Issue No. 66 JAN - FEB 2025

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The Timeless Spirit of Sport

The Bhagavad Gita and the Inner Battle

Reviving the Wisdom of the Ancients: Nutrition for the Body and Soul

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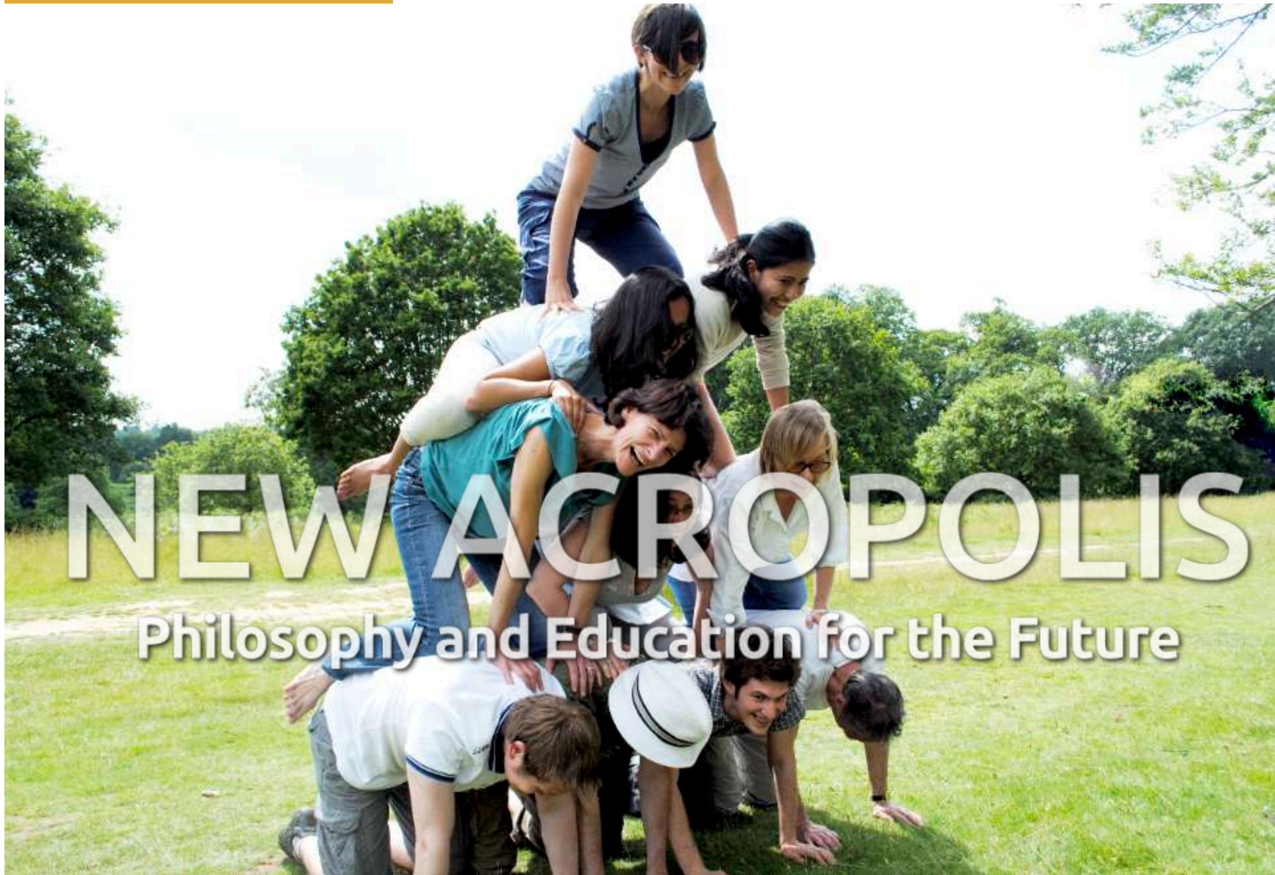

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NEW ACROPOLIS is an international organization working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human 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

The Most Important Job in the World

Bringing up children has never been an easy task, and maybe it is even more difficult today. Previous generations had at least the benefit of a common set of values and a general consensus as to how to bring up children. But most parents are nowadays bombarded with conflicting advice from experts, books, blogs and forums, torn between liberal and authoritarian theories and afraid of 'imposing' views on their offspring. It is understandable that many resort to a passive attitude and try to interfere as little as possible in the 'natural' growing up of their children.

Others expect schools to step in and do the parenting for them; but it is not uncommon in conflicts between teachers and students that the parents take the side of their children and adopt the 'good cop' stance against the 'bad cop' teacher, thus undermining the work of schools. Maybe not surprising then that there are currently severe teacher shortages in England in most secondary subjects (BBC, August 2024) and that teachers report struggling with student behaviour and increasing demands from parents.

Social media also contribute to a feeling of pressure on parents to be 'perfect'. They constantly flood us with curated images of idealized portrayals of family life, whilst never showing the struggles behind the scenes. And since we are nowadays more aware of child development and have a greater understanding of how early experiences shape children, we are constantly afraid of causing lasting traumas.

Further challenges are posed by modern technology, stressful and demanding jobs, rapid social change around issues like gender identity, inclusivity and evolving societal norms and the fact that most parents today have much less support from traditional community and family structures.

Since we can also still see and remember the negative effects of a 'Victorian' authoritarian upbringing, we all want to avoid making the same mistakes. However, going to the other extreme of parenting is not the solution. Because a lack of boundaries, discipline and guidance are proven to have equally negative effects on young people.

Examples of these negative effects of an excessively permissive and laissez-faire style of parenting are: low impulse control, poor emotional regulation, unrealistic expectations and a sense of entitlement amongst young people because they have learnt to get what they want without having to make an effort; a rise in narcissism, interpersonal problems, poor work ethic, disrespect for authority, difficulty handling disappointments, etc.

I am not saying that all young people nowadays display these tendencies. My point is that every parenting style has a certain impact and that there is no point replacing the negative effects of a Victorian upbringing with the negative effects of an overly permissive upbringing. More than anything else, we need well-rounded human beings who are able to face and solve the problems we have created and who can continue to make this world a better place for all.

We have made so much progress in so many fields. But have we also made equal progress in the art of bringing up children? It might be impossible to answer this question, but as a teacher with more than 30 years' experience of working with teenagers, I am sometimes worried about our young people and whether they are well prepared for the demands and responsibilities of adulthood and the challenges that lie ahead.

Regarding the range of parenting styles: I feel that we need to work towards balance and a 'union of opposites': we do need to enforce boundaries but also allow freedom; teach respect and yet allow the questioning of authority and rules. We all have our default modes and either err on the lenient or the strict side. But it is important that we learn how to manage polarities. This requires reflecting on the value of the opposite pole and developing skills from the opposite style. 'Reacting' to the 'shadow manifestation' of a pole by avoiding it altogether will not help.

