires that we face our fear of the duality of the human psyche - the existence of good and the capacity for evil in every individual.

"The mass crushes out the insight and reflection that are still possible with the individual, and this necessarily leads to doctrinaire and authoritarian tyranny..." (p. 2)

Mass Movements and Ideologies: A significant portion of the book is dedicated to Jung's critique of mass movements and ideologies, which he calls "mass-mindedness", and describes as the reduction of individuals to anonymous, like-thinking units of humanity, to be manipulated by propaganda and advertising into fulfilling whatever function is required of them by those in power. The two primary powers in much of society at the time the book was written were the State and the Church. These institutions aimed to control the masses. He warns against the dangers of blindly following charismatic leaders or subscribing to rigid belief systems, arguing that such adherence can lead to the suppression of individuality and the spread of totalitarianism. Jung urges readers to question authority and think critically about the ideologies that shape their lives. He warns against the pitfalls of conformity and the surrender of individual autonomy to collective forces, advocating instead for the cultivation of self-awareness and inner growth. He also warns that the individual becomes a slave to the State and in doing so he is robbed of his judgement and responsibility. Jung's analysis of the tension between the



The Undiscovered Self - C.G Jung first published in 1957 - Wikimedia



Northern Owl - Getty images

individual and society is particularly relevant in today's world, where rapid technological developments and social upheavals have intensified feelings of existential disquiet and fragmentation. His insights into the psychological roots of totalitarianism and the appeal of charismatic leaders offer valuable lessons for understanding contemporary political and social dynamics.

“Happiness and contentment, equality of soul and meaningfulness of life – these can be experienced only by the individual and not by a State” (p. 78)

Individuation: Central to Jung's philosophy is the concept of individuation—the process of integrating unconscious elements of the psyche into conscious awareness. More broadly, Jung saw individuation as the process of self-realisation, the discovery and experience of meaning and purpose in life; the means by which one finds oneself and becomes who one really is. It depends upon the interplay and synthesis of opposites e.g. conscious and unconscious, personal and collective, psyche and soma, divine and human, life and death. By confronting and assimilating one's 'shadows' and repressed aspects, individuals can achieve a sense of wholeness and authenticity. Jung sees individuation as a lifelong journey toward self-discovery and personal growth, emphasising the importance of embracing one's unique identity while fostering empathy, inclusiveness and understanding for others.

Religion, Spirituality and Transcendence: Throughout the book, Jung explores themes of religion, spirituality and transcendence, acknowledging the existence of a deeper, transcendent dimension of the psyche beyond the ego. Jung sees religion as a regulating factor and a counterbalance to the mass-mindedness in society. He discusses the transformative power of religious experiences and mystical states, suggesting that they offer glimpses into the mysteries of the unconscious and the divine. Jung's approach to spirituality is inclusive and open-minded, inviting readers to explore their own spiritual paths while remaining grounded in psychological understanding.

The Collective Unconscious: Jung makes reference to the concept of the collective unconscious, which he describes as a reservoir of shared archetypal symbols and

motifs that are inherited and universally present in human beings. This collective layer of the psyche shapes our thoughts, behaviours, and cultural expressions, often unconsciously. By acknowledging the existence of the collective unconscious, Jung emphasises the interconnectedness of all individuals and societies. Jung differentiates between the collective unconscious and the personal unconscious, the latter containing elements of the individual's personal experience.

"The Undiscovered Self" is not merely a theoretical treatise, nor is it a self-help manual with step by step instructions. It is more of a call to action for readers to embark on their own journey of self-exploration. Jung encourages individuals to confront their shadows - the repressed aspects of their personalities - and integrate them into their conscious selves. He acknowledges that fear of what we might find when we explore our unconscious shadow can stop us from investigating it in the first place:

"It is this fear of the unconscious psyche which not only impedes self-knowledge but is the gravest obstacle to a wider understanding and knowledge of psychology." (p. 35)

Through the process of individuation, he suggests, one can achieve a deeper sense of wholeness and authenticity.

