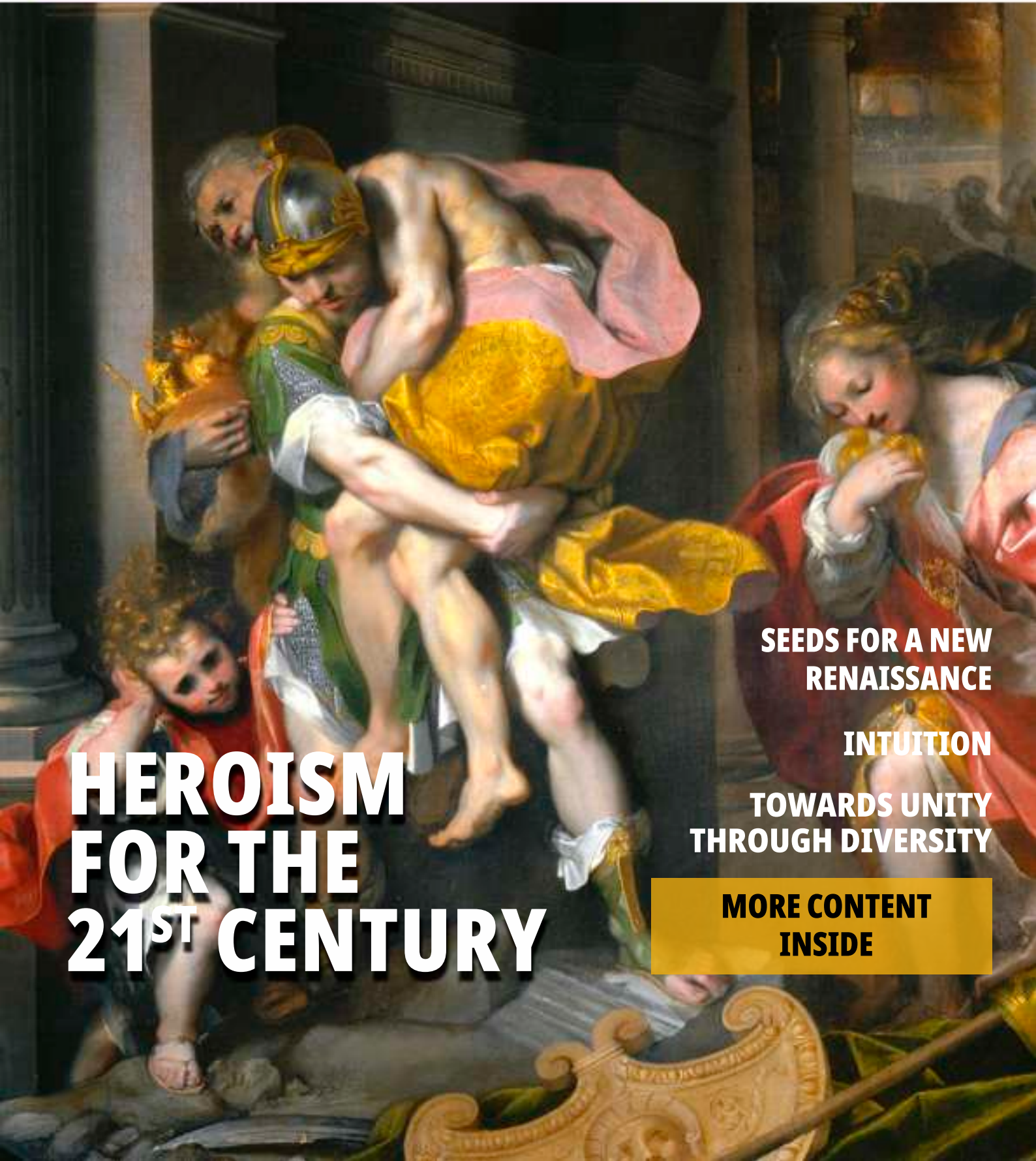


NEW ACROPOLIS

ISSUE 75 /JULY - AUG 2026

MAGAZINE



**HEROISM
FOR THE
21ST CENTURY**

**SEEDS FOR A NEW
RENAISSANCE**

INTUITION

**TOWARDS UNITY
THROUGH DIVERSITY**

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NEW ACROPOLIS



PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE

About Us

NEW ACROPOLIS is a School of Philosophy that promotes culture and practises volunteering. Its 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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FRONT COVER IMAGE
Escape of Aeneas from Troy by Federico Barocci, 1598. Source Wikimedia

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EDITORIAL

BY
SABINE LEITNER



Photo by Joshua Woroniecki, pixabay.com

Why We Need Ideals

A landmark study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education on Gen Z (ages 18 to 25) found that 58% reported experiencing 'little or no purpose or meaning in their lives'. Half of the respondents explicitly stated that their mental health was being actively harmed by 'not knowing what to do with their life'. This lack of meaning was directly connected to anxiety and depression rates which were twice as high as those of younger teenagers.

Why do so many young people, who live comparatively comfortable lives, suffer this real and debilitating crisis of meaning? Academics call it a lack of purpose, direction and core values; or the lack of an 'organizing life aim'. I would call this the absence of an ideal. When a young person says they have "no purpose", they are functionally saying, "I do not perceive a higher ideal worth organizing my life around".

Not having an ideal is like having a detailed map of life, but without having any clue as to where to go. And "if you don't know where to go, it doesn't matter where you go", as the Cheshire cat says in *Alice in Wonderland*. Without an ideal, life seems nothing but a series of isolated events: work, eat, scroll, sleep, repeat... And because these events are not connected to

something higher that would give it meaning, they feel trivial and don't fulfil us. Whereas with an ideal, even our most mundane actions are linked to something larger, enduring and valuable. An ideal enables us to connect with something that is universal, like an archetype, that can give meaning and a context to what we are doing.

Why have the myths of heroes been so popular for hundreds of years and appear in modernized versions such as Harry Potter, Star Wars or Lord of the Rings? Because they frame difficulties as character-building trials and connect us with the idea that life is about actualizing our potential and overcoming limitations. If we can see our difficulties in this light, it will not only make us more resilient, but it will also give meaning to our efforts and change our relationship with the world.