I agree with John F. Kennedy's statement that "children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future". But in view of the sharp rise of mental health issues, behavioural issues, physical health problems and lower life satisfaction in our young people, we have to admit to ourselves – as a society and as adults – that we haven't quite achieved the right balance in bringing up our children yet.

Sabine Leitner

The Bhagavad Gita and the Inner Battle

The Bhagavad Gita is a philosophical treasure of the Indian wisdom tradition. A heroic tale which for the wisdom-seeker explains many spiritual truths about 'the inner battle' and the human condition. The name 'Bhagavad Gita' means 'Song of God'.

The story is about two branches of a single family descended from brothers Pandu and Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra, the eldest son, was born blind (symbolically without spiritual vision), so it was

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impossible for him to be his father's heir. The second son, Pandu, had a different problem in that he couldn't have children, but using a special mantra his wife called forth the Gods, asking each in turn to father a child with her on her husband's behalf. With this the 'Pandavas' – sons of Pandu – were born, becoming the rightful heirs to the kingdom. The wife of Dhritarashtra also became pregnant, but her pregnancy lasted for many years and, lamenting her state, she requested to be hit on the stomach to bring forth the child. She gave birth to an iron ball which shattered into 99 pieces that became the sons of Dhritarashta, the 'Kuravas'.

The Pandavas and Kuravas represent the two principal aspects in man and the two directions of man's activities. First, the Pandavas represent our spiritual aspect coming from above, symbolised by parentage from the Gods; they show the direction of our qualities, our acts of goodness and in short our virtues. The second aspect, the Kuravas represent our material nature symbolised by the iron ball and multiplicity. This is the direction of our egoistic tendencies and self-interest, in short our weaknesses. Human beings are both, part spiritual and part material, and we all share the task of learning how to live and act in both worlds. It seems that the dichotomy between spirit and matter is the condition of our consciousness, but the eternal question (which the Bhagavad Gita addresses) is which of these two aspects will guide our consciousness and therefore our lives? It seems that we are required to make that choice.

The kingdom is called Hastinapura 'The City of Elephants'. The elephant is associated with the ideal of the sage who possesses immense strength to surmount any barriers, but with such gentleness that, were a trail of ants to cross its path, the benevolent creature would carefully lift its feet to avoid stepping on any of them. Hastinapura represents our consciousness, where the two principal families (two aspects in the human being) contest the rulership. The Pandavas are the rightful rulers, but the eldest son Yudhishthira lost a loaded game of dice and, as forfeit, the Pandavas were exiled for 12 years, with the Kuravas ruling in their absence. After the relevant time had passed, the Pandavas returned, but having decided they quite enjoyed being in charge, the Kuravas refused to give up their position. We too often gamble away our responsibility and self-governance (just this once, it can't hurt, one more roll of the dice…) and in place of our virtues, self-discipline and fortitude, our vices happily take charge.

After unsuccessful attempts to resolve the dispute by negotiation, it becomes clear that a battle will be inevitable… Arjuna, leader of the Pandavas and hero of the story goes with Duryodhana, leader of the Kuravas to consult their cousin Krishna. Sleeping when they arrive, Krishna awakes, listens to them and explains that, to one he will offer all his armies and to the other he will offer himself. Having seen Arjuna first as he awoke, Krishna asks Arjuna to choose and, without hesitation, Arjuna chooses Krishna. Duryodhana is secretly thrilled because given the option he certainly would've opted for the armies!

Krishna represents the spark of divinity in each person and also divinity in the most universal sense. By choosing Krishna, symbolically Arjuna chooses the counsel of his own spirit, he chooses Life in its profoundest aspect and chooses wisdom to be his guide on the battlefield. By contrast, our egoistic nature, symbolised by the Kuravas will always choose massification, accumulation, quantity and variety. It will alway seek breadth over depth and this is why negotiation with our weaknesses is rarely possible. Our lower drives cannot conceive of things beyond their own nature, our material self cannot imagine our spiritual self because, just like Dhritarashtra, matter is born 'blind' and without spiritual vision.

Following the meeting with Krishna, the battlefield is set and the armies of the Pandavas and Kuravas line up on either side of the Kurukshetra, the battlefield of life. It falls to Arjuna to fire the signal for battle to commence, but as he rides up and down between the two armies with Krishna as his charioteer, he is utterly overcome by fear and despair… Why must he fight?! He drops onto the chariot floor refusing to fight – it is the image of the crisis at the centre of the human being: a crisis which appears inevitable in the development of our consciousness in its ascending movement.

Arjuna's point of indecision, his uncertainty and doubt loom like a perilous expanse but in his despair he makes a decision to ask Krishna for help and it is now that Krishna begins to sing to him. Arjuna represents our heroic nature, the attitude that wants to bring out the best we have within for the benefit of those around us. We all possess this heroic spark and however dim it may seem during times of crisis, one of the first lessons for the hero to learn is that it is necessary to move into action. Arjuna demonstrates this movement out of despair by asking Krishna for help.

In our own lives, once we accept a situation and take some action, we begin to feel immediately freer. Often the point of acute fear is not in the event itself but the anticipation of it. Once we begin to test ourselves and get to know ourselves we feel ourselves a little lighter. If we are aware in a crisis then such crises can prove to be the most transformative moments of our lives.

As Krishna begins to sing, he teaches Arjuna about reincarnation and the idea that there is an essential part of the human being which is immortal: "Nothing that truly exists can ever die". We may not personally believe in reincarnation but most of us can sense a kind of centre within which we have greater stability and are less changeable compared to more transient whims and shifting moods. Our centre is where we encounter feelings of peace, solemnity and serenity. We are better able to accept and understand Life as it IS, and be less thwarted by the vagaries of circumstance.

In the conquest of ourselves and the living of a full life, it is essential that we provoke a conflict between these two aspects of our human nature. Why? Because in one sense it is through the inner battle that our heroic part can realise its potential and might seize the opportunity to build internally and externally. It is the same in our inner world as it is for our outer world: everything known to us at some point wasn't, we will have had to have entered into the unknown to discover it. The Bhagavad Gita describes the evolutionary human need for the inner war. What's more, knowing this battle within ourselves we will have far less recourse to external wars and battles with each other. The message of The Gita can help to liberate the heroic potential we have within and its symbolism can support us in facing our daily struggles, so like Arjuna we can ascend towards the heights of our consciousness and govern our lives with wisdom.

Siobhan Farrar

The Lessons of Prosperity

"No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable." (Adam Smith)

"The best things in life aren't things." (Art Buchwald)

The twenty-first century has provided mankind with one of its most important experiences and lessons: material prosperity is not enough for human flourishing.