While some readers may find Jung's language and concepts dense and abstract, his ideas resonate with a timeless relevance that transcends the boundaries of culture and time. Whether you're a student of psychology, a seeker of self-knowledge, or simply pondering the mysteries of the human psyche, "The Undiscovered Self" offers profound insights that will enrich your understanding of yourself and the world around you.

In conclusion, Carl Jung's "The Undiscovered Self" is a thought-provoking and illuminating work that continues to inspire readers with its exploration of the unconscious mind and the quest for personal and collective meaning. The book serves as a profound exploration of the human psyche and a timeless guide for those venturing on the journey of self-discovery, in search of truth and authenticity.

Tim Leahy



The Calling of Saint Matthew - Caravaggio (1599)

Life as a Work of Art

As far back as I can remember, Art has always been the first language that I could understand and express myself most naturally through. At an early age I was lucky to be exposed to the world of classical art and artists by my grandfather. Every summer vacation when I would arrive at my ancestral home in Kashmir, my grandfather would gift me a book from his library on one of the classical artists and I would spend my summer engrossed for hours, lost in the dramatic and intimate portraits of Rembrandt, the powerful and intense realism of Caravaggio and the visionary world of Da Vinci.

During the pandemic I had the opportunity to do 2 courses in Classical Oil Painting.

In this article I would like to share some of my reflections and the learnings that I gained while investigating the life and techniques of renaissance artists and studying Grisaille and Chiaroscuro, which are both classical painting techniques and have been used by artists for centuries.

Grisaille in French means “greyness” and is an art technique commonly used in oil painting, that involves creating an underpainting of monochromatic grey tones to establish form and value. It serves as a foundation for the subsequent layers of colour. After the Grisaille underpainting has dried, many layers of translucent glazes of colour are applied which allow for the building of depth and illumination of colour. It first appeared in 12th-century stained glass windows, and later in manuscripts, frescos, altarpieces, silks and enamels. It then became popular in the

Renaissance era (14th to 17th Century) where artists like Leonardo da Vinci used it in their works. It continued to be used in the Baroque period (17th–18th century) in frescos and murals.

The word Chiaroscuro is Italian in origin: “chiaro” means light and “scuro” means dark. This technique has more ancient roots but gained its popularity during the Italian Renaissance period with artists such as Caravaggio, Da Vinci, and Rembrandt. They created the illusion of 3-dimensional form using the contrast of extreme light and shadow.

As an aspiring philosopher, a member of New Acropolis school of philosophy for about 9 years, I have learnt to look at life and all its aspects through the lens of philosophy. As my painting courses progressed I began to realize that I was learning much more than how to add depth to create a beautiful painting; the learnings permeated beyond the boundaries of my canvas into my life.

Building Character

From Grisaille, I learned how the artist first sets the foundation in monochromatic shades and then applies numerous layers alternately of colour and glaze. It is the patient building up of layers of colour that adds beauty, depth and complexity to the artwork.

Similarly, in our life, we too can work on building our character by conscientiously developing qualities such as generosity, courage and compassion. Just as artists work tirelessly to create their masterpieces, we too can look at our lives as masterpieces in progress, in the pursuit of becoming the best of ourselves; but first we need to build a strong foundation of ethical values and virtues, that will bring depth, clarity and meaning to our lives.

Unveiling What is Hidden

Michelangelo who sculpted the astonishing marble masterpiece, the statue of David, was able to see the beautiful form in an uncarved rock and is famously supposed to have said, “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.” While his actual words may have been romanticised in this quote, it is clear what he meant: that he could see the potential of something concealed within the rock and clearly saw how he needed to chisel away all that was extraneous to give it a visible, tangible form.

When we embark on this journey of self-discovery, we too can unveil our hidden strengths and virtues which are already there within us, and reveal our inner beauty and potential. In order to do that we must persevere in looking inwards, and chisel away at everything that is blocking our growth, such as our tendencies and habits that don't serve us.

