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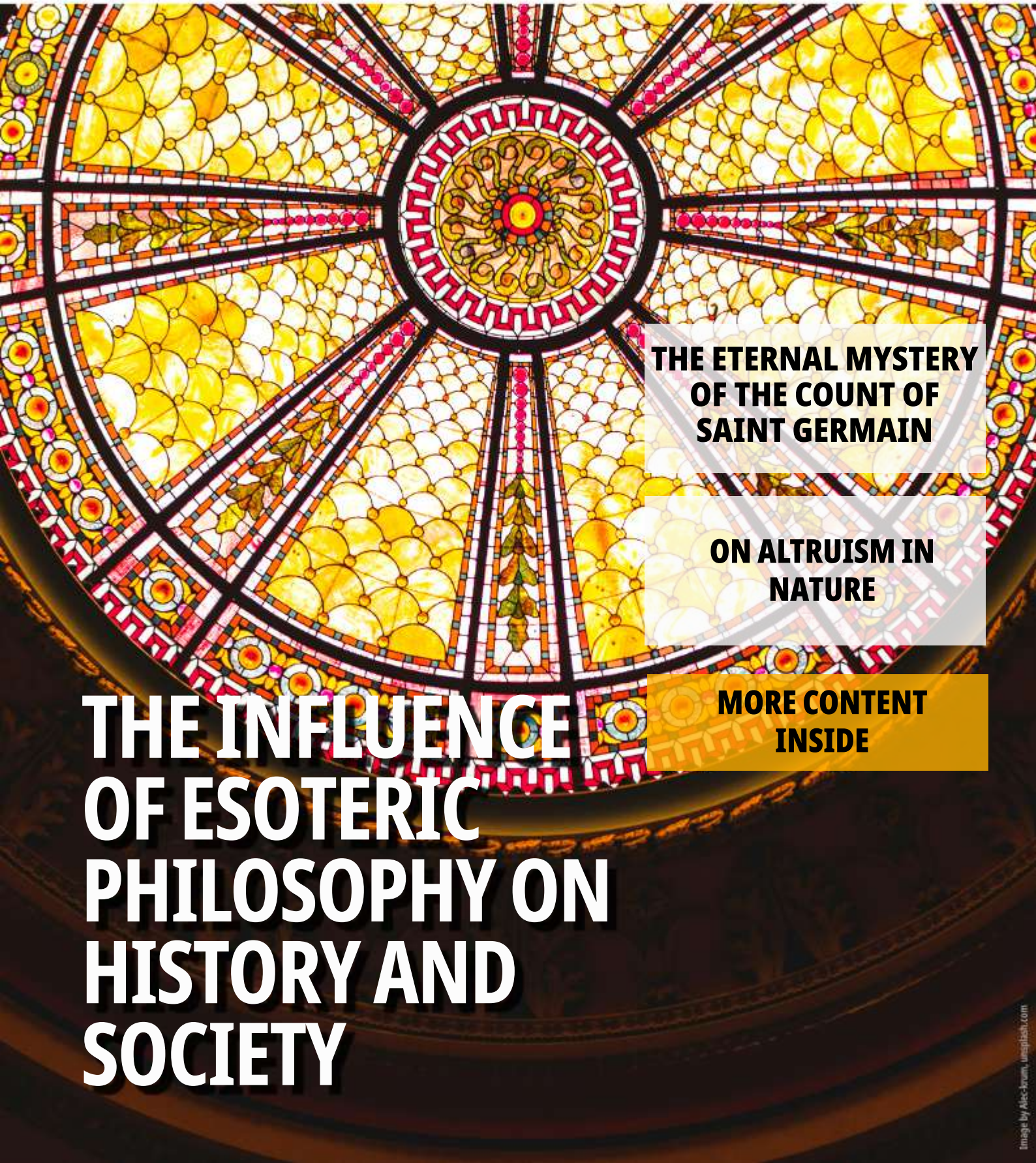

THE ETERNAL MYSTERY OF THE COUNT OF SAINT GERMAIN

ON ALTRUISM IN NATURE

MORE CONTENT INSIDE

THE INFLUENCE OF ESOTERIC PHILOSOPHY ON HISTORY AND SOCIETY

NEW ACROPOLIS

PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE

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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

BY
SABINE LEITNER


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The Crisis of Authority

It seems that respect for authority is declining in many parts of the world. In 2001 half of all Americans said that they trusted the government to do what is right *always* or *most of the time*. In 2023, only 16% said the same. Hardly a day passes by without news about some abuse of power or position: former presidents in prison, ministers having to resign, princes losing all their titles, sexual abuse by church leaders… No wonder respect for authority is decreasing rapidly, which could potentially lead to a breakdown of society but could also be an opportunity for its transformation and evolution.

What exactly do we mean by authority? It is similar to power inasmuch as both refer to the ability to influence or control the behaviour of others; but unlike power on its own, which is based on some superior strength, authority is *legitimate* power in the sense that it is accepted by those who are subject to it and because people believe that the person or institution has the *right* to issue commands.

But when this belief becomes undermined because of corruption, abuse or broken promises, then authority loses its moral foundation, and people start to question the *right to rule* and rebel against what they no longer see as fair or beneficial.

Over time this will lead to an erosion of compliance and authority will gradually lose the power to command because people are no longer willing to accept it. Gandhi said: "When the people withdraw their consent, authority collapses." This crisis of authority can eventually lead to instability, riots and a separation between power and authority. If authority lacks power, it loses its ability to enforce its will and essentially becomes ineffective or meaningless.

In this vacuum of power all too often raw power will arise. Raw power is not legitimate, it does not have authority, but it rules and controls because it is 'stronger', 'has guns' is 'more numerous', etc. Raw power can produce a reign of terror (think of military coups, mafias, drug cartels, terrorism, etc.) but it can also potentially lead to progressive change. History is full of examples where people questioned the legitimacy of authority and as a result laws, society and institutions changed.

To a certain extent it is a natural part of life that there will always be some form of conflict with authority. Oscar Wilde wrote: "Wherever there is a man who exercises authority, there is a man who resists authority." There is a deep psychological tension between our own innermost and often unconscious desires and what external authority (parents, society, moral rules) expects from us. In order to live peacefully together, we have to control our instincts, have to compromise and cannot always get our way or do what we want; and this can lead to growing inner tension. For Freud, rebellion was the instinctive revolt against the inner 'father figure' that authority symbolizes.

However, it seems that there is not only a more instinctive wish to be free in every creature, but there is also a higher desire for freedom and autonomy in human beings. In fact, the idea that self-determination is the ultimate goal of all human beings – in other words the right to live freely according to one's own reason – runs through much of Western philosophy. But are we truly ready to act wisely, in the best interest of ourselves, others and future generations? How much can we resist temptation? How incorruptible are we? We often choose vice over virtue when left to our own devices and it is much easier to acquire bad habits than good ones, and harder to break the bad ones than the good.

For the classical philosophers, only those were fit to govern who could govern themselves. For Plato, to be free was to be ruled by the best part of oneself. Epictetus said that "No man is free who is not master of himself." For Cicero, the essence of freedom was moral self-government according to reason and nature. All these examples show that freedom in the classical sense meant mastery of oneself and not licentiousness.

Most Western people in the 21st century will not respect authority 'out of tradition' any more. Trust will need to be earned and justified by the combination of authority with moral authority. But we should be very careful with blind rebellion and with destroying our institutions too quickly, because it takes about 50-100 years to build new ones and, in the meantime, there is a lot of opportunity for violence, bloodshed and a "war of all against all" (Hobbes).

