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NewAcropolis

Mysticism and Science in the 21st Century

Authenticity

The World We're Living in

Wine in Culture and Philosophy

PHILOSOPHY
CULTURE
SOCIETY
ESOTERICA
ART
AND MORE



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NEW ACROPOLIS is an international organization 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 the next generation.

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Editorial

Why don't we apply what we know?

Recently, I watched a documentary on epigenetics. This emerging field of scientific research has discovered that we are not fatalistically doomed to suffer the programming of our genes regarding our health, but that we can 'switch on or off' certain genes by the way we lead our lives. Epigenetics does not change our DNA, but it can either enable or impede our cells to access the information of the DNA.

This impact of 'nurture' on our genetic 'nature' starts when we are still in the womb, in fact, as soon as the first cells of the human embryo begin to divide. This proves that the emotional and physical state of the mother, her diet and her environment have a huge impact on the unborn baby. An example: if the mother eats a poor diet or suffers from hunger, the baby could be more prone to obesity since its epigenome has programmed it to store more calories every time it eats.

The epigenome continues to act on our body throughout our lives, not just in the embryonic phase. At any moment in our lives, our choices, habits, attitudes, inner mental and emotional states and our environment can have either a positive or a negative impact on our bodies.

However, this is not really news, is it? Have we not known for thousands of years that our environment, our thoughts, our emotions, our attitudes to the problems of life, our diet and our lifestyle choices affect us and others profoundly? It is obviously very useful that we now have more hard scientific evidence to underpin this, but haven't the great sages and philosophers of all times taught the same thing?

If science shows us clearly that the best start we could give to our children would be to ensure that pregnant women eat well, are not exposed to too much stress and are in as peaceful and harmonious an environment as possible – would it not follow that we should try our best to apply this knowledge? There is also an extensive body of research that proves that the early years of our childhood are the most important ones. And we also know that it is much cheaper to prevent social ills than having to remedy them later.

But caught up in the struggle between long-term goals and short-term economic interests, we will most likely continue to be driven by the latter. In the meantime, children in Western societies are showing steadily increasing rates of certain physical and mental health issues compared to previous generations: there is an ongoing increase in ADHD diagnoses; anxiety, depression, and behavioural disorders have become more common; allergies and asthma have become more prevalent, so have type 2 diabetes, autoimmune diseases and obesity rates. It will cost a lot of money to treat these issues, not to mention the pain and suffering involved for those who have them.

So, why does it take us so long to join the dots? "Knowledge is of no value unless you put it into practice", the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov already stated more than 100 years ago. It sounds so simple: we know that something is (not) good for us, so we should (not) do it. But both collectively and individually, we find it very difficult to apply what we know.

Plato said that "human behaviour flows from three main sources: desire, emotion and knowledge." Ideally, we would know what we desire, manage our emotions and increase our knowledge. However, the reality is more like a phrase I heard recently: "our desires know us, our emotions control us, and we are ignorant that this is happening."

So, what can we do to bridge our chronic human "knowing-doing" gap? There is no panacea, but more philosophy in its original meaning (combining theory with practice, aligning head, heart and hands) and a spirit of 'overcoming ourselves' would certainly help.

Again, the idea of overcoming ourselves is far from being new...

Napoleon Hill: "If you do not conquer self, you will be conquered by self."
Plato: "For a man to conquer himself is the first and noblest of all victories."
Buddha: "It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles."

Sabine Leitner



Authenticity

I think we would all like to be more 'authentic' – true to ourselves in every aspect of life – but it is not always so easy to achieve, especially when we are not in an environment where we feel at ease.

So in the midst of the confusion that arises from being in a multifaceted world, let us return to the simple question of 'what is a human being?' Of course, there are many possible answers to this question, but if we accept as a starting point the view of most of the philosophies of the pre-modern era, that the human being is a 'soul' (a spiritual entity) incarnated in a physical body with

psychological characteristics (a personality), this can help us approach the question of authenticity.

The word *persona* comes from the Latin *persona* ("human being, person, personage; a part in a drama, assumed character," originally "a mask, a false face"). Thus, our personality is a mask, a vehicle, a means of expression, as it was in the ancient Greek and later Roman theatre. It is not our true self, which is the being behind the mask.

This is not the usual way we look at things today, where 'personality' is everything. It is our identity. But if we accept for a moment the idea of reincarnation (a



universal belief, by the way, not only an Eastern one), then we will have had many 'personalities', which can be thought of as beads on a necklace, the necklace being our true essence, which pervades them all.

From a modern, materialistic perspective, to be authentic would mean to express whatever you are feeling or thinking at any given moment. But this would be disastrous, both in terms of other people's feelings and our own psychological stability. Yes, it may sometimes be amusing and refreshing to hear someone saying exactly what they think, in a world where truth is wrapped in



cotton wool so that it can barely be heard, where crocodile tears are shed and where institutions issue statements in a language that conveys precisely nothing at all. But is this type of authenticity not just the other side of the same coin, the other extreme, which is no better than its opposite?

Or is authenticity naively to 'wear one's heart on one's sleeve', to cry, to swear, to love, to hate, as the mood takes us? To be as open as a child about oneself and one's feelings of the moment? Surely we have to take into account the sensibilities of those around us, the social situation we are in and what it requires of us? There are appropriate moments for crying, hugging, expressing anger, but living in society requires us to develop the discernment to act in the most appropriate way in all these different situations.

Returning to the concept of the soul incarnated in a personality, the most authentic expressions of our true

self will surely be the higher aspects of our being, what we could call the most beautiful and noble parts of our nature: acts of kindness, volunteering for the public good, courage and serenity in the face of adversity, overcoming personal likes and dislikes in order to behave with justice to all, to cite but a few examples. At the same time, we should be 'natural', which means accepting ourselves as we are at the moment, without any airs or graces, humbly acknowledging our many shortcomings, but constantly striving to overcome them. As the founder of New Acropolis, Jorge Livraga, has written, "the spiritual state of "Philosopher" or "Lover of Truth" is not synonymous with any kind of perfection, but with searching, working hard on oneself, purification and achieving the health of the Soul by one's own will."