Like every idea of progress in history, the idea of a generalized material progress and its association with human happiness came to life through the work of philosophers. For most of history, people lived simply and did not expect otherwise. While philosophers like Plato and Confucius discussed the essential equality and dignity of all human beings, it was the philosophers of the Enlightenment who tried to manifest these ideals in a more concrete fashion. Influenced by the ideals of freemasonry, they envisioned a world where all people in the world could live in dignified conditions. John Locke, a British philosopher, wrote in 1690 about the "natural rights" of all human beings – liberty, life, and property – sowing the seeds for the "inalienable rights" of the US Declaration of Independence (1776) and eventually the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights (1948). Following Locke, economic philosophers like

"The Declaration of Independence", painting by John Trumbull, 1756-1843. GPA photo archive.

Adam Smith (1723-1790) developed practical theories to bring wealth to the greater majority of mankind. These ideas, revolutionary at the time, have led us to a unique position in human history.

In a recent commencement speech at the University of Virginia, Economist Robert Parham stated, "(as) a college student in America today you are better off and wealthier than the king of England was 300 years ago." In purely material terms, this is undoubtedly true. As a result of what some economists call "the Great Enrichment", a large percentage of people today, especially in the so-called developed countries,

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live at a level of comfort undreamt of by the average person just a hundred years ago. As Irish philosopher Edmund Burke noted in 1765, "*Nine Parts in ten of the whole Race of Mankind drudge through Life*", i.e. the majority of humanity, at least since the days of the Roman Empire, has lived in what we would call material poverty.

Let us not be mistaken or overly complacent, however. According to the World Bank, about 700 million people live in extreme poverty today, roughly the number of people who lived in the world during Burke's time. This includes around 300 million people who are facing acute hunger as a result of conflicts and climate change, among other things. Nevertheless, in relative percentage terms, a large part of humanity, especially in developed countries, lives in comfortable material conditions.

We have daily and immediate access to hot water, food and light. Almost any item we can dream of can appear at our doorstep in a few days. We can communicate with people all over the world instantly. There are solutions to difficult health conditions that were incurable or untreatable in the recent past. Infant mortality is significantly lower than in previous centuries. And while this material bonanza is not shared equitably among all people, even the lives of the poor in developed countries cannot be compared to those of the past. Death by hunger, for example, is virtually unknown in the United States and Europe.

We could continue to enumerate the material and physical benefits humanity has achieved, but it is clear that, as far as we know, no other civilization in history has reached this level of material well-being and comfort shared by so many people.

This unique situation allows us to experience something very few have lived before. And now that we have tried out this experiment for several centuries, we can look at the results and reflect on some questions. Did this material prosperity make our societies peaceful and happy? What did we have to sacrifice to reach this prosperity? Is it sustainable?

Happiness is hard to measure and its causes even harder to explain, but significant signals suggest our societies are not happier; in some cases, they might be less so. The so-called illnesses of despair (drug use, suicide and alcohol liver damage) have significantly increased over the last 20 years. In the US alone about 100,000 (!) people have died of overdose each year since 2020, and about 50,000 from suicide.

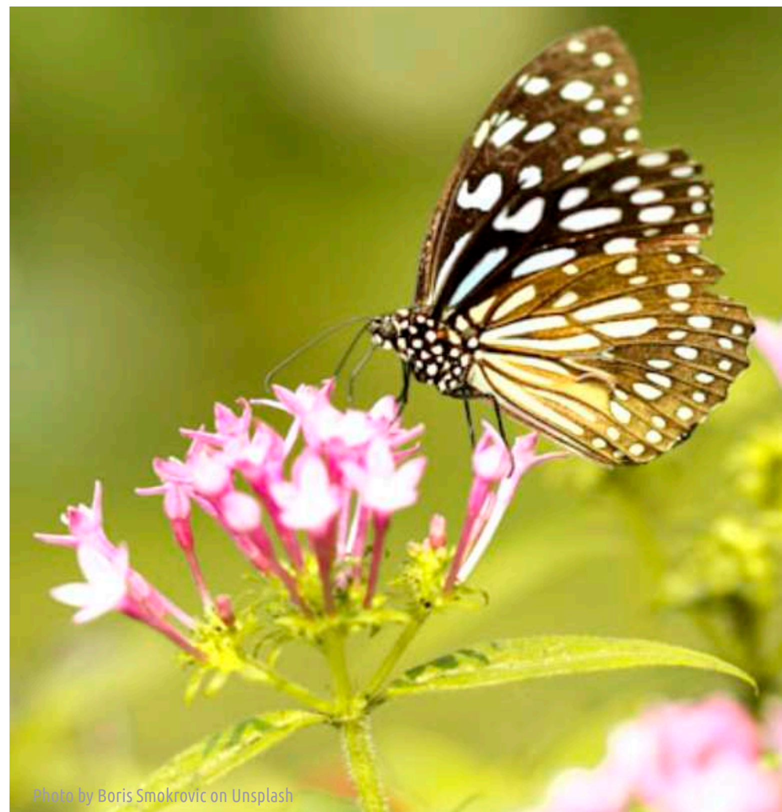
If material progress were enough to make us happy, one could ask what more we need. What else are we missing? Are we unhappy because it takes a few days for products to reach our doorstep instead of a few hours? Do we need a personal drone to bring our lunch from the fridge or a personal massage robot? It seems that no matter how comfortable we are, it is never enough. The truth is that if the material conditions we already have do not satisfy us or make us happy, nothing of this nature will.

And what about the sacrifices we made for this material prosperity?

Many have discussed the various costs of material progress, but one that is often neglected because it is subtle, is the sedation of our souls. When we are excessively preoccupied with productivity and comfort, we lose sight of the bigger picture of what it means to be human. Our minds are so obsessed by the material details of life that we lose touch with subtler aspects of reality, our soul falls asleep and we even forget these aspects exist. This is reflected in cultural decline, a loss of values and moral blindness, and the worst thing is that we don't even recognize it, as we become used to the mud, like a person who gets used to polluted air. Only when they are out in nature, do they suddenly notice they can breathe more easily.

When it comes to material comfort, there are two approaches – one is to continue developing new material means of achieving more comfort (e.g. using a washing machine instead of washing clothes at the river); the other is to satisfy oneself with less. There is also a middle way: to develop means that are sustainable and can be maintained for the long term without destroying their own source or objective, and as long as these means do not make us sacrifice the things that make life worth living. As the old saying goes, we need both bread and flowers: bread to live and flowers to have something to live for. With this analogy in mind, if our production of more bread destroys the flowers, we have taken a wrong turn somewhere along the way.