If we take democracy seriously – in the sense that every citizen has the right to rule – then we must also prepare ourselves for the responsibilities of governance and strive to be truthful, just and accountable.

Sabine Leitner is the Director of New Acropolis UK.

THE INFLUENCE OF ESOTERIC PHILOSOPHY ON HISTORY AND SOCIETY

PHILOSOPHY

BY
JULIAN SCOTT

The word ‘esoteric’ probably gives the impression of something obscure, reserved for the few, and having little resonance in the world outside some small, perhaps élite circles. However, nothing could be further from the truth. What I would like to show in this article is that, despite the fact that the word ‘eso-teric’ means ‘going inwards’ (towards the deeper causes of things), esoteric philosophy has always been an outward-going (as well as inward-looking) philosophy that has sought to bring practical benefits to the world.

Image by Gerhard Bowitz from Pixabay

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...the transformation of oneself from lower into higher, from a ‘man of lead’ into a ‘man of gold’...

Let us start with its principles, which are also its aims: 1) ‘the brotherhood of man’ or universal fraternity, based on the belief that all human beings are sparks of the divine and share a common human reason; 2) ‘eclecticism’, meaning an openness to different forms of thought and belief and a willingness to study different sources in search of truth; 3) the transformation of oneself from lower into higher, from a ‘man of lead’ into a ‘man of gold’; 4) the will to work with nature, of which the human being forms an integral part, using scientific discoveries to improve the lot of human beings on earth, while at the same time considering all life forms to be equally valid and therefore not exploiting them.

Because of the restrictions of space and the limits of my own knowledge, I am going to confine myself to a study of this phenomenon in Europe, over the period of around 700 years from the 9th century to the 16th. But esoteric philosophy is a worldwide phenomenon, so the same principle would most likely apply everywhere and at all times in history.

Let us begin, then, in the so-called ‘Dark Ages’ of Europe, though at a time when some light began to shine: the times of King Alfred in England and the Emperor Charlemagne in France and Germany, and their successors. A figure appeared “out of the darkness like a meteor” (in the words of medievalist G.G. Coulton) in the 9th century, whose name was John Scotus Eriugena. He was head of the ‘Palatine School’ in France for 30 years, leading 50 international scholars in research and the propagation of knowledge at a time when even kings were often illiterate. Here are some of his teachings, which reveal his very ‘un-Dark Age’ spirit:

- There is no eternal damnation, because such a concept flies in the face of the idea of a loving God.
- The supremacy of reason over biblical authority, in other words, freedom of thought.
- The ‘superessentiality’ of God, i.e. the idea that God cannot be a ‘being’, otherwise ‘He’ would be limited to certain characteristics, and God, being infinite, cannot be limited.

Such teachings got him into trouble with the Church, and his books were condemned three times by the

Papal authorities. He is said to have been murdered by his own students when he returned to England, who stabbed him to death with their quills.

Being such an influential figure, he had an immense effect on the thinking of the time, opening people up to free thought, love of knowledge and love of one's fellow human beings. The Dark Ages would have been much darker without him and his supporters.

Let us move on in time until the 12th century. This was a time of cultural flowering in many respects – a time when the ideals of chivalry made their appearance, along with the concept of 'courtly love' and the cult of the Virgin Mary, which reintroduced the value of the feminine into an overly masculinized world. It was also the time when the Gothic cathedrals began to be built – those soaring, light-filled edifices, rich in symbolism and, some say, alchemically manufactured glass.

It was also the time of the foundation of that mysterious order of warrior-monks, the Knights Templar, who not only protected pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, but also established large estates of land all over Europe, which were exceptionally well managed. Research has shown that, when their land was confiscated after 1308, new managers took over, who exploited the workforce and the land, reducing it to a ruinous state[1]. The Templars are also renowned

1. Medieval Histories: The Templars Land. https://www.medieval.eu/knights-templars-land/

Chartres cathedral, France. Source Wikimedia

A stained glass from the Temple Church in London. Wikimedia

" The ideal of chivalry in general can be regarded as a fruit of esoteric philosophy..."

for introducing the system of cheques into Europe, thus freeing up trade and exchange. Little is known about the esoteric aspects of the Order, but they are believed by many to have had esoteric teachings and rituals. What was noticeable was their superior organization, discipline and efficient administration, and the high moral standing of some of their members, such as William Marshal, buried in Temple Church in London, and known as 'the greatest knight that ever lived'. The Templar Knights were instrumental in bringing into being and enforcing the *Magna Carta*, the legal document that first established the Rule of Law and granted the right of a fair trial in England.

The ideal of chivalry in general can be regarded as a fruit of esoteric philosophy[2], if we consider the various elements that characterize it: the trials that a knight has to pass through, often of a mystical nature, as in the stories of Parsifal; the transition from earthly love to heavenly love (from courtly love to the quest for the Holy Grail); and the symbolism of the knight and his horse (the human mastering the animal self). As the occultist J.E. Cirlot writes in his Dictionary of Symbols: "Knighthood should be seen as a superior kind of pedagogy helping to bring about the transmutation of natural man (steedless) into spiritual man."

As for the effects of the Ideal of Chivalry on the medieval world, it was immense: it transformed the figure of the simple warrior into a 'noble knight' and introduced greater refinement into medieval society. The values of the knight were no longer just strength and power, but the cultivation of virtue and the protection of the weak against the strong.

How did this movement come about? One of the main centres of the cultivation and dissemination of the chivalric ideals was the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine at Poitiers in France. It became a centre of poetry and a model of courtly life and manners. From there it spread to England, when she married the future Henry

2. See *The Esoteric Aspects of Chivalry* in *New Acropolis Magazine*, Issue No. 27, March-April 2018

II. When he became king in 1154 she played a very active role in government for almost two decades. Is it coincidence that Henry II was a great supporter of the Templars, giving them the land for their famous Temple Church in the city of London? Or that in his reign the Jews, persecuted for centuries and finally expelled from England by Edward I in 1290, experienced the era of greatest toleration? The harmonization of differences is one of the hallmarks of esoteric philosophy throughout the ages.

Another king with even stronger links to esotericism was Alfonso the Wise (Alfonso X) of the kingdom of Castile and León in Spain. To cite just one example, he commissioned a compendium of esoteric texts called *The Book of Astral Magic*. Under his reign too, the Jews were more protected than at any other time and played an important role as scholars and translators, financiers and administrators.

Now let us move on to the age of the English Renaissance, in the time of Elizabeth I. The esoteric movement there was led by John Dee, astrologer to the Queen, famed magician and at the same time a brilliant mathematician. He was at the centre of a circle of poets, navigators and scientists, as well as occultists. According to Frances Yates, he was the driving force behind the Elizabethan Renaissance[3]. Elizabeth herself was interested in the occult philosophy, as shown by the fact that when Dee published his esoteric work *Monas Hieroglyphica*, she asked him to come and explain it to her personally[4].

Two well-known figures under Dee's influence were Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh. The first was a poet, soldier and courtier. He led the 'Sidney Circle' which cultivated Neoplatonic philosophy and occult studies. His circle gave a warm welcome to the Italian philosopher and occultist Giordano Bruno, who refers to himself in one of his works as: "a proclaimer of a general philanthropy, who does not choose out the Italian more than the Briton, the male more than the female, the mitred head more than the crowned head... but him who is the more peaceable-minded, the more civilized, the more loyal, the more useful...". The esoteric philosopher looks beyond external appearances to see the virtues within, or the lack of them.

A portrait of John Dee. Source Wikimedia.