There is a parable about three stone cutters that shows how our sense of meaning changes when we are working for an ideal. A traveller approaches three people doing the same work on a big construction site and asks each of them what they were doing. The first one replies: "I am cutting stones". The second one: "I am building a wall". And the third one: "I am building a cathedral". All three do exactly the same work, but their

perspectives transform everything. For some it's a meaningless activity, for some their work is a contribution to something higher.

An example from real life shows something similar: according to many sources, coal miners viewed their incredibly dangerous work not just as a job, but as an essential public service for the whole nation – "we are keeping Britain warm!" They were able to see their work in the light of this ideal and this made their work meaningful and they took pride in what they were doing.

People often mistakenly believe that meaning comes from *achieving* things. But achievement only brings a temporary spike in dopamine, followed quickly by an empty feeling. If our sense of meaning is tied to concrete outcomes like a specific job, a specific relationship, or a specific amount of money, our meaning is very fragile. When we lose the job or the relationship, we will also lose our meaning.

Whereas an ideal cannot be destroyed by external circumstances or cease to exist. An ideal is like the permanent North Star guiding our actions because an ideal exists in the realm of metaphysical concepts (like the archetype of the hero). Ideals are not a destination but a compass.

The absence of ideals leads to apathy and a profound

sense of 'why bother?' It leads to a sense of 'existential suspension', and people describe feeling like a rudderless ship. They are moving, working and paying bills, but they have no sense of direction. Some quietly withdraw from great dreams. Many become cynical. When we can't connect to a higher ideal, people often declare that the ideal itself is a lie. If you don't take anything seriously, then you can't be disappointed when it fails. Others become numb and paralyzed. Or try to substitute meaning with excitement, chasing a dopamine high through compulsive consumerism, drugs or thrill-seeking. It is not difficult to see all these symptoms around us.

This quote by the English philosopher and historian Arnold Toynbee seems to point towards a solution: "Apathy can be overcome by enthusiasm, and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things: first, an ideal, which takes the imagination by storm, and second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice."

Sabine Leitner is
the Director of New
Acropolis UK.

CULTURE

BY
JULIAN POWE AND SIAN PHILLIPS

SEEDS FOR A NEW RENAISSANCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIAN SCOTT

Seeds for a New Renaissance
Inspiration for Reimagining the Future



Julian Scott



“Great philosophers bring this piercing clarity into everything they say, in a way that can be immensely helpful to us today, if we are prepared to look and learn.”

We talked last summer with Sabine Leitner about her new book, *An Invitation to Think: Philosophy for Head, Heart and Hands*, the first publication under the Eclectic Books publishing label. She described the purpose of Eclectic Books as being to disseminate ‘living ideas’, seeds if you like, to take root within us, to grow and help us navigate our lives to better effect. And here we are now, Julian, with your new book, *Seeds for a New Renaissance: Inspiration for Reimagining the Future*. And a thing of beauty it is too.

Yes, indeed, I’m really pleased with how it has turned out and I very much hope that readers will enjoy it and keep coming back to it. Sabine’s book was broadly her own thoughts inspired by all her studies over the years of philosophy in New Acropolis, particularly about topical subjects of the day – a living philosophy. *Seeds for a New Renaissance* is also about a living philosophy, but more from

the angle of the vast heritage of human wisdom, which goes back thousands of years, across so many different fields. What I’ve tried to do is to bring together in an eclectic fashion many inspiring treasures of human endeavour from the past – from culture, philosophy, nature, religion and myth, esotericism, art, politics and society – and apply them to the present. And I would just like to say that, for me, the main thing about this book is that if you read it, you will come out feeling happier than when you started!

As your editors, we can only agree! We’ve both experienced a sense of well-being and inspiration, working on the book.

This is interesting, isn’t it? Because why would we get a sense of well-being by delving into the past? Perhaps because *Seeds for a New Renaissance* deliberately seeks out insights and ideas that are intrinsically ‘good’ and that can actively help us today, reinforcing a sense of faith in humanity. In timeless

philosophy there are ideas that really don’t change over time, because there are some things in the human being which also don’t change over time.

The figure who keeps coming to my mind in this regard is Mencius, a Chinese Confucian philosopher, whose main stance was the philosophy of benevolence. It can’t really be said that benevolence only applied in ancient China; it is obviously very much needed today. What these philosophers really do is clarify things – in this case, what we mean by benevolence and how we might apply it. Great philosophers bring this piercing clarity into everything they say, in a way that can be immensely helpful to us today, if we are prepared to look and learn.

And perhaps another reason for *Seeds for a New Renaissance* evoking this sense of well-being is that the veritable panorama of treasures that you have assembled appeals to all aspects of the human being – illuminating to the intellect,

warming for the heart and practical in its applications to life. Julian, how would you suggest that your readers best use and enjoy the book?

I think the best way to use this book is to read it slowly. Either just take a topic which you find interesting or start at the beginning. But don't try and read the whole thing in one go, it would be like having a feast, and you will come away feeling too full and drunk, and you won't feel so great afterwards! Whereas if you take it slowly,

you can savour all these things and let them sink in.

And that savouring is aided, is it not, by some beautiful pictures?

Yes, in this book readers will find some 70 illustrations to illuminate their way, a mix of beautiful pictures and artefacts from the past and the present, and a few pictures of modern philosophers such as Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, John Locke, and so on. I think they bring the book to life somehow. One way I

think of this book is as a kind of 'living museum'. Sometimes, if I'm feeling in need of inspiration, I'll wander off down to the British Museum and just walk around and look at things, and I always come out feeling quite uplifted and inspired. So this book is like a living museum, because for me a museum is not something just from the past, it's something that gives us inspiration for the present and hope for the future. And that's the underlying theme of this book, really – inspiration and hope, a feeling of optimism.

This feels very strong, this notion of 'living ideas' and 'living museum' and the sense of underlying hope and inspiration. But also running through the book is a compelling sense of urgency and the need right now for nothing less than an individual and collective renaissance. Do we hear you right? Why is this so clear to you?