Another of his recurring ideas was that a human being has the stature of their dreams – meaning that whatever we are capable of imagining ourselves to be, we can eventually become. And I think that this is a far more fruitful way of looking at authenticity than the literal 'just be yourself' approach. Because, which self do you want to be? Your lower self, or your higher self? If you set your heart on giving full expression to your lower self, you will sink lower and lower and lose contact with the higher altogether. Whereas if you make a constant effort to express the higher, you will continue to be in daily contact with your lower self (inevitably), but will be developing something extra, something new, something unknown, yet to be discovered!

What are the obstacles to expressing our true self?

Probably the main one is fear of what others may think of us, because we will be stepping out of the common mould and being different. In such situations I often think of a phrase spoken by the 16th century alchemist and doctor, Paracelsus, who once said: "I am different, do not let it disturb you." He, and other wise people before and after him, such as Socrates, were truly authentic. Ordinary people often resented their difference, so such wise men and women gained many enemies who tried to destroy them, but also many devoted friends and followers. The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío once wrote, along similar lines: "Ser sincero es ser potente" which translates as "to be sincere is to be powerful". Because a sincere, authentic, genuine person is someone with an inner power that somehow expresses itself outwardly as well. Not in the noisy posturing of a domineering ego, but in a natural expression of the inner into the outer.

A good question to ask oneself is 'How authentic am I?' And probably we will realize that we are authentic in some things and not so authentic in others. For example,

you may be following your true (authentic) path in life, but not always knowing how to express your higher nature in every situation. Or, the other way round: you may be good at expressing yourself, but you have not connected with your vocation (the call of your soul) in life. You might have many doubts about which way to follow which are preventing you from discovering important parts of yourself and therefore being true to yourself.

Other examples of inauthenticity are false humility,

which has always been at the heart of philosophy. To know how to act in every possible situation, because you are connected with your authentic self.

An old image is that of being at the centre of the circle of our consciousness. From that centre we can have a view of the whole and all its parts, and act from it without losing ourselves. How, then, can we find, and remain in, our centre? This is one of the aims of the lifelong practice of philosophy.



Image by Patrizio from Pixabay

playing a role and over-identifying with it, pretending to be strong, invulnerable and self-sufficient (when one is not) or, the other side of the coin, pretending to be vulnerable, weak and in need of rescuing; false cheerfulness (instead of finding a real reason within oneself to be cheerful, or keeping up one's spirits so as not to bring other people down), or smiling falsely while thinking something not at all friendly towards the person you are smiling at.

These are all masks of the false personality, which we put on to protect ourselves, but which end by imprisoning us. I said earlier that the personality is a mask. Yes, but there are masks that express who we are truly are, and others that conceal our true identity.

It is not at all easy to know ourselves, but we cannot really be authentic without it, and the way to self-knowledge is not only through self-analysis but also through experience, through trying things out and taking risks to uncover the unknown. This is the art of living,

Let me end with another image: that of a diamond. In the Buddhist tradition they speak of a 'diamond soul'. This is not just a poetic phrase, because if we ask ourselves, 'what is a diamond?', we will discover that, chemically speaking it is simply carbon. In other forms, carbon is dark and opaque, as in the case of graphite. What is the difference between these two expressions of carbon? Simply the arrangement of their atoms. In the case of the diamond, they are arranged in such a way that light passes through them and produces beautiful reflections. If the light is our higher self, then a well ordered personality will allow the light of the spirit to illuminate it. In this way, we can become authentic expressions of our true self.

Julian Scott

The World We're Living in

Searching for footprints

If we look back through history, we will see that all peoples, in one way or another, have produced magnificent cultural expressions, and if we study them in depth we will find many more similarities than discrepancies. But these diverse expressions should be studied rather than being flatly rejected. All these expressions of the soul, whether in the fields of religion, art, science or philosophy, have had an underlying purpose, a transcendent content that we cannot ignore.

Fanaticism in its many forms: an attack on humanity

History is full of errors – some more serious than others – of crimes and injustices, of conflicting ideas and instances of relentless fanaticism. But such is history; and it is our history, the history of human beings. This is the

mark we are leaving on time, although sometimes we can notice an attempt to straighten the road that humanity is taking.

It is very difficult to carve out a new path through history, particularly for those wise men and women who do so with a clear vision of the truth, those who are living ahead of their time and trying to get their contemporaries to understand them.

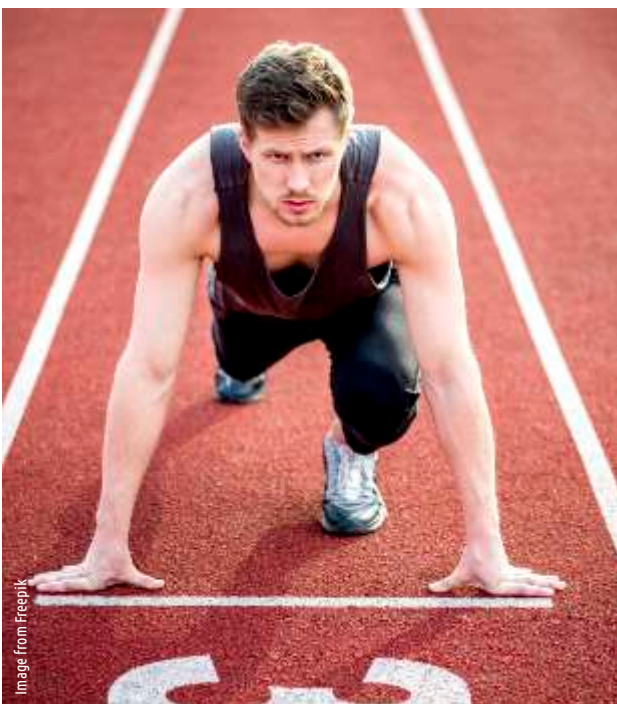
The case of Galileo is well known, but there must have been many other obscure and forgotten Galileos, whose lost battles didn't even merit a famous trial, or the punishment that brought him close to death. There were silent deaths and degrading deaths in which shame, insult, mockery, disbelief and anathema were the lethal weapons. And there was no pardon – and perhaps never will be – for those found guilty of wanting to know more.