According to Charlotte Fell Smith, this portrait was painted when Dee was 67. It belonged to his grandson Rowland Dee and later to Elias Ashmole, who left it to Oxford University

3. Yates, F. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. Routledge, 2001

4. See T*he Occult Philosophy in the English Renaissance* in *New Acropolis Magazine* Issue No. 31, Nov-Dec 2018

Sir Walter Raleigh was the founder of the colony of Virginia in America. According to Alan Gallay, author of *Walter Ralegh: architect of Empire*: "Inspired by the philosophy of hermeticism, Raleigh believed that England could build an empire without the conquest of native peoples, an empire in which English settlers and American Indians would live together, or, alternatively, where natives became allies and England would not interfere with their way of life." Once again this sentiment shows the benevolent influence of esoteric philosophy in every age.

With these few examples we can see how an enlightened ruler, inspired by and at the same time protecting and supporting one or several esoteric philosophers, can bring about profound and positive changes in society. The mythical model for this is King Arthur (the benevolent ruler) and Merlin (the magician/wise counsellor). Perhaps there are no enlightened rulers around at the moment, but this doesn't prevent us from cultivating esoteric philosophical values in ourselves, encouraging them in others and taking every opportunity to spread their beneficent influence in the world.

The esoteric philosopher looks beyond external appearances to see the virtues within, or the lack of them.

ECONOMIC CRISIS:
AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RENEWAL?[1]

SOCIETY

BY
FERNANDO SCHWARZ

Photo by Pixabay

It is interesting to ask ourselves the question of whether the economic crisis in Europe will have any significant effect on human values, in addition to the obvious negative effects it has on economic well-being. Could it make people turn their attention once again to what we might call the more 'spiritual' side of life? First and foremost, we must consider that every crisis is an opportunity and not something negative in itself. For Europe, this crisis is not only economic, but also a crisis of the general functioning of society.

The current situation is leading to a questioning of our model of society, which brings with it opportunities to broaden the accepted criteria for happiness and a good life. Until now those criteria have been purely materialistic and focused on the simple criteria of well-being or the achievement of success, without taking into consideration any metaphysical values.

As politicians find themselves unable to keep increasing the wealth of their countries, they are being forced to reconsider certain values and promote discussions about whether society should only seek to generate jobs, money and material prosperity. New approaches are beginning to emerge in this regard, but it is clear that nothing can be done unless people take responsibility for the situation and agree to question their way of life. This is the opportunity that the crisis provides, but what will come of it depends on people themselves.

1. This article is an excerpt from an interview given by the author in 2014. However, as the issues referred to have not been resolved, we believe it is still eminently relevant today.

"Every crisis is an opportunity and not something negative in itself."

North and South: different rhythms

The peoples of southern Europe have never had an exclusively economic vision of their future, because they have always given importance to the expression of feelings. This is influenced not only by the warmer climate and geographical conditions, but also by their proximity to an ancient Greco-Roman model in which human relationships were more important. They are the true heirs of the ancients in their way of life and their way of being.

The northern peoples, on the other hand, having joined civilization more recently, have based their world view largely on the efficiency of commercial and industrial models – the industrial revolutions spread from north to south. They believe that this materialistic economic model, in which production is paramount, is suitable for everyone and want to impose it on the whole of Europe.

This is a mistake, because not all countries are willing or ready to live these models in the same way. The north Europeans are right to be strict with those who steal or engage in corruption. But people's approach to time in southern countries is much more relaxed than in northern countries, for example, where the saying 'Time is money' is well known. Obviously, if I think that time should only be spent on making money, I am ignoring a part of the human being. It is not that we should not think about earning money or having a job, but time can also be used for establishing deep relationships with people, contact with nature, etc. When we want to enter into a closer relationship with someone, we need

time. However, sometimes we feel we are wasting time if we chat to a neighbour for half an hour or go to a party. Although that time apparently has no material value, it has relational, emotional and intellectual value. In fact, when north Europeans go on holiday, they choose destinations such as Spain, Portugal or Italy. They prefer that other world which is more expressive and less austere in its way of life, which means that this too has its importance.

If we could combine the values of north and south, in the long run, it would lead to a material improvement, since the more open way of behaving in the south implies less anxiety and psychological illnesses of a relational nature and, as a result, less consumption of medicines to treat them, with its impact on the social security contributions that have to be paid.

Both north and south need to accept that they should share their skills and abilities. Then solidarity will emerge. What is impractical is to try to help someone by making them feel that they are doing everything wrong, or that they are mistaken in every decision they make. Neither the southern model is a disaster nor the northern one a panacea. Those in the north can offer good advice on management and methodologies; those in the south can offer a different way of understanding the rhythm of life, a way of managing culture, etc. There should not be a feeling that one side is being tyrannized by the other; rather, everyone should feel valued so that they can contribute the best they have to offer. In short, we are taking the wrong approach to resolving the crisis in Europe.

Photo by Nick Fewings on Unsplash.

Both north and south need to accept that they should share their skills and abilities. Then solidarity will emerge.

Photo by Nick Staal on Unsplash

Philosophy for reconciling differences

My experience of directing a philosophical institution such as New Acropolis in France for many years and being its coordinator in Europe gives me a perspective on how different countries deal with various situations.

Cultures seem different because their history and customs have shaped them that way, but the human soul, that is, the metaphysical aspirations of human beings, the ideals of self-improvement and of improving the world, are the same in everyone. Therefore, the differences are superficial and not profound. The goal of true philosophy is to touch the soul of people and not simply deal with their appearances.

The role of philosophy throughout history has been to civilize, cultivate and improve people, while respecting each person's way of being and the idiosyncrasies of each community. In this sense, our way of understanding philosophy allows us to appreciate the virtues of each people and to make the best out of them, in order to achieve the positive things that philosophy can offer in each community.

In each place, we can find some positive characteristic as an overall quality. Obviously, there are also negative aspects in every community, but philosophy teaches us that it is better to accept these as weaknesses that can be overcome, rather than as fixed and unchangeable defects. The important thing is to realize that there are aspects in every people that can be improved. Understanding this, philosophical experience allows us to affirm that shortcomings can be used as a springboard for developing positive aspects.

When we study any situation in a philosophical spirit we will find that there is always a profound element that is common to all humans and is governed by the same laws, despite the different forms. Thanks to this universal element, the weaknesses of a society can always be improved.

Fernando Schwarz

Fernando Schwarz is Regional Coordinator of New Acropolis in North West Europe and International Director of the Hermes Centre for the Study of Human Sciences. He is also the author of numerous books, including The Wisdom of Socrates: Philosophy of Happiness. His book Egypt: Mirror of Heaven will be published by Eclectic Books early in 2026.

THE ETERNAL MYSTERY OF THE COUNT OF SAINT GERMAIN

CULTURE

BY
LASZLO BALIZS

Photo by Lanju Fotografie on Unsplash

In the glittering salons of eighteenth-century France, stories circulated of a man who seemed to live beyond the boundaries of ordinary life. In one of them, the story starts with a diamond.

A jeweller once presented to Louis XV a brilliant stone with a blemish. The Count of Saint Germain, the enigmatic wizard already a court favourite, begged to be allowed to take the gem back to his laboratory. He returned hours later and placed the jewel into the king's hand. The flaw had vanished.

No one could explain how he had accomplished it. Whispers circulated that he had invented a method of fixing diamonds, some said even making them. Still others believed it a parable that Saint Germain's true gift was transformation: the power to perfect what was broken, to reveal hidden wholeness.