Well, just to put it in a nutshell, I think that our culture, our civilization, our society in general, has come up against a brick wall. We tried many things in the 20th century; all sorts of ideologies came into being. These ideologies didn't work out, but somehow, we're still repeating the same kinds of ideas, which are all based on



Photo by Shahid Sultan. Source pexels.com

recent Western philosophy on how people can live better lives. So, it all started off with good intentions, but my feeling is that we are now stuck. And we need to break through into another way of thinking, another way of being, another way of feeling, which is not only intellectual, not only political, not only a gut reaction – but something which combines all those aspects of the human being into one. And so that would be, precisely, a living philosophy, an eclectic philosophy, because we need to bridge all the gaps and the divisions between human beings, and this is what eclecticism is about.

The book speaks powerfully about Nature as a living being. Might you say a few words about that now, Julian, as it ties in closely with what you have just been talking about.

When planning the book, we thought of all the different sections we might have. If you have philosophy, religion, art, history and politics, you should have science as well. To be frank, I'm not really a great scientist and I cannot legitimately write a whole section about science. But I can write about Nature, because I love Nature and I can observe Nature. And obviously science and Nature overlap, because science is

the knowledge of Nature. So, in the section about Nature, I've focused more on the symbolism of Nature and explored some fascinating questions such as 'Do Animals have Souls?', 'The Language of Birds' and 'The Living Energies of Water'. It's all based on scientific research, but it's open to, let's say, the hidden side or the more poetic side of Nature. I would say that this is my approach to Nature. And nowadays we're becoming painfully aware of the damage that we're doing to Nature. Sitting here now in our school, we are privileged to look out onto a beautiful public garden. It is abundant with trees, but quite a few have died in the last few years, due to factors like climate change, pollution and soil depletion. Which takes us back to your earlier question, the sense of urgency that humanity now needs to carry because we are doing so much damage to the world. There are all these wars going on now, so much suffering; we really need to rethink where we are going. One of the main problems, which prevents us from going forward, is that humanity is very much in a state of confusion, perhaps more so than at any other time in our existence. We don't really know what we're doing, where we're going. We're confused about many things. This is why philosophy in the classical tradition is so



The Alexander Mosaic, dating from circa 100 BC. Wikimedia

valuable, because these philosophers give us clarity about some fundamental principles, without being fundamentalists. And eclectic philosophy is not fundamentalist, but it does seek to discover some fundamental principles.

This theme of the ‘natural’ also imbues your ideas on culture, does it not? Cultivating culture, the roots for a culture, ensuring those roots grow healthily. Indeed, you lead off the book with a section on ‘Culture’. Why did you choose to do that?

Well, originally, this book was going to have a different title, ‘Diving into the Ocean of Culture’. And we’ve retained on the front cover a beautiful image of a figure diving into water, with a tree growing beside it. For me, this encapsulates the whole idea of the book – we’re diving into an ocean of culture, all that human beings have cultivated within themselves and in the outside world throughout time; we’re immersing ourselves in that enormous field of knowledge and wisdom. And in doing so, we can find the seeds for a new renaissance, symbolized by the tree on the left of the picture, because only by going into the depths of the soil or the depths of the past, can we find the deeper seeds, the more profound answers that will help us move

forward today. If we just focus on the present, we end up saying we have a problem and only focus on the problem, never getting out of the problem. Somehow, we need to detach and abstract ourselves from the problem and look at it from a bird’s eye view.

And *Seeds for a New Renaissance* really helps us to do that – to take a bird’s eye view in the rafters of the ‘living museum’ and then choose where to dive down to explore more closely an idea or dilemma, a philosopher, an artist, a historical trend, whatever might take the reader’s interest.

I hope so. And, as you mentioned earlier, we are not just thinking here about the ‘outer’ world, we are also seeking seeds to nourish our

inner renewal and renaissance, both individually and collectively. Many of these philosophers – the Stoics, Plato, Plotinus, Confucius, for example – offer us a sense of serenity. And Aristotle addresses happiness: how can we be happy? So there’s much in the book to help us find not only an orientation in the world, but also a kind of inner orientation to help us go forward in life and develop ourselves – and to do so in harmony with others, because it’s not just about developing ourselves in isolation; it’s much better, and actually brings more happiness, to develop ourselves alongside others, in community, witnessing other people develop as well.

Julian, *Seeds for a New Renaissance* draws together much of your writing and

reflection over the last ten years or so. As these words and thoughts have emerged in that period, what has stirred in your consciousness? What have you most noticed develop in your own appreciation and understanding of humanity and the universe? What has shifted, or remained firm, in your stance in the world?

A very good question! Well, I think these ideas have been germinating in me for 50 years, ever since I started studying philosophy at New Acropolis; and over that time, I have certainly changed some of my views and attitudes and hopefully matured a bit too! As to the last ten years of writing the essays collected in *Seeds for a New Renaissance*, three interlinked themes have become much clearer to me. Firstly, the hugely important and positive influence of esoteric philosophy on history, culture and the world; secondly, the sense in which philosophy, literally the ‘love of wisdom’, can join and bind everything together, in a spirit of love; and thirdly, the power of eclecticism, in seeking to “examine everything and hold on to what is good” in the words of Philo of Alexandria. Esoteric philosophical movements have, on the whole, really changed the world for the better. They were eclectic in the sense that they were very tolerant and open-minded, and they really tried to bring

together different sources and ideas, in a highly non-sectarian manner. Giordano Bruno, who figures in the book, is a very good example of this. He once said something like, “I do not care whether you are a Briton, an Italian, a German, or whatever; what I am concerned about is whether you are a good person, a virtuous person.” And for me, that is what eclecticism is all about – looking for the good, the beautiful, the true and the just and, wherever that is found, bringing it all together in a spirit of love.

Well, you have certainly done that in this book, Julian – the good, the beautiful, the true and the just brought together in a lovely, illustrated whole.

Finally, *Seeds for a New Renaissance* is the third publication under the Eclectic Books label, following Sabine Leitner’s *An Invitation to Think* and Fernand Schwarz’s *Egypt, Mirror of Heaven* earlier this year. What can we now look forward to in the next year or so?