It is time to realize that human flourishing requires more than just material prosperity. Nice furniture does not a happy family make; nor does a nice car make a calm driver. Material things are important, but in the right proportion. The intention here is not to romanticize poverty, which just like excessive wealth, as Plato says, is a producer of great evil. We aim to have both prosperity and flourishing. But this might mean rethinking prosperity to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include elements often ignored today, such as community life, authenticity, spirituality and more.

When writing the US Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson chose to replace one of John Locke's three original natural rights, changing the right to property to the right to pursue happiness. Was he onto something?

Gilad Sommer

Reviving the Wisdom of the Ancients: Nutrition for the Body and Soul

In today's high-speed, ultra-modern world, when food delivery apps are our stove and nutritional advice comes from TikTok and the food celebrities of Instagram, it's tempting to ignore the fact that eating is more than just filling our tummies. If we rewind the clock to the time of the ancient Greeks, we'd find that food was not merely fuel; it was a path to physical and spiritual wellness. In this article we are going to revisit this view on nurturing oneself, a quest for balanced living.

Ancient diets in general were rich in nutrient-dense foods such as grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits and various forms of animal protein. Fermented foods like sauerkraut, kimchi and yogurt were staples, providing beneficial probiotics that supported gut health long before the term was minted. Bone broth, organ meats and herbs such as turmeric and garlic were prized for their therapeutic benefits, which helped to achieve good overall immunity and health.

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Interestingly, modern science is now validating many of these ancient practices, showing how traditional diets can influence gut health, mental clarity and longevity. With the rediscovery of the wisdom of ancient nutrition, we recognize that such practices provide a natural, whole-body approach to health, where natural, real foods rather than processed artificial foods are preferred. Through the application of these tenets to contemporary lifestyles, we can nourish ourselves with a healthy and flavourful diet in tune with both tradition and modernity.

In *Gut: The Inside Story of Our Body's Most Underappreciated Organ*, Giulia Enders masterfully outlines the role the gut plays, not only in the digestion, but also in ensuring that our entire body runs as a slick machine. As Enders points out, the gut and brain are the first two systems to form in an embryo, and they are connected from the very start. This complex relationship between gut and brain is referred to as the gut-brain axis, and the gut is often referred to as our "second brain". It is responsible for so much more than we give it credit for: influencing our mood, emotions and overall health. And, considering that trillions of microorganisms in the gut help with digestion, immune regulation and even mental clarity, it is obvious that much care should be given to the gut. In recognition of this, ancient diets included fermented foods and modern science is now catching up with this wisdom. So, next time you sit down to eat, just remember it's not just about enjoying the food; it's about keeping your gut, and therefore your whole body, happy!

Imagine a dinner setting in ancient Greece, where eating habits were significantly shaped by the ideas of moderation, balance and the natural rhythms of life. The typical Greek diet revolved around the "Mediterranean triad" of bread (made from barley or wheat), wine and olive oil, along with fruits, vegetables, fish and limited amounts of meat. Meals were straightforward yet nutritious, focusing on fresh, seasonal ingredients. Wealthier Greeks enjoyed more luxurious foods like honey, cheeses and fine wines, but even among them, excess was generally frowned upon. Hippocrates, often referred to as the "Father of Medicine", highlighted the crucial role of diet in maintaining health. He believed that food could serve as medicine, famously stating, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food." He promoted moderation in eating, cautioning against overindulgence, and suggested that diets should be customized to fit individual health needs, seasonal changes and personal constitution (which he called "humours"). Hippocrates recommended selecting foods not only for their flavour but also for their impact on the body's balance of hot, cold, humid and dry elements. For example, he noted that warming foods like garlic and onions could help with certain

imbalances, while cooling foods such as cucumbers could alleviate excess heat. He also stressed the significance of fasting or reducing food intake during illness to support the body's natural healing processes. His dietary guidelines aimed to create harmony between the body's internal state and external conditions, establishing foundational principles of holistic health that continue to be relevant in modern wellness practices.

Traditional Chinese Medicine considers food to be a crucial way to nourish Qi, the life force or energy that circulates throughout the body. Qi is viewed as

the essential energy that supports all life processes, influencing physical, mental and emotional health. It travels through pathways known as meridians and ensuring its smooth and balanced flow is vital for well-being. Foods are classified according to their energy characteristics – hot, warm, neutral, cool and cold – and their effects on the balance of Yin and Yang in the body. These characteristics can either replenish deficiencies or reduce excesses. For example, warming foods like ginger can energize the body and enhance circulation, while cooling foods such as watermelon help to lower internal heat and inflammation, making them ideal during

Photo by Robert Biebel/flickr.com

hot weather or fevers. Additionally, foods are categorized by their flavours (sweet, sour, bitter, salty and pungent), and each are believed to support specific organs and bodily functions. Sweet flavours are thought to nourish the spleen and stomach, sour flavours benefit the liver and gallbladder; bitter flavours support the heart and small intestine, salty flavours are associated with the kidneys and bladder, while pungent flavours relate to the lungs and large intestine. The primary aim of Traditional Chinese dietary therapy is to achieve a harmonious balance within the body, facilitating the smooth flow of Qi and preventing illness. This philosophy resonates with broader holistic health practices, emphasizing the importance of maintaining internal balance to foster overall well-being and prevent diseases.

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, emphasizes the importance of food in maintaining health and balance. At the heart of Ayurvedic philosophy are the three doshas – Vata, Pitta and Kapha – representing the different energy patterns found in every individual. Vata is responsible for movement and is characterized by qualities such as lightness, dryness and variability. Pitta governs metabolism, heat and transformation, while Kapha is associated with structure, stability and cohesion. Each person has a unique blend of these doshas, and any imbalances can impact both physical and mental health. Each dosha is linked to specific physical and mental characteristics, and an imbalance can lead to health issues. Foods are classified based on their effects on the doshas, and diets are tailored to restore balance. For example, cooling and hydrating foods like cucumbers and melons may be suggested to soothe Pitta, which is linked to heat and intensity. In contrast, grounding and warming foods such as sweet potatoes and nuts can help stabilize Vata, associated with movement and variability. To balance Kapha, which is related to heaviness and stability, lighter and more stimulating foods like spicy peppers and bitter greens are often recommended to boost energy and reduce sluggishness. By aligning one's diet with each person's dominant dosha and the changing seasons, Ayurveda aims to create harmony within the body's physical, mental and spiritual aspects, fostering a long and healthy life.