Exploring the life of the Count of Saint Germain is a plunge into history and myth, science and esotericism, politics and poetry. He is not easily contained.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the co-founder of the Theosophical movement, once declared: "The Count of Saint Germain was evidently the greatest adept Europe has seen in centuries, though Europe never truly knew him."

"...the greatest adept Europe has seen in centuries, though Europe never truly knew him."

He was praised by kings, distrusted by ministers, admired by philosophers and remembered by ordinary men and women as the most extraordinary character they had ever met. Voltaire (1694 – 1778) said with irony: "He is a man who never dies, and who knows everything."

Who was this man who dazzled courts and confounded spies? His birth and beginnings are shrouded in mystery. Some said he was Portuguese, others claimed Spanish or Venetian. He only furthered the mystery himself, making vague references to a noble line that he refused to specify.

Château de Versailles, France. Photo by Tharun Thejus on Unsplash.

One enduring theory ties him to Hungary. Géza Supka, the Hungarian aesthete, argued that Saint Germain was the natural son of Francis II Rákóczi (1676 – 1735), the great prince of Transylvania and leader of Hungary's independence struggle against the Habsburgs. According to this story, the child was born in Italy during Rákóczi's exile and throughout his life travelled under the name "Tzarogy", an anagram of Rákóczi.

Saint Germain first appears in public records in London in 1745, when Britain was rocked by the Jacobite rebellion. He was arrested on suspicion of being a Jacobite operative and questioned by the Duke of Newcastle.

Horace Walpole, writing to Horace Mann on 9 December 1745, described him vividly: "They arrested a curious man who goes by the name of Count St. Germain. He has been here for two years, and no one knows who he is or where he comes from. He says his name is not real, that he has never had to do with women, sings, plays the violin exquisitely, and composes... People call him Italian, Spanish, Polish... the Prince of Wales is endlessly curious about him, but in vain."

Released without charge, he soon turned to music. Charles Burney, historian of music, remembered him as a composer of *Six Sonatas for Two Violins* (1747) and *Seven Solos for a Violin* (1758). He was celebrated as an improviser and virtuoso, a figure who helped define London's musical life.

In 1757, Saint Germain appeared in Versailles, where Louis XV was recovering from an assassination attempt. He soon earned the confidence both of the king and Madame de Pompadour. He dazzled courtiers with his diamonds, his grasp of science and his attitude of seeming indifference to personal gain. Mme du Hausset, Pompadour's maid, recalled: "He dressed simply but with taste, wore magnificent diamonds on his fingers and snuffbox, and amused himself by letting people believe he had lived for centuries."

Louis XV granted him apartments at Château de Chambord, where he set up laboratories. There in his workshop he experimented with dyes, pigments and medicines, offering them freely for the prosperity of France. His vision was that new industries would employ workers, alleviate poverty and strengthen the kingdom.

But enemies gathered. The powerful minister Choiseul, jealous and suspicious, spread rumours against him. In 1760, Saint Germain was exiled.

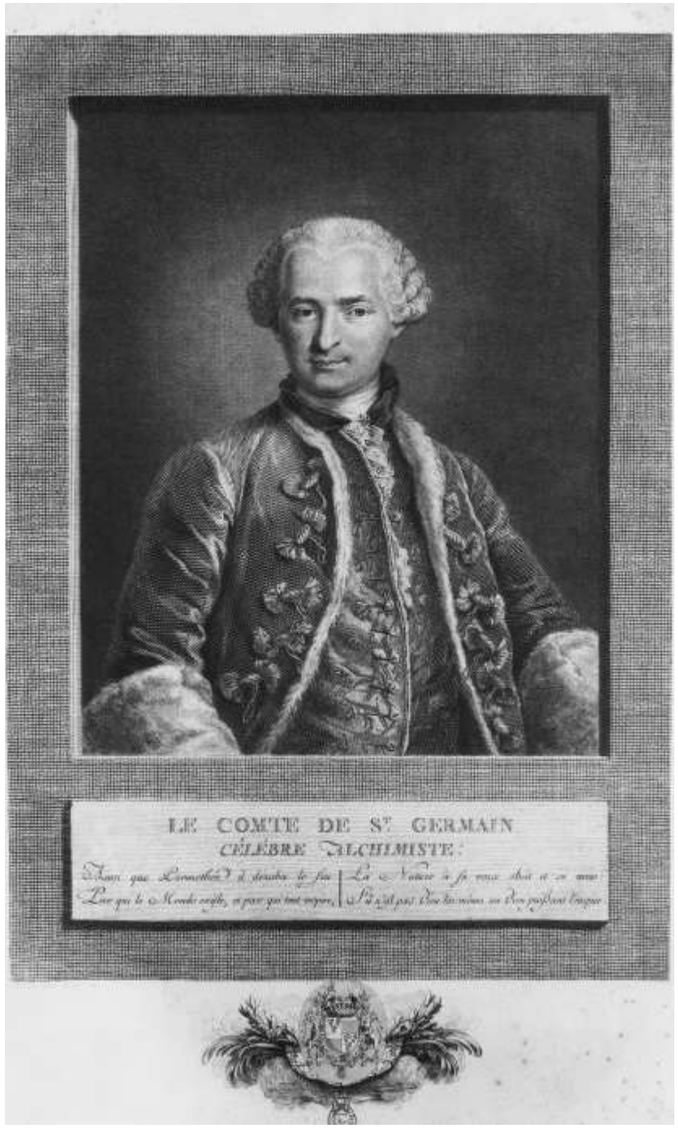
Saint Germain travelled to the Dutch Republic, staying with the wealthy Hope brothers of Amsterdam, directors of the East India Company. There he was an informal diplomat, attempting to mediate peace between France, Britain and Prussia during the Seven Years' War. Prussian envoy Bruno von Hellen wrote to Frederick the Great on January 3, 1760: "A kind of adventurer... he whispers behind the scenes and plays an important role at Versailles. He seems to have persuaded the king that he can produce the philosopher's stone."

He socialized at the highest levels in The Hague and Amsterdam. But suspicion escalated; pamphleteers ridiculed him as a schemer dabbling in finance and diplomacy. By late 1760, under pressure from Choiseul, he fled once more.

The image remains of a man trusted by none, courted by all, forever walking the line between diplomat and outcast.

By the 1770s, Saint Germain found refuge with Prince Charles of Hesse-Kassel. There he lived as a philosopher and not a courtier. He dressed simply, lived economically and gave freely to the poor. He became known for his remedies – especially the *Thé de Russie* (Russian Tea) – and for his teachings about harmony between body and soul. He was a model of moderation, drank only water or tea and followed a mainly vegetarian diet.

According to official records, Saint Germain died in Germany on 27 February 1784 under the care of Prince Charles of Hesse-Kassel.



Portrait of Count of St. Germain, famous alchemist, 1783. Engraving by N. Thomas. Source Wikimedia

He became known for his remedies and for his teachings about harmony between body and soul.

He was buried in the parish church of St. Nicolas. Yet almost immediately, rumours began to circulate.

He was observed in 1785 attending a Masonic meeting in Paris. In the years that followed, Madame de Genlis would claim to have seen him again, not a day older. In Venice, in Milan, in Germany, whispers of his presence continued.

Perhaps, the greatest mystery of Saint Germain is not whether he truly conquered death, but why his story refuses to die. He is the archetype of the Eternal Wanderer – a man who belongs to no time, no nation and no single destiny. His legend persists because he embodies the universal human task: to seek transformation, to live for something greater than ourselves and to walk the path of wisdom without end.