Conviction and fanaticism

We would like to clarify the difference we see between conviction and fanaticism, so that everyone can be clearer with regard to themselves and others in this respect.

Conviction is a high degree of psychological, intellectual and moral commitment. It arises from becoming progressively more convinced of something, on the basis of sound arguments, evidence, experience, and of supporting models and foundations.

A person with convictions displays an overall state of health, an enviable self-confidence, a knowledge of where they come from and where they are going, which enables them to act in a balanced and sensible way. Convictions arise from the constant exercise of our inner powers and



the transformation of changeable opinions into stable and considered judgements.

It is not inflexibility or stagnation; on the contrary, anyone who has convictions lives in harmony with the rhythm of Ideas, which have an energy of their own and a natural rhythm of development.

People who have convictions are tolerant. They are firm in their own beliefs but make room for others. They don't denigrate those who think differently from themselves, but always show a willingness to listen. They have an active tolerance: they will listen to others, presenting and defending their own thoughts, without offending or insulting others. They have the ability to create space for themselves and for others. They open up space, generate it, recognize it and don't invade the space of others; and they don't harass, upset or mistreat those around them. They don't impose their authority tyrannically or regard themselves as the peak of all perfections. Their conviction is what enables them to progress, to be a little better every day.

Fanatical people, on the other hand, don't think very much, if they think at all. They accept what others tell them is good and develop not so much feelings as uncontrollable passions that draw them into unconscious actions, which they don't even regret, because they are unable to judge the value of these actions.

Fanatics only know one idea. Or rather, they only accept one idea, even though they haven't arrived at this acceptance by a process of conviction.

Fanatics are intolerant by definition. They don't even accept the existence of people who might feel and think differently; and this is why they will seek to eliminate them somehow - death and torture being terrible examples of this attitude. Fanatics don't listen, they are unable to have a dialogue. They only shout out their own principles to numb their minds with the sound of their own voices and drown out any other opinion.

What they have is enough for them, more than enough. Everything else is contemptible, doesn't exist, or should cease to exist.

Fanaticism is the very root of tyranny.

It's true that we have to live with many - too many - fanatics, but we must not commit the mistake of unconsciously copying that aberration, however much the prevailing absurdity gives fanaticism more time and space than noble and productive works for humanity.

We must hold onto our moral integrity and become honourable human beings with real convictions.

Civilization or consumer society?

It is almost with shame that we give the name "civilization" to the lifestyle that dominates today and, in a world as varied as ours, it is difficult



to know which form of civilization we should be referring to. Our current mode of life is based on a purely materialistic formula, in which the syndrome of possessions, consumption, keeping the body eternally young and being free from worries are the highest aspirations.

In our accepted "consumer societies", children grow up learning that they are valued for what they (or their parents) have, rather than for what they ARE. Moral values are not part of that consumption process; no one uses them, no one needs them and no one appreciates them. So the point is to own expensive and widely advertised

material products, or to have a standing in society which, in the long run, is also based on material possessions: a degree, a job, a position that distinguishes us from others.

What will become of the new generations, if they are brought up with criteria like these? They will end up as comfort-loving young people, attached to the quiet life they find at home. Statistics are already proving this: there are more and more young people who prefer to live at home with their parents, not because of any feeling of family unity, but because of the comfort that this represents. This will produce young people with a weak attitude towards life,



Photo by bruce mars on Unsplash

accustomed to having everything handed to them on a plate, not having to face any difficulties and, what is worse, carefully considering how to avoid any difficulty.

Unconscious irresponsibility

This may sound like a contradiction in terms, as many people seem to consciously avoid responsibility. But, as philosophers, we cannot accept that consciousness – real human consciousness – should be calling upon us to evade all responsibility.

Today commitments are thought of as the worst “disease” that it is possible to suffer. As a result,

children, adolescents and young people are trained to be “free”, not to be bound by any unnecessary ties. What a pity that the ties that are considered unnecessary are precisely the only commitments that give us the honourable title of human beings. Committing to a timetable at school, work or university; not missing social appointments or meetings just to pass the time; these are not real commitments when compared with those that require us to open the eyes of the soul, to recognize ourselves, to learn how to discover the meaning of life and the role that each of us has come into the world to play – a role which should bring moral and spiritual benefit both to ourselves and to the progress of civilization.

Responsibility

We need only look at nature to receive some real lessons in responsibility. Nothing in nature, whether stones, trees, animals, stars or galaxies, escapes its destiny; on the contrary, everything fulfils its destiny with a regularity so wonderful that any exception to this rule is regarded as a “phenomenon”, which is highlighted by scientific observers and by those always on the lookout for sensational news.

Can man, then, escape responsibility? Quite the contrary. The best thing would be if, from an early age, children were made aware that they have come into a world that expects a lot of them. They should begin to accomplish small tasks, their own tasks, those that are marvellously their own, which no one can take away from them and no one can do instead of them. They would then grow into young people who would be healthy in body and soul, and later into mature, calm and confident adults, with the skills to contribute actively to civilization instead of comfortably watching it go by from the window of their television screens.

Committed to the ephemeral and the superficial

It is interesting to become aware that, whether they like it or not, people are committed – albeit unconsciously – to many things they can’t escape from; and these things are so well disguised that they never show their true nature as traps or prisons.