Finding Balance in Light and Darkness

Just as in the chiaroscuro technique the artist must maintain a balance between the contrast of light and darkness, we too need to find balance and a deeper understanding between contrasting aspects in our lives. Experiencing moments of sadness allow us to truly appreciate the joyful moments, and moments of weakness become the stepping stones to discover the reservoirs of strength we carry within. It is through acknowledging the shadows that light gains significance, and in understanding our vulnerabilities, strength finds its true potency. These contrasting aspects of our lives even though they may seem contradictory, serve as a compass for self-discovery, when we are able to recognize and work with them together.

Finding Beauty in the Midst of Darkness

To find valuable lessons in challenging circumstances is to be able to see Beauty in the midst of Darkness. Just as an artist uses shadows to create depth in a painting, let us look at the challenges that life brings us as shadows that help us develop strength and a deeper understanding of the meaning of life. Like the shadows bring out the contours and highlights in a painting, the obstacles we face in life sculpt our character and reveal our resilience.

It is this interplay of light and darkness that transforms a 2-dimensional painting to 3 dimensional one, making it lifelike. Much like an artist who embraces shadows to breathe life into a canvas, confronting our challenges with an adventurous spirit, allows us to tap into our hidden reservoirs of strength and fortitude. It is through these experiences that we grow and transform into more evolved, stronger and wiser human beings.

Perhaps the most important lesson that these art techniques have reiterated to me, is to learn to look at life with a deeper lens: Now, instead of dreading difficult situations, I constantly try to navigate them by understanding that though they seem daunting, they enrich our lives by contributing to our self-growth. By merely changing our perspective, we can see shadows as opportunities for transformation. I am on this journey, and I have a lot more to work on, but the joy of walking this path and the discoveries it continually brings to light along the way is what I would like to share with you. Like the sculptors' diligent chiselling away to reveal an object of beauty, I invite you to approach life's challenges with a willingness to illuminate and unveil what is hidden within you!

Kanika Mehra



**The best part
of beauty is
that which no
picture can
express.
Francis Bacon**

Falling with grace

The Wisdom of Martial Arts and The Inner Battle



Photo by Thao Lee - Unsplash

"It is not important to be better than someone else, but to be better than yesterday."
- Jigoro Kano (Founder of Judo)

"The ultimate aim of the art of karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the characters of its participants."
- Gichin Funakoshi (Father of Karate)

"The purpose of training is to tighten up the slack, toughen the body, and polish the spirit."
- Morihei Ueshiba (Founder of Aikido)

The epigraphs above are from the founders of different schools of martial arts and for some they may appear paradoxical. How can an art form that uses the martial way, the way of combat, talk about the perfection of the character of the practitioner? In traditional martial arts, the focus was less on outer technique and more on the inner development of the human being. The father of Karate-do Gichin Funakoshi was concerned that practitioners of Karate-do would get caught up in the technical aspects (kicks, punches, throws etc) at the expense of the philosophical/spiritual side of Karate, in the how and neglect the why of things. In the traditional schools of martial arts the dojo was not only a place to practice but it also encompassed life as well. The word dojo comes from a Japanese word of two compounds, do which means way or path and jo that means place or location. The place to practice the way was internally, inside oneself and offers an alternative representation of life, seeing life as a dojo. It is to face the inner battle of facing one's fears, to overcome one's doubts, to build courage but using the principles and teachings of martial arts. The battle is not external with others but internal within oneself, as explained in the many ancient philosophical texts and described in the modern works of Carl Jung.