And so, in truth, Saint Germain never left us. He lives wherever we choose to transform what is broken into wholeness, to serve without thought of reward and to look beyond ourselves toward the eternal.

Accounts of Saint Germain agree on one theme: his life was characterized by benevolence, integrity and a sense of mission. He never sought reward. He offered his discoveries in chemistry, dyeing and medicine freely, asking only that they serve the public good. He frequently discussed the harmony between body and soul, believing that when this balance was achieved, "the machinery of life cannot fail."

Prince Charles of Hesse-Kassel, who knew him intimately, remembered him with reverence: "Perhaps he was the greatest philosopher who ever lived. A friend of humanity, he only desired money to give it to the poor. His heart was never filled with anything but doing good for others."

But his influence went far beyond private acts of generosity. Saint Germain moved between societies and brotherhoods – the Rosicrucians, Freemasons, the Asiatic Brethren, and the Knights of Light – guiding, teaching and linking them in dialogue. Isabel Cooper-Oakley[1] remarked that he "passed from one society to another, pointing the way, teaching." He was travelling from lodge to lodge, forging unity among them at a time when divisions threatened to break them apart. In this, he was not only a solitary sage but a builder of bridges between kingdoms, between esoteric orders, between fragments of knowledge scattered across Europe.

The practical work he did was revolutionary. Jean Overton Fuller suggested that his perfected methods of dyeing silks, leathers and fabrics – brilliant colours produced at low cost – prefigured the industrial revolution by more than a century. By providing employment to the poor and offering affordable goods to ordinary people, he helped to diminish the divisions of class and wealth. His vision was not just alchemical but social: to transmute suffering into prosperity, exclusivity into access, despair into dignity.

Viewed in this light, Saint Germain was more than a cryptic nobleman or wandering alchemist. He was a force of renewal, a man who lived to give, to unify and to lift humanity closer to its hidden potential. His myth lives on, not just because of what he knew, but because of what he attempted to awaken in others: a greatness beyond the self, rooted in service, harmony and the endless work of transformation.

1. Cooper-Oakley, I. *The Comte de St. Germain: The Secret of Kings*. Theosophical Publishing Society, London, 1912.

2. Fuller, J. *The Comte de Saint Germain: Last Scion of the House of Rakoczy*. East-West Publications, London, 1988.

The alchemical *Rebis*, from the *Rosarium Philosophorum* ("The Rosary of the Philosophers"). Wikimedia.

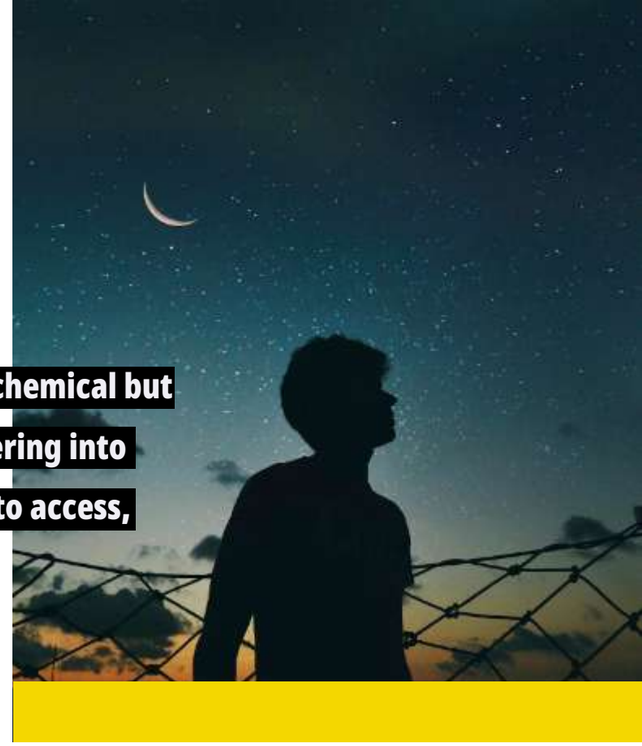


Photo by brenoanp: https://www.pexels.com

His vision was not just alchemical but social: to transmute suffering into prosperity, exclusivity into access, despair into dignity.

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ART

BY
AGOSTINO DOMINICI

THE *COMACINE MASTERS*

Sant'Ambrogio Basilica, Milan.
Source Wikimedia.

" Collegia often adopted symbolic emblems to be used as teaching tools..."

I have always been fascinated by the tradition of sacred masonry, which throughout the ages has left us many remarkable and inspiring buildings. I am thinking especially of those medieval builders who assumed the role of architect-priests, carrying on an ancient tradition that goes back to Imhotep himself (circa 2700 BCE) – the famous priest, vizier and architect of ancient Heliopolis. Our age – full of plastic, artificial building materials, high-tech machines and utilitarian architecture – has almost completely lost touch with the symbolic and practical art of "working the stone", thus forgetting the importance it once held across the esoteric, spiritual and mystical traditions of the past. The Comacini masters form part of this ancient legacy in which 'working the stone' was part of an architectural language that went beyond the mere engineering aspects, encompassing metaphysical ideas of universal creation and inner transformation. Before delving into the cultural side of the Comacine stone masons, let's say a few words about their predecessors, the Roman collegia.

The Roman collegia were multifaceted associations – guilds, religious fraternities, burial societies, and professional craft organizations – that strongly shaped Roman society. Many were dedicated to the worship of specific deities or were linked to mystery cults. Collegia often adopted symbolic emblems (loaf of bread for bakers, forge tools for smiths, square and compass for masons) to be used as teaching tools for ethical and spiritual truths. The collegia were not only economic engines but through their internal regulations and ceremonies acted as custodians and transmitters of symbolic, mythic and initiatory knowledge. It is especially among the colleges of architects and builders that a certain type of 'secret' and 'coded' language reached the Comacine Masters who are widely regarded as descendants or successors of the Roman collegia.

Now let's delve into our main topic. The Maestri Comacini (Comacine Masters) were an influential group of itinerant guilds of masons, architects and decorators originating from the Como region in Lombardy, Italy. From around the 6th century (until the 11th century), they played a crucial role in early medieval building and architectural innovation. Their architectural legacy includes not only structures but also the preservation of ancient construction methods and artistic canons that shaped medieval and Romanesque architecture across Europe.

The Comacine Masters are credited with pioneering a distinctive Romanesque architectural style (known as the "Como-Pavian" school)

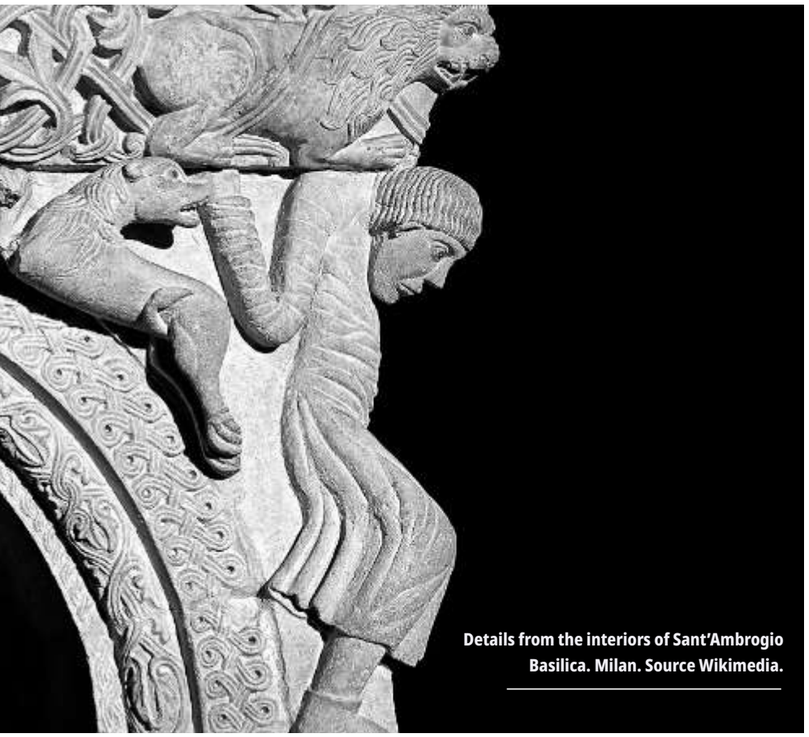
blending Roman, Lombard, Byzantine, Coptic and other artistic traditions. Many elements of their style – geometric interlaces, intricate stone carvings and ornamental patterning – show influences from Islamic architecture as well. Their role was pivotal in the transition and development of Gothic cathedral architecture throughout medieval Europe. In fact, one of their architectural innovations – that initiated the evolution from Romanesque to Gothic styles – was the use of pointed arches and steeply pitched roofs. Later on, these features became hallmarks of Gothic architecture.