- There is a commitment to fashions, so that, unintentionally, people end up compulsively

giving in to whatever the majority is wearing, whether on the body, in the psyche or in the mind.

- There is a commitment to the fears that have gradually entered into us. Everyone fears a certain set of evils which they consider inevitable – the social evils of our time – and they react to them compulsively, either with flight or aggression.
- There is a commitment to the ideas of others. When an idea, of whatever kind, takes hold, and especially if it becomes successful in the “market of opinions”, it is almost impossible to oppose it, at the risk of being called crazy, reactionary, sectarian or something similar. On the other hand, it is very difficult for those who have not developed their own discernment, due to a false sense of freedom, to be aware of when they are thinking for themselves or when they are being manipulated by others, without noticing the hand that is pushing them from behind.
- There is a commitment to weakness (don't do anything, let others do it) and to vices disguised as virtues (what's wrong with this if everyone does it and nothing happens to them?).
- There is a commitment to ignorance. Disinformation – or manipulated information – ensures that no one knows what is really going on in any area, although most people have no means to reach that reasonable conclusion.
- There is a commitment to instability – as if it were the distinguishing characteristic of our time – and to change for change's sake. There are no fixed or clear goals. There are words to fill us with enthusiasm today, and tomorrow we'll see... Tomorrow we will change, because that is the only acceptable sign of progress, regardless of the direction of the change, if it has any direction at all.

True commitment

We would like to reaffirm the idea that a philosopher is not afraid of commitment; on the contrary, commitment can be used as an intelligent tool of action to support our efforts to

make progress. What a philosopher does fear, however, is false freedom, which has the same effect as a fatal sleeping pill.

Conscious commitment is better than unconscious pseudo-freedom. The latter, sooner or later, becomes a prison from which there is no escape. Commitment is like a channel through which our life can flow. Let us be free: let us be able to choose, let us be able to accept our commitments joyfully and with self-confidence. This was the path followed by all the great sages and teachers of the past, who today silently show us the direction that humanity should follow.

Pessimism or optimism

We wouldn't be able to find solutions or build a new and better world without being aware of the difficulties we have to face.

The courageous denunciation of the problems afflicting us is not pessimism. On the contrary: pessimism is to accept those evils as inevitable and to surrender to an inexorable fate which the human will is powerless to resist.

We have an absolute faith in the human potentials that lie dormant in the majority of cases; it is just a question of activating them appropriately. In the same way, if we are aware of the cycles of history, we will know that after a confused and violent period – lethargic in terms of spiritual values and driven by material ambitions – there must come another time in which sanity and the sense of fraternity, which today are hidden, will be restored.

We are interested in seeing things as they are, facing reality and accepting the fact that we have been born into this world and into this period of history. It is our responsibility to act, to the extent of our possibilities, and to feel part of our society with its virtues and its defects.

Delia Steinberg Guzmán (1943-2023), former international president of New Acropolis
(Excerpted from her book *Philosophy for Living*)

Mysticism and Science in the 21st Century

“The greatest men who have been philosophers have felt the need both of science and of mysticism: the attempt to harmonise the two was what made their life, and what always must, for all its arduous uncertainty, make philosophy, to some minds, a greater thing than either science or religion.”¹ One might think that a quotation such as this would be frowned upon in today’s world. Yet, it may come as a surprise to many that it was written by one of the most influential secular thinkers of the 20th century – the mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell. Although much of Russell’s secular liberal outlook has come to be commonplace in our times, a contemporary version of his nuanced admiration of mysticism is rare to find. However, if someone as influential on modern thought as Russell felt

mysticism could bring value to human life, perhaps it would be unwise to close our minds to this topic?

Characteristics of mysticism

Uniting with the divine, altering one’s consciousness, penetrating the deeper mysteries of life through sudden revelation; such acts are thought to be the definition of mysticism. In his magnificent survey on “The Varieties of Religious Experience”, the philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910) lists four characteristics as being core to the mystical experience:

1. Its ineffability: defying expression;
2. Its ‘noetic’ quality: the experience having been a state of certain knowledge to the subject;
3. Its transiency: where the experience cannot be sustained for long;
4. Its passivity: the subject feels as if their own will were in abeyance and grasped by a superior power.

Nowhere does James claim that such experiences require a prerequisite belief in God or the supernatural. For example, many of us have had the experience where, for whatever reason, we suddenly feel a deepened understanding of the significance of a particular moral maxim. For James, this too is a form of mysticism: albeit a rudimentary one which is open to even the common folk.

Despite this, much like scientific observations, one might say, both Russell and James agree that there are certain commonalities in the insights of mysticism. In the first instance, mystical experiences allow the subject to perceive the presence of a world beyond the senses. Having entered this mysterious world, however momentarily, mystics have been led



Plate from *The Song of Los*, by William Blake

1. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, 1914 (Essay)

to common conclusions about the nature of reality. Let us consider three of them in turn.

A belief in unity

The revelation of the oneness of all things is a common insight. It comes with the experience of unifying with something greater than oneself – usually the ‘divine’. In this process, the subject’s feeling of a separate ego diminishes, creating a sense of liberation. As Shankara, the Indian Vedic scholar (8th century CE) explains:

*“The nature of the one Reality must be known by one’s own clear spiritual perception; it cannot be known through a pandit (learned man)... the eradication of this notion and the craving for personal separateness is called Liberation.”*²

Modern science finds some commonality in this view, as experiments in physics have shown the characteristics of an electron seem to depend on whether it is being observed or not. In other words, consciousness is not a mere observer of the phenomena in the universe, but an active participant, thus dissolving the separation between subject and object.

The flow of time is an illusion

Another area in which science finds commonality with mysticism is the subject of time. Time is unreal, the mystics say.