Yes, the Eclectic Books label has some momentum now. In the coming months we will be publishing two further books. The first is called *Art and the Emotions* and was written by C. Jinarajadasa, fourth president of the Theosophical Society. Full of

insight on the nature of beauty in art, music and literature, the book will carry an introduction by Sabine Leitner, drawing on her leadership for the last 14 years of the International Tristan Institute for Music and Arts Education. And I will be editing a selection of writings by the cultural historian Christopher Dawson about what shapes the movement of history. Writing in the mid-20th century, Dawson took a different approach to many of the historians of his time, in that he advocated that it is not just economic factors or power struggles that drive history, but more fundamentally ideas and beliefs. And Eclectic Books will continue to enjoy growing organically and collaboratively – and thank you so much Julian and Sian for your energy and vitality in mobilizing this effort – as we look for our next ideas and recommendations for 2027, including a work framing the nature of heroism in the 21st century.

If you would like to order a copy of ‘Seeds for a New Renaissance: Inspiration for Reimagining the Future’, please send an email to info@eclecticbooks.co.uk and we will send instructions for payment. The price is £11.99 (20% discount for members of New Acropolis) plus p&p, or collect a copy from our school at 18 Compton Terrace, London N1 2UN to save on p&p.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY OF THE 21ST CENTURY

SOCIETY

BY
JULIAN POWE

In our fractured times, we can all assuredly bear witness to the heroic contributions of some of our fellow human beings: friends, family and community members who are building for the common good, overcoming adversity, bringing people together and instilling hope. We all carry heroes from the past in our souls – for me, Socrates for his unquenchable search for truth; Simone Weil for her radical compassion; Nelson Mandela for his implacable pursuit of justice, whatever the personal consequences (“If needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die”)¹ and his

1. The last words of Nelson Mandela's speech in April 1964 at the Rivonia trial when he and his seven co-defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment.



Mahatma Gandhi in 1938. Wikimedia

“And yet conversations nowadays about the ‘heroic’ and ‘heroes’ evoke a certain ambivalence.”

warm-hearted forgiveness as he led the rebuilding of South Africa in the 1990s; and Rosa Parks for her courageous act of civil disobedience on her bus in 1955 Montgomery, USA. And my soul also encompasses contemporary and historical heroes from the worlds of sport, art and music, supreme examples of human intelligence in full expressive action – Carlos Alcaraz for his grace and demeanour on the tennis court; Johannes Vermeer for his representation of an ideal in luminous beauty; Bruce Springsteen for the vibrancy of his music and his thunderous opposition to authoritarianism. Shining examples of humanity at its best.

As we explore and learn from these exemplars, we can practise what Matthew Del Nevo calls the technique of ‘attunement’². He encourages us to think of figures, poets,

artists and musicians whom we are drawn to; to find out more about them; and in becoming more ‘attuned’ to them, to connect with our own soul and vocation more intensely. In so doing, we can make out the contours of the eternal nature and character of heroism – sacrifice, negation of the self in compassionate service of others, a stretching of human possibilities, a sense of noble purpose, some form of legacy – and use those contours to guide our own choices in life, especially in difficult times.

And yet conversations nowadays about the ‘heroic’ and ‘heroes’ evoke a certain ambivalence. “Oh no! The last thing we need is more heroes! We need builders, connectors, collaborators, not heroes ready to do even more battle!” This antipathy calms a little when we talk about the mythical and historical pantheons of heroism being full of civilization builders, men and women prepared both to struggle and construct, but

2. Matthew Del Nevo. *Art Music: Love, Listening and Soulfulness* (Routledge, 2013). See also Julian Scott. *Seeds for a New Renaissance: Inspiration for Reimagining the Future* (Eclectic Books, 2026), pp. 167-8.

the doubts remain strong. And understandably so! From our disenchanted place in the world, it is now very difficult to identify leaders in the public sphere whom we can truly look up to. ‘Strongmen’ are rising around the world in the false hope that they can assuage widespread uncertainty and vulnerability; and many politicians, tech bros and influencers are donning the mantle of ‘hero’ as they soak themselves in the snake oils of money, power and dominion.

In his excellent *The Long History of... Heroism*³, Rory Stewart sheds light on the depletion of the notion of the hero in the last 100 years, challenging us with the need to reinvent and revitalize it for the next phase of humanity’s life on earth – if indeed, there is to be one! He argues that the classical model of the hero of myth and Homer was blown to pieces by the machine gun trench warfare of World War I; that further antipathy to heroic notions grew with Hitler’s channelling of heroic attributes into the zombie characteristics of the SS and his other death cults; that, as the dominant culture of the post-World War II era, the United States embraced and spread the idea of the cartoon ‘superhero’ as an

3. Rory Stewart. *The Long History of... Heroism* (BBC Sounds, 2025).



“All the while, the more authentic heroes of the 20th century like Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Mandela were crowded out by this noise...”

almost childlike expression of post-depression hope and aspiration (the superheroes are just handed magical powers, they do not have to struggle to attain them, appealing to modernity’s deep impatience and desire to acquire and grow with ease – for instance, Superman is ‘Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!’); and that all this became absorbed into the superficiality of celebrity culture where intelligence and success is primarily measured by money and recognition. All the while, the more authentic heroes of the 20th century like Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Mandela were crowded out by this noise and reduced to posters on school room walls with no major place in overarching narratives about who we are and where we are going.

Stewart’s is a compelling diagnosis, especially if we add to it modernity’s general antipathy to the mythical and the sacred; our growing tendency to frame psychology as a route to safety and well-being rather

Nelson Mandela statue, Parliament Square, Westminster. Wikimedia

than a noble struggle to reach the highest levels of human aspiration; and the increasing challenge in our fragmented world of being able to perceive the common good, the values that truly bind us all together. Even more importantly, he traces the initial outline of a path of discovery for us all to shape the heroic stance that will be needed in the next phase of humanity's development: suggesting that, in our ever more technological age, the eternal character of heroism will need to reach towards our being more intensely human, in a more collective manner, mastering our egos so that we can truly see each other and Nature, and expanding our consciousness in this interdependent direction. It is imperative that we find a way to navigate this path, framing it as the hero's journey of the 21st century. The tectonic plates of civilization are crashing and shifting. In the recent Global Justice Report⁴, Thomas Piketty writes, "There's a huge cultural, intellectual and political battle going on. And we all have a role to play." Commentators such as the redoubtable Rebecca Solnit in her most recent book⁵ are full of hope,

4. Chancel, L et al. *The Global Justice Report: A Plan for Inequality and Prosperity Within Planetary Boundaries* (World Inequality Lab, 2026).