Aristotle, the great pragmatist, believed in the concept of the "Golden Mean", a balanced approach to life that avoids extremes. In terms of diet, Aristotle would always advocate for moderation – neither gluttony nor asceticism but a middle path that provides the body with the necessary nutrients while also allowing for the pleasure of eating. He understood the central role of physical health as a support for intellectual and moral virtues. For Aristotle, of course, there is a theoretically

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important connection between the well-nourished body and eudaimonia, the human flourishing that goes well beyond this. So, you can have your cake and eat it too – just maybe not the whole cake…

Modern scientific research, like that presented by Giulia Enders in her book *Gut*, resonates with many ancient principles, particularly the importance of balance, the role of digestion in overall health, and how specific foods affect bodily functions. Her work aligns with concepts found in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Ayurveda and Hippocratic teachings, all of which acknowledge the crucial link between diet, digestion and holistic health. Like TCM's focus on Qi and Ayurveda's attention to doshas, modern science highlights the microbiome's role in maintaining the body's internal environment. Just as Qi symbolizes the flow of energy through meridians, and doshas represent the interaction of elemental energies within the body, the microbiome serves as a dynamic ecosystem of microorganisms that impacts both physical and mental health. This common emphasis on balance and flow illustrates the universal principle of internal harmony as essential for well-being. Enders's research reinforces that nurturing a healthy, balanced gut contributes to better overall health, reflecting principles shared by these ancient traditions. Her findings point to specific health benefits, such as improved immune function and enhanced mental well-being, both of which are associated with a healthy gut microbiome.

Today, as we face a huge storm of dietary advice – paleo, keto, vegan, low-carb, high-fat, name anything you can imagine – it might be helpful to step back and consider what the ancients might have to say. Their approach was holistic, considering not just the physical effects of food but also its impact on the mind and spirit. Maybe the most important thing to take away from them is that food does not need to be a quick fix (or even a cynical source of guilt). It should be a mindful, happy and peaceful way of life.

So, the next time you take a seat at the dining table, what do your choices say about you? Are you eating so that both body and spirit are nourished? If the answer is yes, then you're not just feeding yourself; you're engaging in an ancient practice of living wisely and well. And if the answer is no? Right, perhaps it's time to bring a bit of philosophy to the table.

Laszlo Balizs

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George Eliot

Humanist, Sociologist and Knower of the Inner Life

"Eppie's hand rests on the shoulder of her adoptive father, Silas Marner, as she looks her natural father, Godfrey, in the eye. Godfrey had deserted Eppie's mother, who had then died shortly after giving birth to their daughter. He is now offering Eppie a life of comfort and thus redemption for himself. After finding and adopting Eppie as an abandoned baby, Silas' tender care had galvanised his own redemption, guiding him back into community after his fearsome embrace of isolation and miserliness precipitated by the loss of all he had, early in his life. Sixteen-year-old Eppie firmly rejects Godfrey's proposition. "He's took care of me and loved me from the first, and I'll cleave to him as long as he lives, and nobody shall ever come between him and me."

Portrait of George Eliot by the Swiss artist Alexandre-Louis-François d'Albert-Durade.

Eppie's decision is one of a multitude of moral choices made by the characters populating the extraordinary suite of novels written by George Eliot (born Mary Anne Evans, 1819; died Mary Ann Cross 1880). Her novels include *Adam Bede*, 1859; *The Mill on the Floss*, 1860; *Silas Marner*, 1861; *Middlemarch*, 1871-2; *Daniel Deronda*, 1876. Standing with Dickens and Trollope in the triptych of great 19th century English novelists, Eliot's breathtaking range of publications encompassed novels, poetry, literary criticism, translations, and scientific and religious essays. She was the most powerful female English intellectual of her age. Praise abounds for the quality of her fiction – for her plotting and drama, her descriptiveness, her characterisation, her use of language and metaphor, her ear for accent and dialogue, her humour, her psychological sensitivity and her philosophical exploration. Virginia Woolf described *Middlemarch* as "One of the few English novels written for grown-up people." The novelist Thomas Keneally wrote recently that "No-one has ever out-thought or out-written her on human relationships."

Eliot outlined her philosophy for fiction in *The Natural History of German Life*, 1856, published in the prestigious and progressive *Westminster Review* that she edited in all but name. Reflecting her intimate knowledge of the work of Auguste Comte, the 'father of sociology', and Ludwig Feuerbach, the German philosopher and anthropologist, Eliot signalled her intent to write a natural history of ordinary people in a spirit of humanist realism – a revolutionary departure for English fiction.

The world she chose to evoke was rural and small-town middle England, the world she knew so well as the daughter of a land agent in "the rich, fat country" outside Nuneaton in the West Midlands. The sub-title of Middlemarch is *A Study of Provincial Life*. She set most of her novels in this vista in the late 1820s/early 1830s. Her contemporary readers would have remembered it from their childhood, depicted in its entirety, whilst also noticing the emergence of the economic, social and political forces that transformed English society in their lifetimes. Forces for change that were manifested in Eliot's characters – for instance, Dorothea Brook's vision for transforming the landowner-tenant relationship; Lydgate's passion for modern, preventive medicine; Ladislaw's embrace of political reform at the time of the Great Reform Act of 1832; Silas Marner's discovery in later life that the Lantern Yard chapel of his youth had become "a large factory, from which men and women were streaming for their mid-day meal"; and the ghost character, money, that permeated all her novels as materialism took hold in the 19th century.

Eliot's novels are not, however, exclusively of the outer world. DH Lawrence called her the first novelist to put all the action inside. She takes us confidently into the inner world of her characters, describing their motivations, emotions, fears, addictions, aspirations and attractions, often in highly embodied ways. Such was her success in taking on the "Hard task to analyse the soul" (William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*: Book 2, 1805 – he was much admired by Eliot), that modern observers remark on her capacity to articulate psychoanalytical ideas well before they were current. In her study of her characters' inner life, we hear echoes of Baruch Spinoza, whose *Ethics* (1677) Eliot translated from the Latin in 1856. As the philosopher Clare Carlisle elucidates, Eliot's strong affinities with Spinozism include "…the deep emotional intelligence evident throughout her novels… and her core sense that human excellence lies in enlarging the human soul."