That is why philosophers are drawn to traditional martial arts because there is a wisdom in this art form, the wisdom of the peaceful warrior. The Dalai Lama, the great proponent of non-violence and peace, said: "A monk is a soldier engaged in conflict, but in this case the enemies are internal, ignorance, anger, attachment & pride" This is the same sentiment described in the philosophical Hindu text called the Bhagavad Gita, that the battle is not outside with others but the fight is inside ourselves. In this martial way, it is not picking a fight with others but it is to recognise the fight that we are engaged in everyday with ourselves and not to avoid it. When avoiding or ignoring it, we pick fights with others, we blame others, blame life. So in the dojo of life, if we are open to it, we are going to face ourselves, to discover who we truly are through facing challenges. This alternative representation of life, sees life as a dojo. The promoted model today is one of excess comfort, to not be disturbed, but this model does not give life meaning or a sense of victory. How does one feel when doing the right things even if it is challenging? One feels good. It is not that we don't have to seek some comfort but not as a purpose of life or way of life. To be challenged, to be confronted even if there is a side of ourselves that does not like it, there is another side that welcomes it and wants it. Why? Because



Photo by RDNE - Pexels

it awakens in us to our inner potential, our inner strength and a sense of becoming stronger within ourselves, this strength in the way of facing life with a sense of victory, with happiness. It is gaining in our inner strength that one gains happiness, this internal happiness.

One of the first things taught in martial arts is how to fall. It is to learn how to fall with grace and to get up quickly. There is a richness of learning from this experience which has an import into daily life. Learning how to fall in daily life is learning from mistakes, to recognise and accept one's shortcomings but not to remain with them. Getting back up again quickly is learning from the experience and not repeating it again which makes one stronger. The natural adversity of life gives many opportunities to learn, to accept to fall and get up continuously so as to progressively perfect oneself. The martial way is not one of violence, manipulation, force, it is the way of the peaceful warrior. That may sound like a paradox, like many of the paradoxes of life, it contains a truth in it. The martial way of the peaceful warrior allows for the gradual development of self-control and to withdraw from being all over the place, chaotic, hyper or anxious. Instead, when well positioned in our mind, the emotions naturally pacify themselves and this allows us to recognise ourselves in our convictions and identify. It also increases focus and presence, in other words, mindfulness.

In ancient Japan, this sentiment of engaging in the inner battle was described by Bushido, often referred to as the "Way of the Warrior," a code of conduct and way of life associated with the samurai, the warrior class. Rooted in various influences including Shinto, Zen Buddhism, and Confucianism, Bushido developed over



several centuries and played a significant role in shaping the moral and ethical framework of the practice of martial arts. In this sense, martial arts are a form of education which prepares a student for a higher form of knowledge. This can also be found in the West in the works of the Greek philosopher Plato who stated that education should consist of two pillars, Music (mental training) and Gymnastics (physical training) that complement one another.

Through this practice it will foster a strength of character to face the natural adversities of life. It is not physical strength but inner strength, the strength to withstand the challenges that come our way and enables us to go through with what we have committed to do. There are different types of inner strength, there is strength of mind, strength of emotions, strength of energy and finally physical strength. The word strength is not just the ability to resist, to remain static where we are but strength in taking action.

In summary, martial arts is one art form that awakens beauty through its graceful movements, disciplined practice, and profound connection between mind, heart and body. New Acropolis developed an institute of martial arts that promotes this traditional practice, to face oneself while correcting ourselves, mentally, emotionally and physically, at the individual and collective level.

Michael Ward & Amanda Kauer

June


The sun is rich
And gladly pays
In golden hours,
Silver days,

And long green weeks
That never end.
School's out. The time
Is ours to spend.

There's Little League,
Hopscotch, the creek,
And, after supper,
Hide-and-seek.

The live-long light
Is like a dream,
and freckles come
Like flies to cream.

by John Updike



**Beauty in things
exists in the
mind which
contemplates
them.**

David Hume



The Land of Dreams

Aboriginal Rock Art, Anbangbang Rock Shelter, Kakadu National Park, Australia - Wikimedia - Thomas Schoch

Aboriginal Culture and its Relationship to the Land

Aboriginal Australians are the most ancient continuous civilisation on Earth. Their ancestors, who first arrived on the continent about 70,000 years ago, were the first humans to cross an ocean. Split into hundreds of social groups each with its own tribal territory and dialect, a cumulative population of 1.6 billion people has been estimated to have lived in Australia supported by the land prior to British colonisation.