5. Rebecca Solnit. *The Beginning Comes After the End: Notes on a World of Change* (Granta Books, 2026).

adamant that progress in the last 50 years on a multitude of social, intellectual, and environmental fronts has now gained such momentum that we can be confident that it will sweep away the forces of resistance. I stand in this hope; but if we realize that in 2026 some \$2.6 trillion will be invested in the development of AI and compare this to the amount that might be being invested in our human sensemaking, relating and regenerative capabilities, we know that the challenge is truly significant. As in any true hero's journey, we know we are up against it! At the heart of this struggle is the need to meet head on, and reverse, the depletion of the human spirit that we witness all around us – in the polarization, isolation, deteriorating mental health and crises of trust, meaning and purpose that now run deep in modern society. Replenishment of the human spirit calls for the elevation of the good, the true and the beautiful in all we do; the regeneration and renewal of our organizations and civic society; and a profound move away from our mindset of treating Nature, our fellow human beings and our own attention as commodities to extract and deplete. As we embark on the hero's journey of the 21st century, we can choose to be pioneers in the necessary expansion of human consciousness – to be more connected to each

other and Nature, to become deeply attuned inner and outer listeners, to become more attached to who we are and what we can become than to what we might have and acquire. Pope Leo XIV calls his recent encyclical about conserving human dignity in the age of AI, 'Magnifica Humanitas'⁶ – an appropriate title for the banner of the hero's journey of the 21st century: Magnificent Humanity, aspiring to reach the very best we can be. Interlocutors in Rory Stewart's radio series such as the philosopher Edward Skidelsky are adamant that the realization of this adjusted frame of heroism is "the hardest challenge of the age", impossible to achieve on one's own. So, as we continue on the hero's journey of the 21st century, it is helpful to be reminded by Rutger Bregman in his 2025 BBC Radio Reith Lectures⁷ that small groups of people can undoubtedly change the world – he mentions the Fabians, the anti-slavery movement, the Suffragettes – as long as these communities are energized by an ideal, by profound personal transformation on the journey, and by a readiness to support each other through adversity, come what may. Which takes me back to Rosa Parks's bus protest in 1955

6. Pope Leo XIV. Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas* (Vatican Archives, 2026).

7. Rutger Bregman. *BBC Reith Lectures, 2025- Moral Revolution* (BBC Sounds).



Suffragettes taking part in a pageant organized by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in 1908. Wikimedia

Montgomery. Four months previously, she had attended sessions on desegregation at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, an institution dedicated to action-oriented dialogue about issues that truly mattered, frequented by other major figures of the civil rights movement such as Martin Luther King and John Lewis. Small beginnings can indeed lead to great undertakings, a fact that can inspire us all to take the hero's journey of the 21st century, each in our own unique way.

"...an institution dedicated to action-oriented dialogue about issues that truly mattered..."



TOWARDS UNITY THROUGH DIVERSITY (PART 1)

Photo from pexels.com

SOCIETY

BY
FERNAND SCHWARZ

We know from systems theory or evolutionary ecology that the degree of greatest development of a system¹ (an ecosystem, for example) is defined by its level of diversity, which is strongest in the face of changes and distortions when it is at its highest level. All

1. Author's note: From this point onwards, whenever I mention the term 'system' it will be to refer to any system in which there is a certain degree of complexity inherent in the connections between its constitutive elements

the species that form part of the system contribute to its stability, and its unity depends on the countless links established within its diversity. We find this axiom in any organization in Nature: family groups, herds, towns, communities of species, etc.; and on an individual level in the organization of an organism, a cell, the genetic material.

This axiom also applies to the systems achieved by human beings in the course of their evolution ("unity depends on diversity"): when a system approaches its maximum diversity it attains its greatest stability and degree of development, and exhibits a more robust unity than when it is further away from its potential diversity. In this way, societies, family clans, symbolic groups or

commercial networks, to mention some systems that can be counted among the evolutionary achievements of the human being, exemplify this axiom. For example: a society with a greater diversity of professions and job types is more stable and developed, a health system with more specialists and equipment is more efficient in preserving health, a set of laws with more normative developments is more capable of responding to varied circumstances. This applies in these and many other cases, provided that the parts have links between them and are orientated

towards a unity, such as the common good. In other words, just as no species is superfluous in a material ecosystem, so no individual is superfluous in a society, no knowledge in a university, no expression of beauty in a centre of art, and no plan in the building of the future. What is appropriate for the human being as an individual and in relation to his cultural, symbolic and economic creations, is that the dependent relationship between unity and diversity should be maintained. When this relationship breaks down, there appear individuals with excessive

egos, cultural exclusions, massified societies, totalitarianism. And on a personal level, the loss of balance between unity and diversity gives rise to addictions, manias, phobias or the loss of health. This axiom, which until now has only referred to material projections, is equally valid in the psychological, mental and spiritual fields, and in the interactions between these planes themselves and with the material plane. For the philosopher Edgar Morin, the real and effective constitution of a planetary humanity should involve at the same time the full achievement of human unity



Photo from pexels.com

and diversity. He was of the opinion that unity cannot be separated from diversity and variability, since “what characterizes the organization of the system *homo* (species/individual/ society) is that it can generate – by its fundamental and, therefore, “constant” characteristics – great varieties of behaviours, strategies and social relationships.”²

The unity and the humanity to which people aspire should not consist in a destructive and phagocytic uniformization and homogenization of cultural and individual diversities and differences, but should be capable of welcoming diversities and singularities within itself. “Thus – we can conclude – as a highly complex animal, the human being is biologically

2. Morin, Edgar (and M. Piattelli-Palmarini) 1982 «The unity of man as an interdisciplinary foundation and approximation», in Leo Apostel et al, *Interdisciplinarity and Human Sciences*. Madrid, Tecnos/Unesco, 1983: 188-212.

determined by a principle of unity-diversity and, already at this level, unity and diversity are non-exclusive but complementary terms.”³