The Comacine Masters spread their influence from Italy to Northern Europe primarily through their status as an itinerant guild of master builders who travelled widely across the continent. The guild operated with a degree of independence granted by Lombard rulers, allowing members freedom to travel. They were often given building commissions by influential church leaders and rulers (e.g. Pope Gregory the Great, Gregory II and Charlemagne) and their guild operated across borders, including countries like France, Spain, Germany and England.

The Comacini's guild structure, secretive practices and symbolic use of tools have been connected historically to early or proto-Masonic guilds, partly inspiring the development of modern Freemasonry. The hierarchical structure of the Comacine Masters' guild consisted of three main internal degrees or classes:

- Novices (Apprentices): these were the beginners or trainees who underwent initial instruction and practical training in the arts of construction, masonry, sculpture and related crafts. They were trained in a dedicated school often called the "schola".
- Operatori (Craftsmen/Workers): after apprenticeship, members progressed to this class where they actively worked on stone hewing, carving and the physical, material aspect of building. Their workshop was sometimes called the "laborarium," the centre for practical craftsmanship but not yet fully qualified for leadership.
- Magistri (Masters): this was the highest degree, comprised of fully qualified master builders who had the authority to take contracts, lead building works and supervise others. They were considered the elite within the guild and had full legal and organizational rights.

The Comacini guild was a secret brotherhood, preserving the knowledge of stone building and related arts, while also offering mutual support and fraternal bonds. Each local lodge was led by a Gran Maestro (Grand Master) or Capo Maestro (Head Master), and supported by officers such as a treasurer and secretary. Members wore aprons, a sign still used in many craft and Masonic traditions. The guild used secret signs and marks to recognize members across different sites and projects, which also served as a signature on their work. It is believed that they used the Solomon's Knot as their emblem – a symbol rich in esoteric and philosophical significance. Some of their architectural symbols evolved considerably from their Roman origins through to the Renaissance, while others remained unchanged for centuries. In their architectural sculpture, they preserved and adapted Roman classical elements such as Ionic and a variant of Corinthian capitals with upright volutes, creating a stylistic continuity from Roman imperial architecture to medieval buildings.



Details from the interiors of Sant'Ambrogio Basilica. Milan. Source Wikimedia.

...their guild's symbolic language also included tools such as the square, compass, mallet and rulers...

An image of the master mason Hugues Libergier, Reims, France. Wikimedia

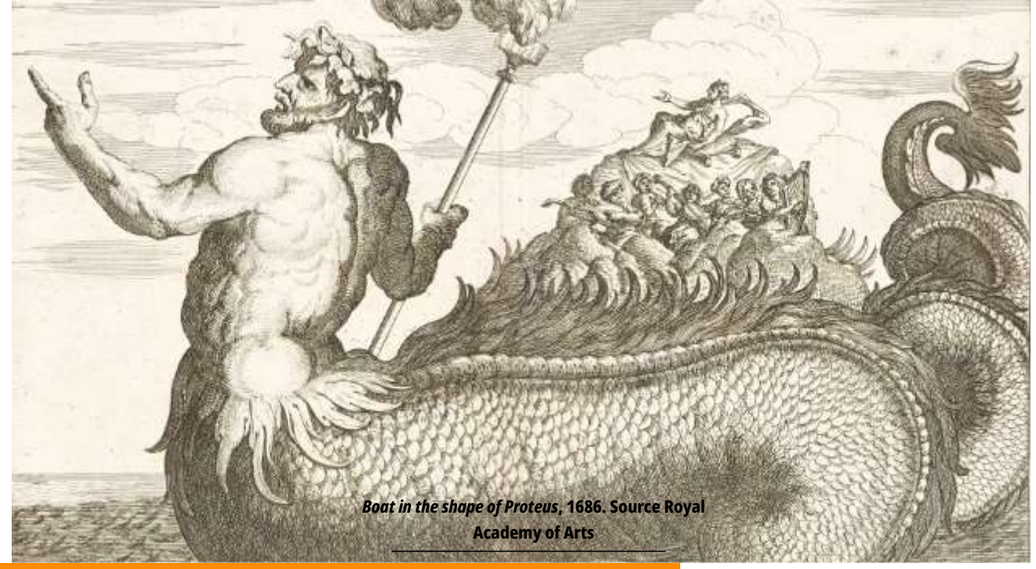
At the level of his heart, he presents the image of the sacred temple; in his left hand he holds a measuring staff incised with the proportions of the golden ratio.

Among other symbols we can mention:

- The mosaic pavement motif, representing the foundation and order of construction work, reflecting Roman floor mosaic traditions.
- The Lion of Judah (or the lion's paw), which functioned as a signature motif marking their work, often seen crouching or guardian-like, representing power and protection. These lions appear in Lombard churches and during the early medieval and Gothic periods.
- The Two Great Pillars "J" and "B": this is a symbol linked to legendary pillars framing the entrance to Solomon's Temple, representing wisdom and strength, used often internally as secret signs.

As mentioned earlier, their guild's symbolic language also included tools such as the square, compass, mallet and rulers – each imbued with allegorical meanings related to moral and spiritual virtues, signifying also technical secrets and their spiritual mission.

By the late medieval period and into the Renaissance (circa 15th-16th centuries), the Comacine Masters' symbols and guild practices began to coalesce or merge with other masons' guilds, until the traditional Comacine organization eventually faded or transformed into the freemasonry movements of later centuries.



Boat in the shape of Proteus, 1686. Source Royal Academy of Arts

MYTH

BY
SOFIA VENUTI

What the Myths of Proteus and Janus Tell Us About Change and Transformation

Our current sociopolitical climate can cause a fear of change and a want of permanence – of identity and ideology for example. The philosopher looks back and sees that the ancient world offers a sobering counterpoint: a reverence for change, mutability and the transient. This is vividly portrayed in the myths of Proteus, the elusive sea god of Greek lore, and Janus, the Roman deity of beginnings and transitions. Though they arise from distinct cultural contexts, both deities embody fundamental philosophical questions about change: its nature, its necessity and its relationship to knowledge and time. Through these mythic figures, we are invited not only to contemplate the inevitability of change, but to consider how we might live wisely in its midst.