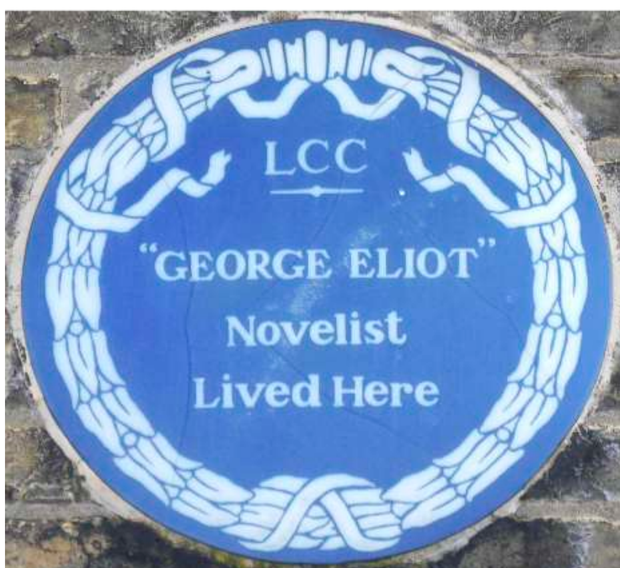
Eliot lost her evangelical faith in her early 20's (to avoid the risk of family breakdown, she compromised with her father, attending church with him but not taking communion). But she did not abandon the code of ethics, allied with a deeply felt inner life, that she had developed in her school days. Described as a humanist, Eliot's spiritual philosophy was much influenced by Comte, by Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), and by David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835), both of which she translated

Image by Billy Wilson, Flickr.com

from the German. For her, the essences of Christian belief and practice must continue but in a secularised way. Eppie's salvation of Silas is one of many examples – the little child leading him to the only kingdom of heaven that Eliot would allow on earth, compassionate community.

Character development – evolution if you like – is at the core of Eliot's universe, her narrator navigating her characters like seas of consciousness, long journeys through time. We are invited to a whole life view – Maggie and Tom Tulliver, siblings in *The Mill on the Floss*, heartbreakingly repeating relationship patterns from early childhood to their death by drowning in each other's arms in early adulthood; Silas Marner, from evangelical youth to complete loss to isolation to contented old age; Dorothea Brook from late teens through her desiccated marriage to Casaubon to her love of

Ladislaw, all the while seeking ways to satisfy her aspirations to change the world for the better; the list goes on, much lost, much gained in individual lives. Throughout, we sense Eliot's belief that we are all capable of spiritual growth, our own version of the passion and crucifixion, but that we cannot do it alone, we must be sympathetically open to what our fellow human beings can give us. We also need will and determination, 'Endurance' in Eliot's lexicon. Here is Dorothea in Middlemarch looking out one morning as the local community moved off into their working days – "Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance".



George Eliot's blue plaque at 31 Wimbledon Park Road

Eliot's humble grave in Highgate Cemetery is a perfect place to contemplate her own extraordinary trajectory of the life of the mind, or the life of the spirit as she herself articulated it. Biographers agree that her passion to make an intellectual difference in the world ignited in her encounters at school with spirited, independent female teachers; developed in her studies in her father's client's grand library and with the tutors he provided for her; evolved in her contact with a community of free-thinkers and radicals in nearby Coventry; and then flowered in London and abroad, in a plethora of intellectual endeavours, drawing support from her 'shared soul' romantic and intellectual partnership with George Henry Lewes (1817-1878). Her trajectory to intellectual pre-eminence was not without its squalls – she experienced a lull in popularity in the 1860s before she wrote *Middlemarch*, and she constantly sought reassurance about the quality of her writing – but it was always fuelled by profound determination, her own endurance. Here from her journal is a full day even by her standards, 13 June 1855 – "Began Part IV of Spinoza's Ethics. Began also to read Cumming for article for Westminster Review. We are reading in the evenings now, Sydney Smith's letters, Boswell, Whewell's History of Inductive Sciences, the Odyssey and occasionally Heine's Reise Bilder. I began the second book of the Iliad in Greek this morning."

A perfect place too, her graveside, to reflect on her final words in *Middlemarch*, encapsulating Eliot's democratic spirit, her admiration of ordinary lives, and her profound belief in human potential and the scope for improvement:

"But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive; for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

George Eliot – the effect of her influence, art and wisdom "incalculably diffusive" through the ages.

Julian Powe

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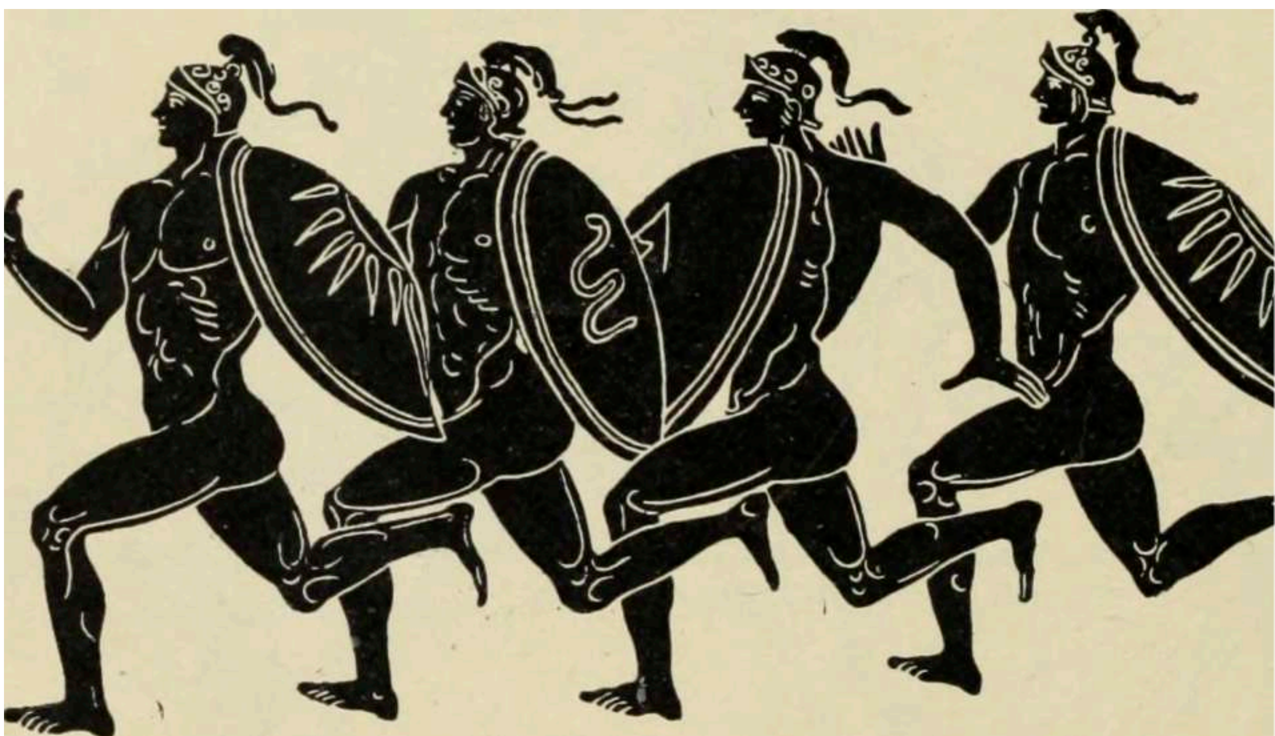
The Timeless Spirit of Sport

Sport is not only formative for individuals, but is also a social and global concept which includes the responsibility for human development through everyday activities. In fact, some of the greatest ancient philosophers recognized the importance of developing a harmoniously balanced personality where physical education and sport played a significant role.