Anthropological universals are not only biological in the narrow, reductionist and biologicist sense of the term, but biocultural, and this biocultural unity cannot be separated from diversity and variability. The biological and socio-cultural aspects of the human being should not be conceived as two separate or merely juxtaposed dimensions. Morin is opposed to any reductionist construction of the concept of the human being, built one-dimensionally from a single perspective, whether this be culturalist or biologicist, because the human being is not biological on the one hand and cultural on the other, in a juxtaposed and alternative way, but

3. Morin, Edgar - 1973 *The Lost Paradigm. Essay on Bioanthropology*. Barcelona, Kairós, 1983 (3rd edition).

constitutes a “holistic system”, a “complex organized unit”, constituted by a group of interactions and independencies between multiple and diverse bio-psycho-social factors. Human beings, then, must be defined in a “total” way, that is say “bio-psycho-social”, since we are the result of permanent interactions of this type.⁴

Humanity is one and diverse at the same time

Since its origins in 1957, New Acropolis has upheld the unity of humanity and its diversity as the basis of its own philosophy.

Jorge Ángel Livraga, the founder of New Acropolis, has said: “The human being carries within himself the archetypes of the whole of humanity. Each of us reflects, somehow, all the human beings who exist on the earth. Each of us has within

4. Morin, Edgar 1982, *ibid*.

himself all the dreams of those who have lived on the earth and also of those who will come in the future. Each of us has a truly unsuspected potential, but it is necessary to have tenacity.”⁵

“In this richness of humanity, each of us has our own way of feeling, our own way of thinking, our own way of living; but we all also have a culture that unites us. That culture that unites us allows us to speak about science, art, literature, and many other things, and we understand one another by conventional signs that we have accepted. In other words, human beings, in the genetic aspect, only inherit a series of instinctive abilities, but a learning process is also needed; that is to say, the transmission of culture is necessary for the human being to realize himself as such.”⁶

“History is part of Nature and will respond to the same laws of causality. Humanity forms part of the immensity of the Cosmos, of Nature. We are not a species of aliens, we are within Nature.”⁷

The International Organization New Acropolis (IONA) has continued with and developed the promotion and practice of

5. Lecture: “How Dreams Become Reality”, in *Magic, Religion and Science for the Third Millennium*, Vol. III, Ed. Nueva Acropolis, 1995.

6. Lecture: *Continuing Education for a New Formation, in Magic, Religion and Science for the Third Millennium*. Vol. II, Ed. Nueva Acropolis, 1995.

7. Lecture: *Beyond the Crisis, in Magic, Religion and Science for the Third Millennium*, Vol. V, Ed. Nueva Acropolis, 1995.



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“Humanity forms part of the immensity of the Cosmos, of Nature. We are not a species of aliens, we are within Nature.”

the philosophical principles proposed by its founder, Jorge Ángel Livraga, as we can see from the resolutions and actions proposed at each of its General Meetings over the years.

In 2024 we celebrated 67 years of action in favour of unity in diversity, during which time we have forged a unique experience of harmonious coexistence, as demonstrated by the fraternal union within our movement of members from

Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, Israelis and Palestinians, as well as members of many ethnic, religious and other minorities.

Our hundreds of thousands of volunteering hours in favour of people abandoned and marginalized by society – the homeless, immigrants, disabled persons, indigenous (or autochthonous) minorities, elderly people and others – bear witness to our commitment to diversity and

to social, ethnic or cultural minorities. This unique and positive experience has made it possible to unite human beings in a fraternal way beyond their differences, and is a source of hope for the present and the future.

To promote union in diversity is to give life to the founding principle of the philosophy of living together: *philia* is the natural sympathy that unites all living beings, which Aristotle distinguishes from friendship between two people. It is the civic friendship founded on the inalienable consideration that each individual deserves. This attitude of human comradeship enables the circuit of violence to be broken. It is a powerful antidote to discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and therefore the advance of barbarism.

Unity and diversity are not about politics or society. They are above all philosophical, metaphysical concepts which refer to one of the essential laws of Nature, and their application is translated into many fields from the biological to the social, the cultural, the political, etc., as an effect.

This article was first published in the book "Hacia la Unidad por la Diversidad (Towards Unity Through Diversity), Volume I (Editorial Nueva Acropolis, 2026). The second and concluding part of the article will appear in the next issue.



ON THE NATURE OF THE WOODLOUSE

Woodlice are everywhere but seldom noticed. They are crucial to our ecosystems but are labelled as pests. They are a diverse land animal yet their ancestors are creatures of the sea. As a child I remember often seeing them in my garden and not thinking much of them. Yet, as I have come to learn over the last few years, this humble and gentle being has been overlooked and misunderstood. St Basil the Great once said, “Let him who boasts the knowledge of

actually existing things, first tell us of the nature of the ant.” Taking his inspiration, in this article I hope to shed some light on the nature of the Woodlouse.

What are Woodlice?

Woodlice are invertebrates (without a backbone) that live on land and can grow up to 35 mm. They have 7 pairs of legs, one pair on each segment that is covered by an exoskeleton, using them mostly to find dead plants upon which they feed. Some

SCIENCE

BY
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woodlice have a more varied diet, consuming dead animals, like the Sand Beach woodlouse (*Scyphax ornatus*) in New Zealand that feeds on drowned honeybees. Contrary to popular belief that they are pests, woodlice rarely feed on living plants.

Another misunderstanding is that woodlice are insects. In fact, they belong within the great class of Crustaceans and thus are more closely related to crabs and lobsters than any insect. Within this class, woodlice belong to a subclass called the Isopods who also mostly live within aquatic habitats. Yet, within this group the terrestrial Woodlice (*Oniscidea*) are the most species-rich with estimations of 3,700 species worldwide. This fact poses an interesting question – namely, how did a group whose ancestors lived in the marine world come to thrive on land?