“It is believed by most that time passes; in actual fact it stays where it is. The idea of passing may be called time, but it is an incorrect idea, for since one sees it as passing, one cannot understand that it just stays where it is.” – Zen Master Dogen³

Modern science nods with approval. Einstein’s brilliance showed there is no separate dimension of time: collapsing it instead into space-time which is given en bloc. And it is through this that we move, feeling, mistakenly, as though there is a past, present and future.

Evil is illusory

Mysticism also touches on areas not covered by scientific inquiry. Here we come to the third insight

common to mystics. Namely that the things we call evil in our world are illusory. In Western philosophy, Spinoza (1632-1677) provides the best example and rationale for this view. He writes:

“Whenever, then, anything in nature seems to us ridiculous, absurd or evil, it is because we have a partial knowledge of things, and are in the main ignorant of the order and coherence of nature as a whole, and because we want everything to be arranged according to the dictates



of our own reason... As for the terms good and bad, they indicate nothing positive considered in themselves...” (As quoted in *The Story of Philosophy* by Will Durant, 1926)

Though modern science does not deal with Good and Evil, it does, by seeing them as merely human concepts, imply that ultimate reality is beyond this duality. So, perhaps in this respect there is an overlap between science and mysticism on the question of Good and Evil.

The value of mysticism

What can we say about the value and reliability of the insights of mysticism? It is undeniable that certain mystical insights overlap with modern science. Furthermore, the commonality of these mystical insights across time and culture also add to this sense of reliability and scientific rigour.

2. As quoted in *The Perennial Philosophy*, 1945, by Aldous Huxley, p.13

3. As quoted in *The Death of Forever: A New Future for Human Consciousness* by Darryl Reaney, p.215

However, we should be careful not to overstate this. William James makes this caution explaining how this unanimity disappears when we look at the insights from the mystical experiences from a larger mass of people. Even within the same religion, such as Hinduism, we find insights that emphasise the dualistic nature of the world rather than its inherent unity. Yet, this should not discourage us from appreciating the value of mysticism. It would be a surprise if any form of human experience were to be unanimous. Indeed, we live in a world of mixed constitution and so, just as in our ordinary experience, we should not be too surprised if mystical experiences also reflect this. Additionally, just as we may be liable to error in our scientific insights, one would expect the same in our mystical

Alchemists at work. Source image, Wikimedia



insights. This is because, in the last analysis, both scientific and mystical insights are based on intuition. Therefore, as William James says:

*“What comes must be sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience, just like what comes from the outer world of sense.”*⁴

Therefore, what is needed is this mystical sensibility, combined with the patient and careful scientific temper acting as a restraint. With this combination, perhaps, in our age when science seems to be reaching its limits on certain questions, new avenues of truth could be opened up.

Though unadulterated mysticism has its limits in investigating reality, it is in our spiritual and moral life that Russell thought mysticism could bring its greatest fruits. While science can help us grasp the facts of life, it is mysticism that helps decide the attitude we take towards it. In science, reason and empiricism act as a controlling force to our intuitions; in our moral lives, however, reason and empiricism, rather than being used to help put our moral intuitions into action, have instead limited them. Hence, the modern person tends to walk through life enclosed in their ‘finite self’, seeing things from only the here and now, dividing humans into enemies and allies and those we love or hate: for this is how things have always been, so why should we hope for it to be any different?

Yet, if we look at the history of humanity, many of those who have lived nobly have always had a mystical sensibility to inspire them. It is easier to care for your fellow beings if you see them as not separate from you; it is also easier to bear present troubles if you are able to transcend the trappings of temporality; and it is easier to accept the world as it is if you can foster a sense of union with it. As a result, mystical experiences, according to Russell,

*“... seem to suggest the possibility of a life free from the conflicts and pettinesses of our everyday world, a life where there is peace which no misfortune can disturb... A life dominated by this insight, we feel, would be a life free from struggle, a life in harmony with the whole, outside the prison walls built by the instinctive desires of the finite self.”*⁵

Mysticism, then, has much potential in the 21st century. In our quest for knowledge, it could provide us with insights from other states of consciousness that can be corrected with the cautious and patient scientific attitude. In our quest for wisdom, it can provide us with the spirit and the moral attitude to live a life of reverence for nobility and truth, untouched by the trappings of private desires and the fickleness of circumstance. So, let us return to mysticism and let it, as Russell writes, again be the “inspirer of whatever is best in man”.

Adhyan Jeevathol

4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

5. *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell: Chapter 61 - The Essence of Religion* (1912)