In the West, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, for example, acknowledged that sport aids the pursuit of virtues, such as wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Their systems of education enabled students to have a physical, moral and intellectual education in one space. This was actually initially an open-air space where a holistic curriculum would be taught, harmonising mathematics, physics, astronomy and



"Greek athletic sports and festivals Year", by Edward Norman, 1864-1930. Source image: Wikimedia.com

dialectics with poetry, music, military training and "gymnastics" in the forms of running, wrestling, boxing, ball games and other physical activities. Socrates and Plato called this space the "Gymnasium", and Aristotle later developed the "Lyceum". It's quite ironic that what we call our modern educational institutions (which in most cases focus on academic education) in much of the West derive from ancient Greek athletic grounds[1].

For Plato, physical education had the purpose of developing the human character. He wrote: "Physical training, no less than education in literature and the arts, has to do with the soul." He clarified that physical training as part of a

Source image: Wikimedia.com

harmonious education is drastically different from physical training done only to become a better athlete: training only the body produces disharmony at the expense of the other aspects of the personality, which invariably prevents the athlete from achieving "kalokagathia". "Kalokagathia" is a classical Greek concept that combines the ideas of physical beauty and moral virtue. It is an ideal of noble personal conduct, of harmony of the body and mind, achieved through wholeness and the harmonious balance of the material and spiritual aspects of the human being. It is derived from the Greek words "kalos" (καλός), meaning beautiful, and "agathos" (ἀγαθός), meaning good or virtuous. The term embodies the ideal of the complete human personality, harmonizing both the body and the soul. Similarly, in Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle disagreed with "all exaggerated unilateral development, whether mental or physical" and believed that developing the body alone was not enough to give meaning to one's life.

In the East, sport was seen as a means for the development of the human being too. Ancient China, for example, embraced martial arts and archery, with the philosophy of balance and harmony playing a significant role in the development of these disciplines. In India, traditional sports like Kabaddi and Kho-Kho were played to enhance physical fitness and foster a sense of community. In much of the African continent, sport was seen with a similar lens, with even more emphasis on the interconnectedness and unity between people. In many African countries there was the concept of Botho or Ubuntu, which was a philosophy of life around the concept that "I am a person through other persons", and represented the aspect of humaneness, personhood, morality and humanity. In India, the practice of the physical exercises of yoga was only a minor part of the whole practice of yoga, which included training of the mind and connecting with the spiritual during study and everyday activities. In many ancient traditions sporting activities were also combined with music, dance, powerful symbolic costumes and gestures, rhythmic chanting, rituals, ceremonial competitions and the involvement of nature. The purpose of these activities was to connect the participants' body, mind and soul with their ancestors, cultural history, ancient wisdom, nature spirits and God/s.

So, it is evident that sport and physical education should aim at developing individuals so that they can contribute positively to self, family and community, through the development of values and the inner self. This was somewhat lost in time, until

1. In Germany and Austria, academic secondary schools are called 'Gymnasium', while in France and Italy they are called 'Lycée' and 'Liceo' respectively.

the late 19th century with the formalization of the Olympic Games as a global activity and Olympism as a concept.

The Olympic Games have been held in Olympia, Greece, since at least 776 BCE. They initially featured events like running and wrestling, then expanded over the centuries to include a variety of disciplines, emphasizing the Greeks' commitment to physical excellence and the pursuit of athletic virtue. Olympism is a social philosophy that emphasises the role of sport in world development, international understanding, peaceful co-existence, and social and moral education. Like all large scale socio-cultural movements across history and the globe, the development of a structure and system to fulfil this social philosophy began by establishing some principles and symbolic elements.

Olympism translates into a few simple phrases that capture the essence of what an ideal human being ought to be and aspire to. It promotes the ideas of:

- individual all-round harmonious human development
- towards excellence and achievement
- through effort in competitive sporting activity
- under conditions of mutual respect, fairness, justice and equality
- with a view to creating lasting personal human relationships of friendship
- international relationships of peace, toleration and understanding
- and cultural alliances with the arts

These concepts are further represented by the Olympic symbol, motto, anthem, oaths and the torch relay.

The Olympic symbol is composed of 5 interlinked rings and is the visual representation of Olympism. The rings are the only official symbol of the Olympics, designed by Pierre de Coubertin in 1913. The 5 rings represent the 5 continents, interlinked to show the universality of Olympism and how athletes from all over the world come together for the Games. On the Olympic flag, the rings appear against a white background so that, together, the 6 colours of the flag represent all the nations.

The Olympic motto is CITIUS, ALTIUS, FORTIUS, which, translated from the Latin, means FASTER, HIGHER, STRONGER. These words encourage athletes to give their best when they compete, on the understanding that the most important thing in the Games is taking part, playing well and fairly, not winning; what is essential in life is not conquering but fighting well.

Source image: wikimedia.com

Giving one's best and striving for personal excellence in every aspect ourselves form a laudable goal.

The Olympic anthem and the oaths are part of the official protocol of the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games. Those who take the oath and sing the anthem are nationals of the host country, who hold a corner of the Olympic flag as they say the words. What does taking an oath mean, and what effect does singing an anthem with thousands of other people have on us humans? Setting aside any religious or monarchic connotations (such as in the judicial systems of America and Britain), an oath is a pact with the archetypes of justice and truth – as well as with our higher selves, which channel these

Source image: wikimedia.com

archetypes if we silence the voice of our lower self and listen to the higher. If we break an oath by lying, cheating and such things, we betray not only those around us, but also our true selves and the universal principles which govern our universe.

Along with the flag, the Olympic flame and torch relay are the most well-known elements of the Games. In modern times, the flame is an expression of the positive values that human beings have always associated with the symbolism of fire. The flame is lit and kindled at Olympia, recalling the ancient Greek roots of the Games and emphasizing the link between the ancient and modern Games. From there, the flame is carried to the host city by thousands of torchbearers, announcing the Games and transmitting a message of peace and friendship to all along the way. It also promotes the culture and natural riches of the regions through which it passes. Reflecting more deeply, fire is symbolic of concepts of transformation, purification and victory over darkness, so the Olympic Games give an opportunity for participants to overcome personal challenges and develop virtues to align their "lower" aspects with the "higher". Also, recalling the myth of Prometheus who stole the fire from the Gods to give to humanity, we can reflect on the dualism of our human predicament: humans are given the tools for good and for evil, but it is our moral choice which determines how we use them.

Sometimes we can see that this predicament plays out not in favour of these principles, in the Olympics or other global sporting activities, where capitalism, political leverage or division cause humans to go against these principles, individually or collectively. Luckily, we all have an opportunity to recognise and act differently, however small or big our impact may be.