The evolution of the woodlouse

The question is a difficult one as crustaceans do not fossilize well, so many extinct species of woodlice and their ancestors are missing from the fossil record. The earliest fossilized woodlouse is from approximately 100 million years ago (mya). Prior to this the oldest fossils we have are only of the aquatic ancestors of woodlice dating back to 360 mya. However, by looking at the differences in the fossils we have, as well as the

differences in the extant and extinct woodlice and by using a method called phylogenomics, scientists can begin to answer this mystery. It is thought that woodlice would have evolved from Isopods that lived on the seabed. We can see from their modern counterparts (e.g. *Bathynomus*) that these Isopods already have limbs for walking on the seabed rather than swimming, predisposing them for life on land. Gradually, over millions of years these creatures would have evolved to live in inter-tidal habitats along the coasts, splitting their daily life between the water and land. The *Ligia* woodlice, thought to be the most primitive group of woodlice that exist today, still live in such habitats. Finally, over time, these inter-tidal species would have evolved to survive longer on land until they became fully terrestrial. However, there is a debate as to whether this transition happened once or whether it occurred multiple times. The solution to this debate is intimately tied to the study of the relationships between the different woodlice groups. Generally, it has been thought that woodlice are a monophyletic group, meaning that all woodlice have one common ancestor from which they all evolved. Favouring the most parsimonious explanation, this would mean the transition to land happened



**“This was a time before the dinosaurs;
it was the Age of Amphibians”**

once, which subsequently gave rise to all woodlice. However, some genetic studies have shown that certain groups of woodlice are more related to other Isopods than other woodlice. In simple terms, this would mean that these groups of woodlice had a different ancestor. This would imply that woodlice evolved from multiple common ancestors whom each separately adapted to live on land. What is clearer in this story

are the challenges to be overcome in making such a transition. In aquatic environments, tissues are buoyed up by the water but on land this is not the case, so further support is required. The gravest challenge would have been desiccation as the outer layer of the Isopod exoskeleton is very permeable to water. As we have mentioned before, these seabed-dwelling marine ancestors would have already had limbs to hold themselves

up allowing them to walk on land. They may have also had the ability to keep their young in a water filled brood pouch similar to their present-day marine counterparts. In the sea this protects the young against predators but on land this would have also reduced their water loss. Nevertheless, further adaptations were needed to complete their transition to land. In time this would include a modification of their gills to help them breathe on land. It would include the water-proofing of their cuticle (the outer layer of the woodlouse) to reduce the passive loss of water through their exoskeleton. And even the

behaviour of these creatures would change – preferring areas of higher humidity by being active during the night, sheltering in moist refuges and forming aggregations to reduce water loss. Again, due to the dearth of fossils it is not clear when this transition would have occurred, but phylogenetic analysis posits that it would have been during the carboniferous period (approximately 360-300 mya). This was a time before the dinosaurs; it was the Age of Amphibians. It was a time when terrestrial life, both animal and plant, was becoming well established for the first time in Earth’s history. It was also a time when our earliest ancestors, the synapsids, began to emerge.

And during such a momentous period, the humble woodlouse was also born.

Woodlice in the present day

Woodlice in the present age have long left their marine ancestors behind and now live as cosmopolitans on land living on every continent apart from Antarctica. Though we tend to picture woodlice as dull in appearance, their colours and forms do vary. The ant woodlouse (*Platyarthrus hoffmannseggii*) is a ghostly white that lives in the nests of ants, helping to keep them clean. Even within the same

species one finds bright orange or pink forms. Others may show a subtle stripe down the middle and further markings that can form quite beautiful patterns on their exoskeletons.

Furthermore, these creatures have colonized even the most extreme habitats. For example, the Saharan Sandlouse (*Hemilepistus reaumuri*) lives in the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East. Living in burrows to escape the heat

these woodlice are also unique as they live in social groups. They pair for life, with both parents tending to the young that can reach up to 100 individuals. These juveniles also help maintain the burrow before eventually leaving once they can live independently. In their colonization of land, these creatures have also become integral to our ecosystems as they feed on dead plants and sometimes animals. They chew dead plants into smaller fragments

and then excrete them as faecal pellets that then decompose rapidly. They also excrete some of the waste products as ammonia. All these help return essential nutrients back into the soil and aid plant growth. Without them, the natural world would be poorer.

So, what can be said about the nature of the woodlouse? Its story is one that goes deep back into Earth's history and has an enduring element of mystery. Yet it is clear that these creatures manifested, in their own way, that element of striving which is found in all life and which allowed them to colonize the land and meet all the challenges it had to offer. This humble being has come out victorious and continued to live gently and inconspicuously whilst it gives life back into the soil upon which we live. No wonder, then, that it has been used as an analogy for the trinity in a Catholic sermon or represented in the stained glass of St Mary's church in Shrewsbury. May we all live with same modesty, placidness and generosity as the woodlouse.

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INTUITION

PHILOSOPHY

BY
DELIA STEINBERG GUZMÁN

In addition to rational thought, which works with ideas and shapes the mind, there is in the human being another more subtle form of thought, which is intuition. The first form weaves threads in order to know: it is the reasoning faculty; the second grasps directly: it is intuition. We relate this second possibility of knowledge directly to intelligence.

Once again, Maya has changed the threads in her game and makes us believe that intelligence is a certain ability and skill that goes from the physical to the spiritual. To be “intelligent” is to be “smart”, clever, with quick reactions, and in this way human beings eagerly work to develop intelligence as

if it were a mental athletic competition. Intelligence, however, is a gift that goes much deeper; it is more than thinking and reasoning; it is much more than responding rapidly to stimuli; it is to be able to understand life beyond the superficiality with which it presents itself to us. It is to recognize facts and make discerning judgements about



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them. Intelligence is to know how to choose and, even more importantly: to select one out of many other opportunities, to separate the good from the bad, the useful from the useless. All of that is intelligence, all of that is to work with intuition.

Intuition is to win the race against time. Old Chronos has been dominating us for many centuries, and has always imposed his condition: we human beings must develop ourselves on his terrain, and things must cost us... time. Acting takes time; feeling consumes our life; thinking uses up many hours; but by using our intuition... we break that barrier and grasp the essence of things in time, but



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without wasting time. Intuition is immediate understanding, which also contains the selective and decision-making capacity. What is understood – is it positive or negative? Will we be able to retain what we have understood or not? And if we can retain it, how will we use it to act? What do we choose to do and what do we do?