Art at the Heart of Humanity and the City

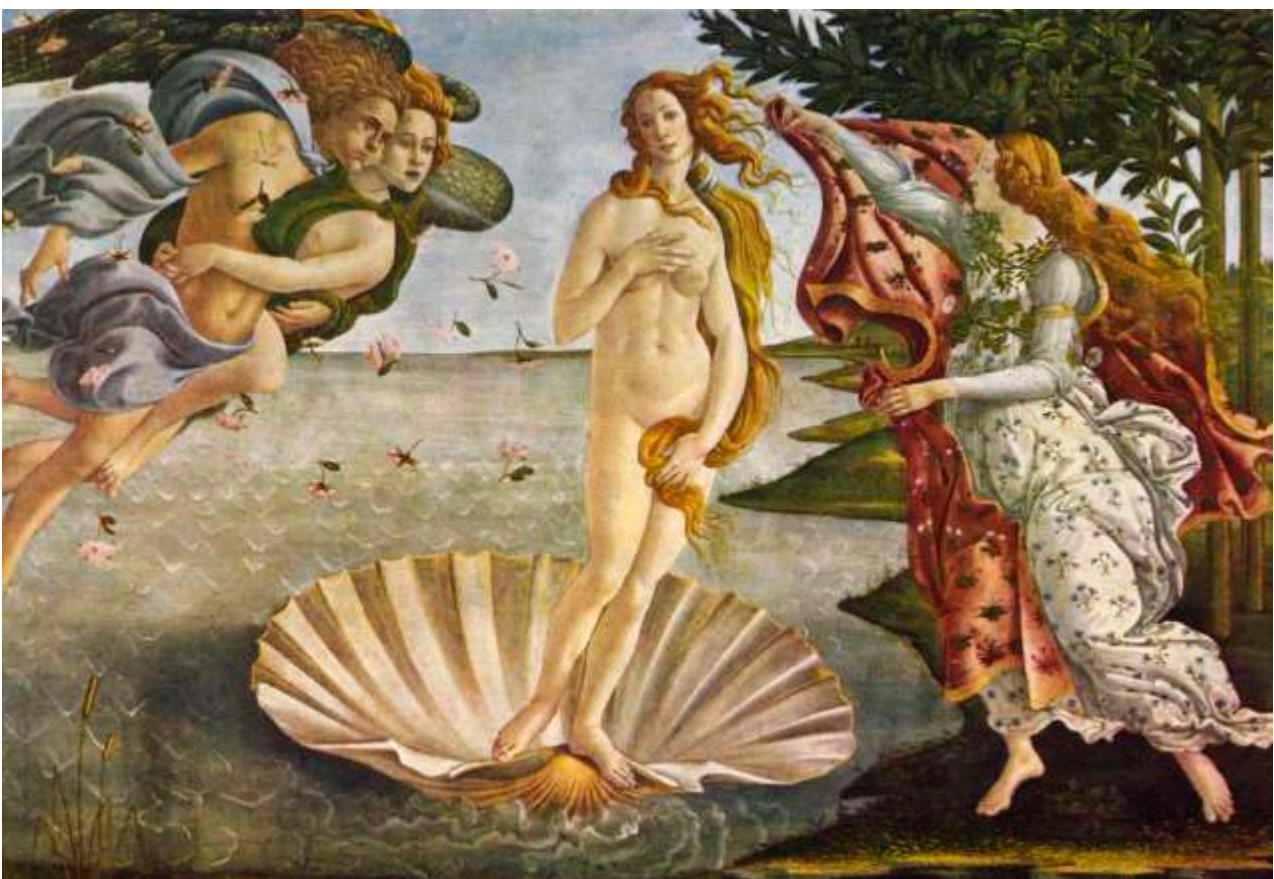
‘The transition in civilization to which we aspire requires us to move art away from criteria that are all too often personalistic, commercial or simply to do with entertainment, and put it back at the heart of the inner development of the human being and the city.

Art is undoubtedly the most dazzling expression of the wisdom of civilizations, and the strongest and most beautiful visible mark of their profound identity. Hegel wrote in his *Aesthetics*: “In works of art the nations have deposited the richest inner intuitions and ideas, and art is often the key, and in many nations the sole key, to understanding their philosophy and religion.” And that is exactly the point: art puts us in touch with what is highest in a people; the most essential thing to share is what makes us brothers and sisters in humanity.

Art as a means of accessing the divine

For artist-craftsmen from the earliest antiquity through to the Renaissance, art was always religious, symbolic, the bearer of a transcendent and magical meaning, provoking in the soul that contemplates it a contact with the sacred, essentially a means of access to the divine.

As the French author and politician, André Malraux, wrote in *The Voices of Silence*: “The most profound metamorphosis began when art no longer had any end other than itself”, with the modern artist most often aspiring to ‘originality’, to be a witness to and critic of his time and his own life. The artists of antiquity and the Middle Ages were mostly anonymous, following precise artistic canons, without ‘originality’, but with a strong identity acquired through contemplative practice.



The Birth of Venus by Sandro Botticelli. Image from Wikimedia

They knew how to raise themselves inwardly to the level of what they wanted to represent. They did not create to please or displease an audience, or to entertain for an ephemeral moment, but to express eternal and timeless truths, to create forms capable of embracing the divine, bringing it to life and making it transmissible. And what they created still touches us, if we know how to perceive with the eyes of the soul.

Beauty is thus a way of coming into contact with a truth, making it loved, awakening in the soul higher feelings and a little intuition about the mystery of divine things.

Art makes life more beautiful

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche wrote: “Art must above all embellish life, and thus make ourselves tolerable to others and agreeable, if possible: it moderates and holds us in check, creates forms of civility, binds those whose education is not complete to laws of propriety, cleanliness and politeness, teaches them to speak and to be silent at the right moment.”

In short, without art, without beauty, we will very quickly regress to barbarism. Our world has become accustomed to ugliness and brutality. And even if the artist uses ugliness to make a virulent criticism of society, its injustice, its excess, its misery, you can't fight misery with misery, nor ugliness with ugliness.

Art, thought Kandinsky, “is a means of opposing materialism and its negative effects on the human soul, a means of knowledge and salvation, which must lead to individual and collective improvement.” Artists have always had a responsibility to convey beauty and harmony.

The philosopher-artist

The educational function of art is to teach us to recognise and love beauty, to awaken higher sentiments, a sense of aesthetics and harmony in ourselves, in our relationship with others and with our environment. Plotinus taught that “no soul will ever see beauty unless it first makes itself beautiful.”

True art is a support for the inner workings of inspiration and self-transcendence, and also for collective life. It is not so long ago that people

painted or sculpted in a studio, under the guidance of a master. The same work was produced by several hands. Great works are often collective works. The studio is a school for all ages, a place to learn about the human side of art, not just the technical.

The practice of philosophy encourages the artist to seek the timeless and to develop the power to captivate the soul, while the practice of art reinforces discipline, high standards and a love of perfection. The two combined gradually lead the apprentice to a mastery that sets him free.

Three virtues lead to harmony. Clarity brings each person face to face with himself, with what he knows how to do, with what he has mastered, in order to make the best contribution to the whole. Clarity helps to build a very rare thing, philosophical friendship, without passion, attachment or comparison. Clarity and friendship allow for interpenetration, a somewhat mysterious virtue, the osmosis that can be established when you are both receiver and transmitter. Once harmony has been recreated, an invisible exchange can take place with higher planes, and other, more subtle vibrations are set in motion.