Sofia Venuti

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SILK ROADS

The term 'Silk Road' refers particularly to the route along which silk and other commodities were traded from China to the West, during the European Middle Ages. It conjures up images of camel trains crossing the desert, loaded with silk, spices and other exotic products from the East. What the exhibition at the British Museum (ending 23 February 2025) tries to illustrate, however, by changing the term to its plural form of 'Silk Roads' is that, rather than one route specialising in silk and going from East to West, there was a whole network of routes encompassing several different civilizations, and trading many different commodities, all coexisting at a period between 500 and 1000 AD.

When Western Europeans think of this timeframe, what probably springs to mind is the 'Dark Ages', referring to the early Middle Ages characterized by a loss of the values and technology of the classical world of Greece and Rome. One of the things that the exhibition shows is that this period was not as dark as we think, even for Europe. One of the objects on display is a beautiful drinking horn (i.e. a form typical of northern Europe) made of blue glass from Byzantium – modern-day Istanbul. It was made somewhere between 550 and 600 AD.

What this shows is that there was frequent trade and communication between the lands of northern Europe, the Mediterranean and Byzantium. The fusion of styles and materials also indicates a cross-fertilization of cultures which is at odds with the idea of a Europe enclosed within itself.

Another fascinating exhibit is the so-called 'Franks Casket' (named after its donor). With writing in Latin and Runic scripts, it contains on its different faces scenes from Jewish history, Christian tradition, and Roman and Norse mythology: a model of eclecticism! It was made in Northumbria around 700 and found in Auzon, France. Moreover, in a singularly modern touch, the work is dedicated to the whale from whose bones it was made!

Franks casket (first half of the 8th century AD). Photo from Wikimedia.com

One further curiosity from the exhibition might surprise those who think of the Vikings as barbaric marauders, murdering their way to conquest: a statue of a seated Buddha, found in Hëlgo, Uppland, Sweden and dated somewhere between the late 500s to mid-600s. Where did it originate? Probably the Swat Valley in modern-day Pakistan!

Helgö Buddha. Photo from Wikimedia.com

This is not to suggest that the Vikings were peace-loving Buddhists, but simply that they seem to have had an appreciation of the art and religion of other cultures with whom they came into contact. For they did not only come to places like the British Isles in search of plunder; it turns out that they were the most widely travelled people of this 500-year period, with their trade routes covering around 8,000 kilometres. They even established a settlement in Newfoundland, Canada, around 1,000 AD.

There is a darker side to all this intercontinental trade, which was that human beings were among the 'objects' bought and sold, and the Vikings were among the major slave-traders of the day, usually selling to the Arabs. Islamic law forbade the enslavement of people living within Islamic lands, but it was allowed anywhere outside of them; this meant, for example, northern and slavic Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and Byzantium itself.

Silk was produced in China and exported around the world. The trade had been going on for a long time, and the philosopher Seneca had complained in the 1st century about the decadent custom of men wearing silk in the Roman capital, where it had become the height of fashion. Traders were selling it in Rome at a hundred times its original cost, so big profits were being made. From 500-1000 AD it was one of the major commodities traded on the Silk Roads, starting its journey in Tang dynasty China (618-907) and criss-crossing the world along numerous routes. But many other commodities were also being traded, such as precious stones from India and Java, some of which ended up in the famous Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon burial found in Suffolk, England (7th century AD). Similarly, a Celtic-style dagger and scabbard was found in far-off Korea.

Java was at that time the centre of a flourishing civilization, with its famous Temple of Borobudur, dated to around 700-800 AD, the largest Buddhist temple in the world. Other thriving civilizations at this time were the Islamic caliphates, particularly the Abbasid capital in Bagdhad, and the Ummayad caliphate based in Cordoba, Spain (then called al-Andalus). These places were not only political and diplomatic centres, but also centres of culture. Bagdhad was home to the 'House of Wisdom', which attracted scholars from around the world, and Cordoba had a vast library of over 400,000 books and a centre for translation from Latin and Greek into Arabic. Christian and Jewish scholars worked side by side with Islamic ones. It was through Islamic Spain that much of the knowledge of Arabia (on astronomy, medicine, etc.) passed to the West. In turn, Islamic culture had received much of its knowledge from ancient Greece, India and Persia.

Thus we see an immense interconnectedness throughout this period, across so many cultures that

Ancient silk production in china. Photo from Wikimedia.com

here I can only list some of them. Among those who contributed to this trade in commodities and 'metaphysical goods' were some whose names have been almost or even entirely forgotten: the Sogdian empire which controlled the Eurasian steppes and acted as a bridge between China, India and the Mediterranean. It comprised a confederation of

The Sassanid empire around the 7th century CE.Wikimedia.com

city-states or principalities, each with its own ruler, and its peoples worshipped a supreme Goddess called Nana. They were great traders originating from the lands now known as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Then there were the Sasanians (224-651 AD), whose empire functioned as a bridge between Europe and Central Asia and whose people mainly practised the Zoroastrian religion. Sasanian glass vessels have been found as far away as Nara, Japan. And who has heard of the Aksumite empire today? Yet in its day it was "an international power, connected diplomatically, economically and culturally to the contemporary known world.[1]" It occupied the highlands of Ethiopia and Eritrea from the 1st to the 8th centuries and was an early adopter of Christianity. From their Red Sea port at Adulis, the Aksumites traded everything from ivory to wine to marble. Let us end this list with the Türkic Khaganates which dominated the Eurasian steppe for a time. Perhaps due to the traffic constantly passing through their lands, the Türkic populations adopted several religions such as Buddhism, Manicheism, Christianity and Islam, and generally demonstrated religious tolerance in the territories under their control.

Returning to England, a major school was established at Canterbury around 669 AD, with a diverse curriculum including Latin, Greek, law, astronomy, medicine, music and 'computus' – the method for calculating the movable date of Easter. It was founded by two Greek-speaking scholars sent by the Pope, one of whom was born in North Africa and the other in what is now Turkey. This is yet one more example of the international character of the age, which we see also in the phenomenon of the 50 international scholars working at the Palatine School at Aachen (Germany) under the Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena in the 9th century.

To conclude, this is an eye-opening exhibition which reveals the interconnectedness of the world at a time which many had thought of as the 'Dark Ages', in which ideas and beliefs travelled and were transmitted by daring and faith-driven individuals. Humanity, at its present stage of development, is still capable of cruelty and inhumanity, but is also capable of bringing people together in an eclectic spirit of intercultural exchange and understanding. Tolerance or fanaticism? As the Zoroastrians would say, it's up to each individual to decide whether they want to be 'Followers of Truth' or 'Followers of the Lie'.

Julian Scott

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