In Greek mythology, Proteus is a minor sea god, sometimes described as a servant of Poseidon, whose most famous attribute is his ability to change shape at will. According to Homer and later Virgil, Proteus possesses a secret knowledge of all things – past, present, and future – but will only reveal this truth to those who can hold him fast through his metamorphic transformations. He becomes fire, water, a beast, a tree, all in an attempt to evade the inquirer. Only once he is held firm does he relent and speak truth.

This motif of truth concealed behind transformation offers a rich philosophical metaphor. Proteus suggests that truth is not static, and that access to it requires endurance through change. The seeker of wisdom, like Menelaus in the *Odyssey*, or the alchemist, to bring in another image, must resist the temptation to retreat when confronted with the strange or disorienting. The Protean trial becomes a test of philosophical temperament: are we willing to hold fast through confusion, contradiction and flux? The seeker of wisdom must also resist the temptation to rest on their laurels once they 'think they know' – are we willing to never cease seeking truth?

From a metaphysical standpoint, Proteus symbolizes a pre-Socratic worldview, where being is not fixed, and the world is a constant becoming. Heraclitus, whose doctrine of perpetual flux ("you cannot step into the same river twice") aligns with this Protean imagery. Here, change is not a deviation from reality, but its very essence. To know the world is not to arrest it in fixed categories but to move with its transformations.

Yet there's a paradox: although Proteus is constantly changing, he is also always Proteus. Beneath the mutable forms lies a continuity – a persistence of identity. This tension between appearance and essence, flux and persistence, reflects enduring philosophical debates, from Plato's realm of unchanging Forms to modern existentialist concerns about authenticity in the face of social roles. Is there a 'true self' beneath the roles we play, or are we, like Proteus, constituted by the very transformations we undergo?

The seeker of wisdom must also resist the temptation to rest on their laurels once they 'think they know'...

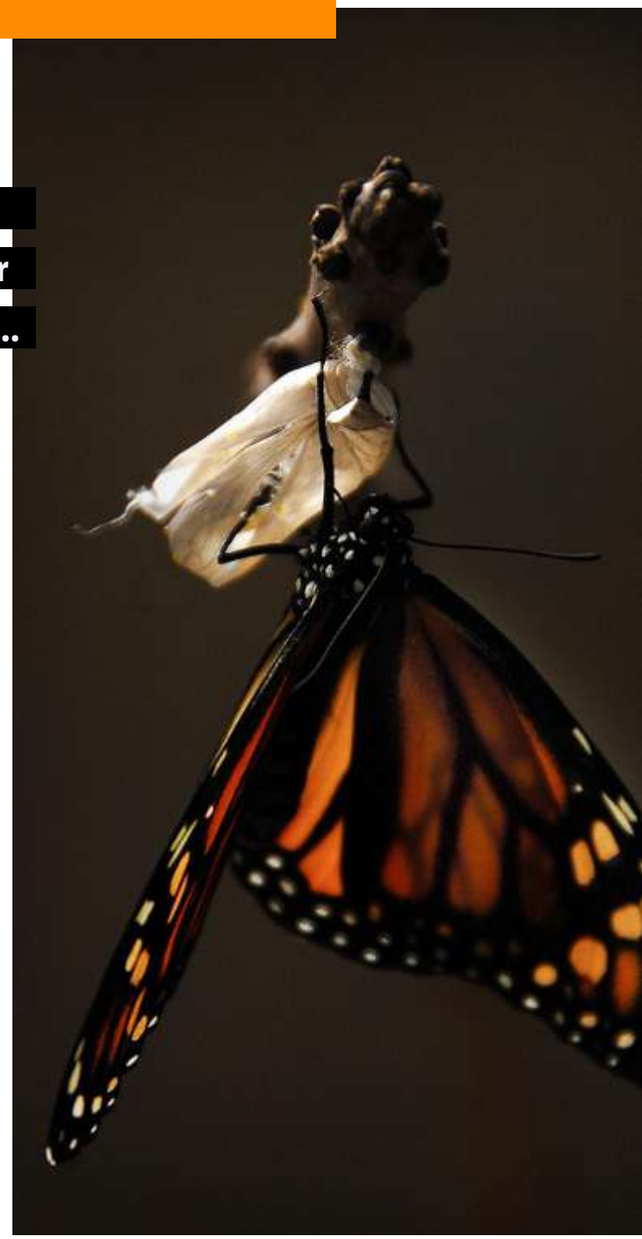


Image by Kei Rothblack from Pixabay

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If Proteus embodies the metaphysics of change, then Janus, the Roman god of gates and animistic spirit of doorways, embodies beginnings and transitions and represents the temporal and ethical dimensions of these. Most famously depicted with two faces, one looking to the past and the other to the future, Janus presides over moments of passage – from one state to another, from old to new. The month of January, a time of resolutions and retrospection, bears his name.

Unlike Proteus, who resists disclosure and thrives in ambiguity, Janus welcomes awareness. He stands at the threshold, a conscious guardian of transitions. For the Romans, Janus was not just a symbolic figure; he was ritually invoked at the outset of every endeavour, from military campaigns to agricultural seasons. His dual gaze represents a philosophical stance: that to move forward wisely, we must look backward honestly.

This temporal duality has ethical implications. Change, for Janus, is not chaotic but structured and consequential. Every new beginning carries the memory – and sometimes the burden – of what came before. In this way, Janus reminds us that change is not erasure, but transformation. One cannot pass into a new identity, role or epoch without reckoning with the past.

Philosophically, Janus invites us into a phenomenology of transition. What is the experience of being 'in-between' – not quite what we were, not yet what we will become? The liminal moment is often one of discomfort, uncertainty or even crisis. Yet it is also a site of potential, creativity and redefinition. Janus encourages us to embrace the anxiety of becoming as the price – and privilege – of freedom.

When we juxtapose Proteus and Janus, two distinct but complementary visions of change emerge. Proteus is the ontological trickster, representing the flux of nature and the elusive nature of truth. His transformations challenge the mind, demanding philosophical resilience. Janus, in contrast, is the temporal mediator, guiding us through personal, social and historical transitions with a sense of continuity and responsibility.

Together, they frame change as both mystery and process. Proteus teaches us that change is inevitable and that seeking truth demands we face it head-on. Janus teaches us that change can be meaningful – that it matters how we navigate it, how we honour the past while moving toward the future.

This dual perspective is particularly relevant in our contemporary world, where rapid technological, social and environmental transformations often leave us feeling either disoriented (like those who chase Proteus but can't hold on) or paralyzed at the threshold (like those who face Janus but can't choose a direction). In such a world, these ancient myths remain potent tools – not as literal beliefs, but as philosophical models.

So, what guidance do Proteus and Janus offer to the modern thinker?

"From Proteus, we learn that intellectual and personal flexibility is essential."

Photo by Olha Ruskykh: https://www.pexels.com

From Proteus, we learn that intellectual and personal flexibility is essential. In a world of shifting narratives, fluid identities and rapid change, the ability to stay engaged through transformation (without clinging to illusion or retreating into rigidity) is a philosophical virtue. We must become, in some sense, Protean ourselves.

From Janus, we are reminded that change is not merely something that happens to us, but something we participate in. We must become stewards of our transitions, attentive to both memory and intention. Janus's gaze prompts us to integrate reflection with foresight, recognizing that change, while inevitable, is also ethical: **how** we change matters.

Proteus and Janus – shape-shifter and gatekeeper – are not just relics of mythology but enduring archetypes of the human condition. In their myths, we find a philosophy of change that is neither nihilistic nor naive. They remind us that while we may not control the tides of transformation, we can choose how to navigate them – with courage, with consciousness and, above all, with the willingness to face both the past and the future at once.