Aborigine culture developed in the context of a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle. They maintained the tradition of wandering long after most people of the world had settled down to the sedentary life of farm, village or town.

Their wide practical knowledge, accumulated over thousands of years of experiment and observation, enabled them to harvest food without exhausting effort. The frequency with which they moved camp and the exact timing of their movements reflected their understanding of climate, winds, marine life, insect life, the maturing of plants and the habits of wild animals. Their knowledge of the land and all that grew from it was supplemented by a spiritual belief that the earth would not continue to be productive unless they obeyed its rules and its deities. One of the aims of their religious ceremonies and many of their taboos was to maintain the fertility of the land and its creatures.

The Aborigine religio-cultural worldview, relevant to generations both past and present, pivots on the 'Dreamtime', the ever-present moment of creation. It explains how in the beginning Ancestor Beings travelled through the land shaping the animals, plants, rocks and other forms of the country that we know today. Eventually they settled in a place that was important to them where they still inhabit the land. These are the sacred places of Aborigine culture and have special properties. Because the Ancestors did not disappear at the end of the Dreaming, but remained in these sacred sites, the Dreaming is never-ending, linking the past and the present, the people and the land.

By virtue of birth there is a spiritual link between a person and a specific site or a part of the country. Dreaming stories pass on very important knowledge to later generations. Through ceremonial song, dance, painting, carving and storytelling, Aborigines have maintained a link with the Dreaming from ancient times to today. Their spiritual and cultural connection to the land obliges Aborigines to look after cultural sites which are living museums of their ancestors and include dreaming sites, archeological sites, water holes and burial grounds.

The Aborigine religio-cultural worldview, relevant to generations both past and present, pivots on the 'Dreamtime', the ever-present moment of creation.

It has been with difficulty that Western society recognised the kind of abundance and autonomy in which aboriginal Australians had lived prior to British colonisation. We often value the material success of ancient empires by their surviving monuments and the remains of their temples and city walls. Accumulation of property is, in our eyes, a sign of success.

Having long lost sight of the unchanging unity of life which underlies the multiplicity of creation, the whole planet is now faced with the effects of the destruction that capitalism and colonialism have caused to our earth: global warming, widespread health problems, education and social issues, ill governance, to name just a few. Regardless of the oppression of colonialism and attempted genocide of their society, Aborigines have been able to identify with, value and pass on their culture, adapting and persisting through the struggle.

It is time we realised there is much we can learn from a society as successful as the aboriginal Australian if we are to regain the ideal pattern of life we have forgotten. After all, theirs is a knowledge that, through over 70,000 years of compiling and refining, has the greatest potential to sustain human life on this planet.



Alexander the Great ,Thessaloniki city,Greece - Getty Images

Philosophy of History

A Key to the Past, the Present and the Future

There is an old Eastern saying which states: “The Past Time is the Present Time, as also the Future, which, though it has not come into existence, still is.” In the Eastern view of time, reality exists beyond the temporal realm and what we experience as separate stages are actually part of a simultaneous reality. This is an interesting concept, implying that the past still exists, the present is but a fleeting moment and the future already exists in the blueprint of nature. It would be one way of explaining the many instances of prophecy that have been recorded in history.

In the West, Philosophy of History is a more methodical discipline that studies the significance of human history, if any, and asks whether it has any purpose or meaning. It raises questions such as, are there any general principles, laws and patterns in history? Is there a direction or meaning in history? Can we use history to predict the future? What lessons can we learn from history? Let us look at these questions one by one.

Are there any general principles, laws and patterns in history?

We can start with the principle of unpredictability: in other words, figures arise or events occur at certain times in history and have a tremendous effect, but their appearance is rarely predicted. One example of this was the appearance of fascism in the 1930s. Surprisingly for us today, almost no political commentators saw it coming, and everyone was taken aback by its mass appeal. A similar case is that of certain outstanding historical figures, such as Alexander the Great or Napoleon.