Art is everyone's business and is for everyone

The harmony we begin to gain in colours, sounds, words and rhythms is also propagated by sharing our common ideas and values. Art is a wonderful medium for living together in harmony. By its very nature, art is everyone's business and must be accessible to all.

As long ago as 1910, Kandinsky wrote in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: “Literature, music and art are the first and most sensitive realms where this spiritual change makes itself felt.”

It is high time we honoured this prophecy and put culture and the arts at the centre of our lives and education. If we do so, a major change will occur and will change the way we live. Beauty will once again enchant our lives and our streets.

Françoise Béchet, Director of the Tristan Centre for the Study of Music and the Performing Arts, France

Wine in Culture and Philosophy

Wine has had an important role in the history of mankind. Ever since grapes have been cultivated, wine has been produced as well. The earliest traces of winemaking can be found in the lands of Georgia and Persia from about 6000 and 5000 BCE. In the ancient world, wine was used not only for enjoying a meal and drinking with friends, but for religious purposes as well. Libations were often made with wine. Archeologists found amphoras in the tomb of King Tutankhamun, with the name of the chief winemaker, but there were also wine cultivation scenes on tomb walls from the times of the Old Kingdom. However, the Egyptians thought that drunkenness makes people crazy and lose control of their senses.

The cult of wine became central in ancient Greece, where the god Dionysus (also known as Bacchus) was associated with this drink. Apart from being the god of wine, he was also the god of fertility, festivity, insanity, and religious ecstasy. Wine had a key role in the cult of Dionysus, as it was his earthly incarnation. Like the saviour-god himself, wine could ease suffering, bring joy, and induce “divine madness”, i.e.

mystical enthusiasm (*en-theos*). In this case, wine would be a symbol for the inspirational teachings of the god, who travelled far and wide, spreading “the message of wine”. That is why in many sculptures, Dionysus is depicted with grapes symbolizing wine. Dionysus was celebrated during festivals such as the Dionysia, which were held around the spring equinox, and the first celebrations were held in Attica.

In Greece, wine was not only for humans, but also for gods. According to one story, the god of artisans, fire and metallurgy, Hephaistos, who had been ejected from Olympus by Hera, prepared a golden throne for his mother as revenge for rejecting him. When she sat on it, she could not stand up again. All the gods went to Hephaistos to ask him to set her free, but the stubborn blacksmith refused or put them off until Dionysus came and, after intoxicating him with wine, took the subdued smith back to Olympus on the back of a mule. So, paradoxically, wine helped him to ‘see reason’. This scene was often painted on the pottery of Attica. As a matter of curiosity, the oldest known image of Dionysus,



Coffin floorboard depicting Isis being served wine. Image from Wikimedia

accompanied by his name, is found on a cauldron by the Attic potter Sophilos from 570 BC and it can be seen in the British Museum.

The Romans called Dionysus Bacchus, and identified him with their own god, Liber Pater, the patron of viniculture, wine and male fertility, and guardian of the traditions, rituals and freedoms attached to coming of age and citizenship. In Rome, the most well-known festivals of Bacchus were the Bacchanalia, based on the earlier Greek Dionysia festivals. Romans planted vineyards near towns, so that wine could be produced locally rather than shipped over long distances. They discovered that burning sulphur candles inside empty wine vessels kept them fresh and free from a vinegary smell. In the Middle Ages in Europe, the Roman Catholic Church supported wine production, because the clergy used it for their



masses. Monks in France were specialists in wine, but it had to be drunk quickly as they hadn't developed the system of bottles and corks, so it would usually age badly in casks. The quality of wine in the Middle Ages was far lower than in Roman times – another example of history moving in cycles, rather than in a linear development.¹

Wine has its role in philosophy too. Plato's famous dialogue, the *Symposium*, takes place during a drinking party, where Socrates and his friends are speaking about love while they are drinking wine. Wine was also mentioned by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* as a pleasant drink, but sinful when

used to excess. He then reaches the strange syllogistic conclusion that “Every sin has a corresponding contrary... thus timidity is opposed to daring... But no sin is opposite to drunkenness. Therefore, drunkenness is not a sin.” Earlier on, St. Ambrose (4th century A.D.) pointedly remarked that “the things we avoid when sober, we unknowingly commit through drunkenness.” Wine was praised by Montaigne, Smith and Hume. Immanuel Kant appreciated a good Médoc with his dinner, but according to his biographer, Manfred Kühn, the Professor occasionally drank so much that he couldn't find his way home. John Locke wrote a whole treatise on the topic – *Observations Upon the Growth of Vines and Olives* – when he stayed in France.

Roger Scruton, who wrote about the connection between wine and philosophy, said that somehow philosophers have said little about the real point of wine, which is as an aid to thinking and intelligent conversation. Leaning on that old proverb in vino veritas (*oinon kai aletheia*), they have assumed that the truth of wine is what you blurt out under its influence, rather than as a means of approaching truth. As an exception, he mentioned the Hungarian philosopher, Béla Hamvas, who wrote *The Philosophy of Wine*. In his book, Hamvas propagated the joy of life and spoke against materialism and pietism. He believes that wine drinking can help us discover the beauties of the world, because the truth of our being has found its way into bottles, and needs only to be poured out and raised to the mouth in congenial company. Being is not a fact, but a gift. But without the benefit of wine it is hard to seize this truth; harder still to recognise the obligation that it imposes, to be gentle with others, and to allow them their own space. But as Scruton highlighted, academic philosophers today spend more time drinking than thinking, and wine is high on the list of diversions. So, we can say, may wine lead to joy and understanding, but measure and moderation are important too.