In a time when change feels both exhilarating and exhausting, perhaps these ancient gods can guide us – not with answers, but with better questions: Who am I becoming? What must I hold fast to? And how can I pass through the next threshold with integrity?

As the world turns – and it always does – Proteus shifts again, and Janus stands watch. Will we understand what they're telling us? How will we choose to act?

SCIENCE

ON ALTRUISM IN NATURE

BY
ADHIYAN JEEVATHOL

Photo by A. Dominici

" ...'eusocial' societies, as they are called, are the highest level of sociality found in the natural world outside of humans. "

I remember a number of years ago in one of my lectures at university learning about the curious characteristics of *Dictyostelium discoidem* – otherwise known as cellular slime molds (CSMs). Not to be confused with the fungal moulds which we are more familiar with, CSMs are single-celled organisms that, when put in conditions of starvation, aggregate to form a multi-cellular structure. However, unlike multicellular organisms such as ourselves, the cells in this aggregation all have different genes. Some of the individual cells within this structure make up the stalk which hold up the other cells at the top which make up the spores. The latter are able pass on their genes whilst the former die and are not able to reproduce. It seems then that the cells that make up the stalk sacrifice their reproductive potential to help the spore cells reproduce. In other words, what we have here, in this humble microbe that you can find in the soil outside, is a case of altruism.

CSMs are far from the only organisms in Nature that show altruism, which is defined as behaviour that harms the actor but benefits the recipient. For example, vervet monkeys produce alarm calls to warn the rest of their group of predators despite increasing their own risk of being attacked. However, the main example of altruism in Nature are the social insects who live in colonies numbering from 10 to 20 million individuals depending on the species. The members of each colony are usually organized into two basic castes: one or a small number of reproductives and a large number of workers who forgo their own reproduction to raise the young of the reproductive caste. These 'eusocial' societies, as they are called, are the highest level of sociality found in the natural world outside of humans.

This is certainly very puzzling from an evolutionary perspective. Darwin himself wrote in the *Origin of Species* that the altruism shown in insect societies appeared "insuperable" and "actually fatal to my whole theory". This is because evolution through natural selection presents a picture of Nature where the primary aim for the individual is to propagate its own genes. Therefore, in theory, altruistic behaviour which seems to limit the reproductive potential of the individual ought to have been eliminated by natural selection. So why has altruism persisted?

The first theory that attempted to explain this and gained traction was that of group selection. Darwin himself proposed a type of group selection in the *Origin of Species*. Group selection states that natural selection does not just act on an individual level but also on the level of groups. In theory then, it would be advantageous for such groups to have individuals that are more altruistic, as this would enable them to outcompete those dysfunctional groups that are made up of conflicting selfish individuals. However, in the 1960s John Maynard Smith and G.C. Williams argued with the support of mathematical models that group selection is not a strong enough evolutionary force to prevent selfish individuals from exploiting and outcompeting the altruists. Thus, over time selfish individuals would propagate themselves leaving few altruists within the group.

A different approach decided to try and bring natural selection down to a smaller level than the individual – that of genes. The theory, known as kin selection, was proposed by W.D. Hamilton in 1964. In simple terms, the theory states that organisms are more likely to be altruistic the more related they are. Empirical studies have borne this out. Helper birds are more likely to raise the young of their relatives than strangers. In the case of eusocial insects, many colonies, particularly the hymenoptera (wasps, ants and bees) have a haplodiploidy sex determining system, meaning that all fertilized eggs with two pairs of chromosomes (diploid) become female while all the unfertilized eggs, with one pair of chromosome (haploid), become male. As a result, sisters share identical copies of their father's genes, as he only has one pair of chromosomes, and half of their mother's genes. This creates a unique condition where on average the sisters are more closely related to each other than daughters are to their mothers. Therefore, for the female worker it becomes evolutionarily beneficial for them to forgo their own reproductive potential and help their queen to make more sisters as a way of propagating their genes.

There are, however, occasions where unrelated organisms may show altruism. The classic example of this are the vampire bats which share blood meals with their starving roost mates that are unable to find food themselves. However, in such cases there seems to be a degree of reciprocity as studies show that bats are more likely to feed roost mates that have helped them in the past.

At present kin selection and reciprocal altruism are the dominant paradigms in explaining altruism in Nature. However, kin selection, though it is widely accepted, does have its critics within the scientific community. These critics have noted that there are many organisms that have developed eusociality without having the haplodiploidy sex determining mechanism described above. These include a certain species of beetle, termites and the mammalian mole rat. These cases are therefore not as well explained by kin selection. Instead, these critics think that selection operates at multiple levels simultaneously: the gene, the individual and the group. For example, initially when colonies begin it may be beneficial to preserve a high degree of relatedness between individuals to dissuade selfishness, but as colonies mature and become more successful it may be more beneficial for colonies to have more genetic variability to make the group as a whole more resistant to potential diseases, for instance. Therefore, as with most scientific theories, which are ultimately models of a complicated reality, there is an ongoing debate and continuous refinement. However, it does seem that relatedness between individuals has had a large part to play in the evolution of altruism. This has led some people to believe that this devalues altruism, as evolutionary theory presents it as a clever way of passing one's genes or just an example of delayed self-interest in the case of reciprocal altruism.

Firstly, is it so bad that altruism can be beneficial to the survival of a species? Rather, shouldn't we be pleased that the study of Nature has much to say in favour of altruism? It would be much harder to argue in favour of altruism if nature's wisdom showed it was a fruitless ideal. Instead, it is clear that altruism and co-operation are part of nature rather than a concept purely made up by human beings. Behaving altruistically, then is not something contrary to nature but in line with it.

Photo by Ben Knoop on Unsplash

...it is clear that altruism and co-operation are part of nature rather than a concept purely made up by human beings.

Photo by Marcelo Magalhaes on Unsplash

Secondly, we must distinguish between the mechanism through which altruism evolved and how conscious beings can wield this gift. This is evident even in other animals who can show acts of deep and moving love. For example, it is hard to see the evolutionary advantage of elephants mourning their dead herd members and even in some cases burying them. Likewise, we too have this power to choose what we do with our potential for altruism. Darwin himself recognized this as he said:

"As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races."

Such noble sentiments are worth living by.

Photo by Tristan Gevaux on Unsplash

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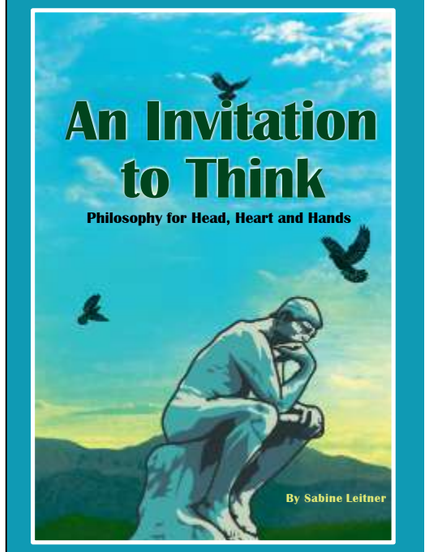

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An Invitation to Think

Philosophy for Head, Heart and Hands by Sabine Leitner

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About the Author

For nearly 30 years, Sabine Leitner has been Director of New Acropolis in London – a school of philosophy in the classical tradition, dedicated to reviving philosophy in its original sense, as the love of wisdom and the integration of theory with practice. Alongside her leadership of the school, Sabine has worked as a German teacher in secondary schools while gaining MAs in Philosophy and Organizational and Leadership Coaching, as well as a Counselling Diploma from the Institute of Psychosynthesis.

Contact

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