Who would have guessed that the ruler of a small Macedonian kingdom would have set out to conquer the world at the age of 18 and, by the time he died at the age of 33, had taken his campaigns as far as India? Or that an obscure Corsican would be crowned Emperor of France and bring havoc to Europe with his 'Napoleonic Wars'?

At the same time, however, there is a logic to history. Things do happen for a reason, or rather, for a variety of reasons. It is the multiplicity of factors that makes history difficult to interpret and predict. Among the factors that influence the development of events are geography and climate (e.g. the presence of rivers is conducive to stable civilisations, while icy wastes or deserts are not), economics, philosophy and religion, to name but a few. How can we understand the development of Islamic civilisation, for example, if we ignore the religious factor which was at the heart of its expansion?

Another principle is that of cyclicity. There are cycles of civilisation which follow one another and grow out of one another. No civilisation is permanent. In Europe, practically every nation has had its day of glory: the Spanish, the Austrians and Hungarians, the British... but then they were eclipsed by others.

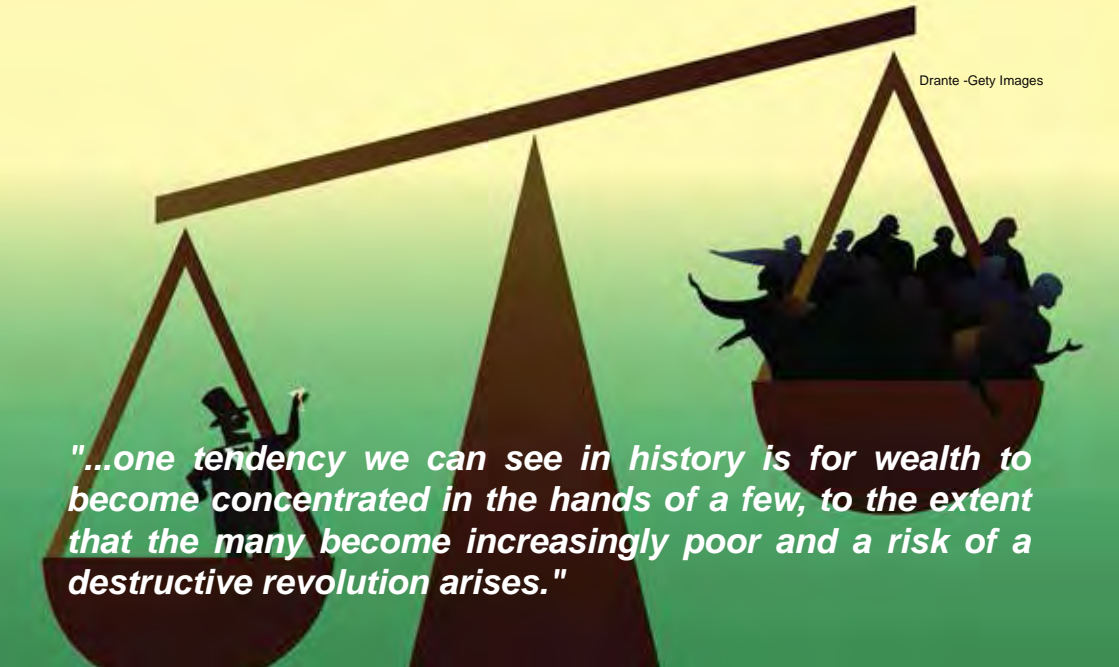
What causes civilisations to die? This is another natural law. It is partly due to 'time' which erodes all things. But it is also partly due to the loss of values, in particular spiritual values, since a sense of transcendent meaning is what gives a human being, and therefore also a civilisation its sense of purpose. If these values are lost, then the civilisation will lose its *raison d'être* and, like a plant deprived of sunlight, will eventually wither and die.

Is there a direction or meaning in history?

Are there forces at work that are driving history? Most people in the past believed this, but it is an unfashionable idea today. Such forces have been called gods, providence, destiny, fate, karma... Today, they are often called 'economics'.