Istvan Orban

Recommended reading:

Roger Scruton: *I Drink Therefore I Am*

Béla Hamvas: *The Philosophy of Wine*

John Locke: *Observations Upon the Growth of Vines and Olives*

Paul Lukacs: *Inventing Wine: A New History of One of the World's Most Ancient Pleasures*

1. See, for example: <https://theinquisitivevintner.wordpress.com/>

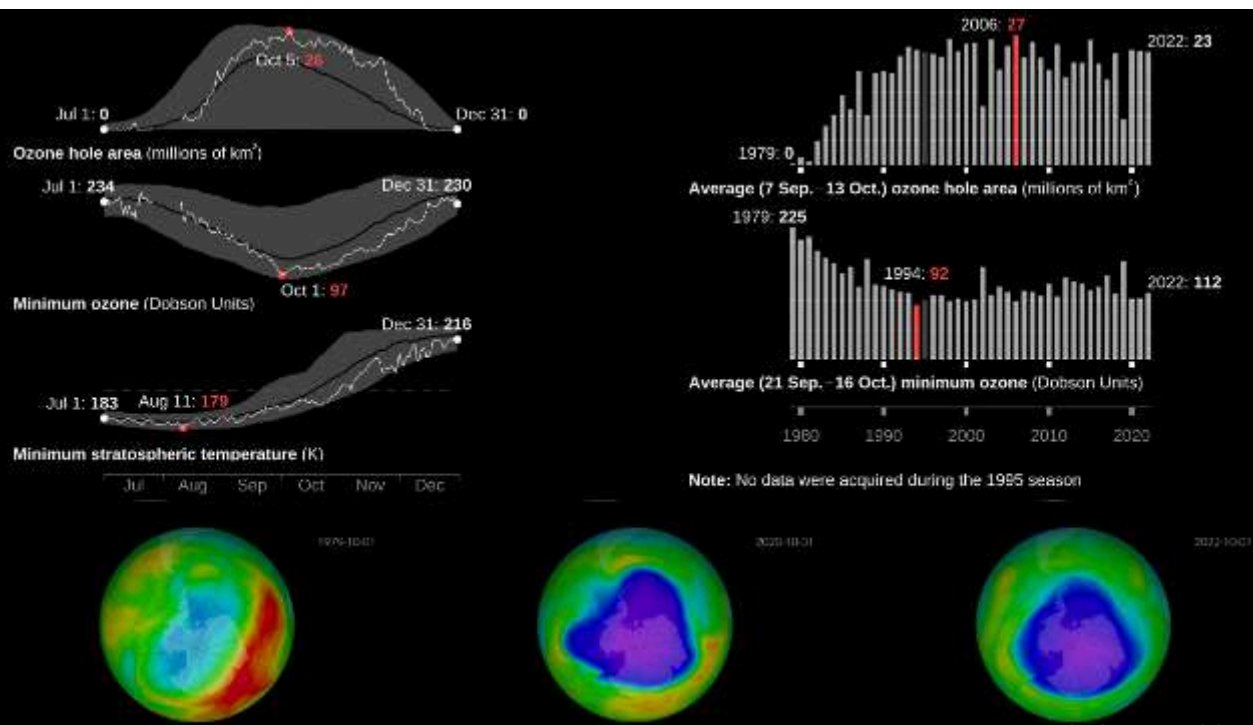
BIG DATA for BIG ISSUES

It can be a scary world out there, if you keep listening to the mainstream news or social media: the way algorithms are set on social platforms, pushing you into bubbles, looking for what triggers strong emotions and encouraging you to doomscroll into oblivion. It can be a vicious circle that can lead to hatred, depression or escapism.

It is true that the predicament in which humanity has placed itself, global warming, the destruction and misuse of our environment and the various wars and conflicts happening around the world can be overwhelming. And it would be easy to say that things are worse than ever before.

However, Hannah Ritchie, a Scottish data scientist, senior researcher at the University of Oxford and deputy editor at *Our World in Data*, tells a different story – a story based on big data. In her latest book, *Not the End of the World*, she follows in the footsteps of the late professor Hans Rosling, and shows with actual data the areas in which humanity has improved the standard of living worldwide, where areas of biodiversity and pollution were in the past in a worse condition than they are today, and how we managed to solve those issues. One example is the hole in the ozone layer in the nineties and how we passed regulations forbidding the use of fluorocarbons, which were mainly to

Plots showing the size of the ozone hole between 1979 and 2022. Image Wikimedia



blame. She believes that scientific research could be helped by zooming out and looking at the wider picture instead of specializing and focusing on one small matter of expertise at a time.

Hannah Ritchie shows that things are bad, as we know with climate change and how six of the nine planetary boundaries have been breached. But she also shows that some things are good, with a better standard of living, higher food production, medical progress and an overall better understanding of the importance of hygiene. And things can be better: as we are already facing the consequences of climate change, we must adapt and change the way we interact with the environment.

One of the key words is sustainability. Often used in a misguided way to do a bit of 'greenwashing', it is supposed to look at the welfare of humanity and the environment, where both must be looked upon equally, rather than neglecting one in favour of the other. She holds the unpopular opinion that humanity was never truly sustainable, as we either fought for survival looking to greener pastures or

we were thriving whilst degrading our environment to the point of society or civilization collapse.

She calls for more optimism, as she believes pessimism sounds smart, but does not bring solutions to the problem. Her kind of optimism is a conditional and urgent one. One that is not afraid to tell the whole story and look for broad solutions that could benefit the greatest number of people, and especially the ones that are already suffering the most. Looking at historical data she was able to see the amazing progress we have made to extricate large portions of humanity out of poverty. But she does not see it as something final, rather as an encouragement to go further and keep at it.

As philosophers we could hold together in our mind, as Hannah Ritchie suggests, the fact that some things are bad, some things are good, and some could be better. For the betterment of societies and the communities we live in, we could encourage constructive criticism and conditional optimism.

Florimond Krins





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