However, the belief in higher powers influencing human events is not an irrational one, because there are many events in history that could make us think there is some higher force other than chance at work. One example of this was when China had decided to invade Japan and an enormous fleet set sail which would certainly have defeated the Japanese. But a great storm unexpectedly blew up and sank almost the entire Chinese fleet. The Japanese called it the 'Kami Kaze', or 'Divine Wind' (Kami are spirits in Japanese religion).

Today we tend to reject this possibility, not because it is illogical, but because, collectively, we do not believe in gods or spirits and we believe, on the other hand, that everything happens by chance. In antiquity, the belief in chance ruling all was generally regarded by its most eminent philosophers, such as Plotinus, as absurd. Returning to the Eastern concept of time mentioned at the beginning of this article,

A balance scale is shown against a green background. The left pan is higher and contains a single silhouette of a person. The right pan is lower and contains a group of silhouettes representing a crowd of people. The scale is tilted, indicating that the group on the right is heavier.

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if in some way the future already exists – in the archetypal world – then there would be forces guiding human history towards the fulfilment of those archetypes in time.

Can we use history to predict the future?

Will the global civilisation of today survive the present crises (ecological, economic, demographic, spiritual, etc.)?

What generally happens in history is that many elements are lost, later to be replaced by very different forms.

As an example, we can look at the civilisations of Greece and Rome. The power of Greece collapsed when it was eclipsed by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. But it did not disappear completely. Many of its cultural elements, such as its art and religion, were passed to Rome, which incorporated them into its own life.

Rome suffered a similar fate: when it fell, in the 5th-6th centuries AD, some of its forms (philosophical, cultural, institutional, etc.) were taken over by Christians in the West, and later by Muslims in the East. Some of these forms survived right up until the early 20th century or even later, such as architecture, law and systems of government and administration.

As for our own civilisation, we could speculate that, unless everything is destroyed in some nuclear or natural catastrophe, some of the scientific and cultural elements of our present civilisation will be transferred to a new civilisation that will gradually take its place, but that new civilisation will be based on a very different set of values.

We tend to think that the future will be an extension of the present, but history shows that this is never the case. Rome was very different from Greece. Medieval Europe was very different from Rome. And our technological civilisation could not be more different from that of the Middle Ages. We could imagine that in the future people might entirely lose interest in gadgets and technology and become fascinated by parapsychology and mysticism – something almost unthinkable today – but if we study history we will see that outlooks do change in such radical ways.

What lessons can we learn from history?

There are many lessons to be learned from the study of history. It is full of instruction about human nature, destiny, politics... Will and Ariel Durant, in their book *The Lessons of History*, suggest that one tendency we can see in history is for wealth to become concentrated in the hands of a few, to the extent that the many become increasingly poor and a risk of a destructive revolution arises. We can see it happening right now on a global scale, with the gap between rich and poor growing every year. This has happened many times before in history and occasionally the situation has been rectified before it was too late. In many other cases, like the French and Russian revolutions, the forces of violence took over and caused widespread destruction and loss of life.

Another lesson of history is the hope and inspiration we can gain from it. Often people have the view that history is a catalogue of disasters, or (as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* says about life) 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. But there are figures in history who clearly work for the common good, rather than out of self-interest, even though sometimes their reforms are undone by people with vested interests. What we can learn from this is that while the wicked are powerful in the world and perhaps always have been, there are also those who selflessly fight against evil and strive, with some success, to re-establish the good.

Even in the case of military conquerors of whom we may not approve today, people like Alexander the Great or Napoleon, we can learn from them their spirit of 'nothing is impossible'. The famous battle of Crécy, in the Middle Ages, for example, was won by Edward III despite the fact that he was numerically outnumbered by the French by five to one and most of his commanders advised him to turn back. Often such conquerors are undone in the end, and this would be another lesson to learn, the lesson that there are limits to human achievements in this world and that the great danger in such situations is 'hubris' or pride.

Beyond all the lessons of history, however, philosophy of history is about understanding the nature and destiny of humanity, and this implies going back to the philosophical question of the nature and destiny of the human being.

Julian Scott

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