Someone who can use their intuition knows what they have, the value that is contained in what they have acquired, the possibilities of application this implies and the immediate way in which they will put it to use. In intuition there are no doubts, no unnecessary circumlocution: it is a race won against Chronos, beyond the veils with which Maya has attempted to cover up this reality.

Those who have never won this race against the discursive mind may believe that intuition is something like imagination. They may believe that what is “grasped” is actually “imagined”. But – since it concerns the higher mind – if we spin a little more finely, we will be able to note that intuition is not to grasp what we want, or what we believe, or what we believe we are grasping; it is to grasp what Is. Certainly, fantasy imagines things that don’t exist, it goes into raptures in absurd games which not even Maya could make use of. But fantasy is totally different from intuition, because its images are sterile, they have no power to become real in the world of action. Intuition, on the other hand, grasps realities, the few realities that the game of Maya allows us to glimpse; it treasures them and then converts them into successive descents which touch each of the planes of human expression in turn. And intuition can reach the mind in the form of an idea which, coloured with feelings and suitably vitalized, results in action. Intuition always results in appropriate action.

Intuition is to see with the eyes of the soul, but to act with the hands of the body. That is why we speak of intelligence: it is to know how to see and to know how to do. If it were just



Image from Wikimedia

“ Through the effects of intuition, it is possible to come a little closer to the amazing unity that hides behind the veils of Maya.”

about seeing with the eyes of the body, those eyes would not see further than what our hands can do; that is why ability and skill are not the same as intelligence. While the ordinary mind grasps things in a reduced and partial way, adapted to the thousand and one divisions of the interests of Maya; and while this mind can work quickly with the small parts that it cuts out of reality, the intuition enables us to have “sudden insights” that are less divided. Through the effects of intuition, it is possible to come a little closer to the elusive reality, to the amazing unity that hides behind the veils of Maya. We are no longer satisfied with the brief extracts that ordinary thought can digest, but we act through an organ that has the power to absorb more quantity, more wholeness. It is a step towards the unification of the forms of life, which is why we can speak about intuition as intelligence.

Maya prefers us to think, to waste our time bumbling along with our ideas while we play at living. Maya does not want us to discover her secret, her trap to force us to remain in the world. That is why she plays and makes us play, while at the same time leading us slowly away from the possibility of intuiting and grasping her truth. Nevertheless, by watching Maya at play, by detaching ourselves a little and seeing ourselves participating unconsciously in that game of chess, a ray of intuition awakens. If we observe slowly the things around us and how our behaviour is affected by these things, a faint clarity begins to appear in the midst of our confusion and suddenly we understand a thousand reasons which mere reason cannot express. Through her games, we are beginning to intuit the presence of Maya.

Excepted from the book by the author, *The Games of Maya*, available from New Acropolis.



Roman relief showing Goddess Roma holding a Nike (Victory). Wikimedia

ESOTERICA

BY
AGOSTINO DOMINICI

ESOTERIC ASPECTS OF THE *ITALIC* TRADITION

The *Italic* (Latin-Greek) Tradition is animated by an esoteric current, which like a hidden subterranean river, runs beneath Roman religion, philosophy, poetry, and politics. Its mythological roots can be said to predate the founding of Rome itself (753 BCE). In its tangible form, traces of it can be found from the late Republic through late antiquity and beyond. While it draws on Greece and the Etruscans and shares much with Greek Platonism and the Mediterranean mystery cults, it transforms these influences into a distinctive vision of Rome's

destiny, the heroic spirit, the soul's transformation, and the anticipated return of the Golden Age and the Age of Heroes¹. A return marked by the constant themes of *regeneration, rebirth, renaissance and resurgence*.

The various stages of this Italic path are illuminated by a remarkable array of figures, including Cicero, Plutarch, Nigidius Figulus,

1. The word Hero is etymologically connected to Eros/Amor. "Amor is the root principle and force in action, underlying the hero whether acting in the inner or outer planes. By embodying the principle of amor, the hero is set apart from the hubris of the Titans and usurpers of Tradition". Quoted in *The Magic Door* by David Pantano.

"The bough thus symbolizes the power of transition – between death and rebirth, mortality and eternity, suffering and destiny."

the emperors Augustus and Julian², as well as Virgil, Ovid and Macrobius. This tradition continues through the Middle Ages with Petrarch, Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*³, extends into the Florentine Renaissance and culminates in the esoteric currents behind the Italian Risorgimento.

Aeneas, the Golden Bough and the Western Light

We can situate the imaginative centre of this tradition in Virgil's *Aeneid*, especially Book VI, where Aeneas descends into the underworld guided by the Sibyl. Before he can enter, he must find and pluck the *Golden Bough*⁴, a mysterious talisman that yields only to the hero chosen by fate. Later tradition understood this bough as a symbol of divine favour, safe crossing between worlds, and the soul's capacity to pass through death and survive it. In Virgil's poem, the Golden Bough allows Aeneas to pass among the dead, encounter his father Anchises, and behold the future heroes of Rome yet to be born. The bough thus symbolizes the power of transition – between death and rebirth, mortality and eternity, suffering and destiny. Viewed esoterically, this journey provides a description of the initiatory path: the hero must accept the burden of fate, descend into the 'night' of the soul, and then return, carrying the light of wisdom back to his people.

2. Even though emperors might seem out of place in a discussion of esoteric topics, I have my reasons for including them on this list. Emperor Flavius Claudius Iulianus was initiated into various ancient mystery cults, while Emperor Augustus reformed and revived many Roman cults, rites, and festivals, claiming to have rebuilt eighty temples. In this respect, see also note 9.

3. The *Fedeli d'Amore* ('Faithful of Love') were outwardly a literary and courtly movement but in reality were initiatory circles, who saw 'love' as a vehicle for the soul's ascent and transformation (see for instance Plato's Symposium). In a symbolic key, they are the Aeneans, the followers of Venus/Amor.

4. According to the anthropologist Sir James Frazer, the Golden Bough functioned symbolically as an initiatory token: a sign of the right to enter the otherworld. Linking it thus to archaic initiation rituals.

Closely linked to this story is the image of *Hesperia*, the western land (where the *golden apples* grow) that Aeneas seeks⁵, and the light of Venus as evening star. The *West* – vespers, Hesperia – is not merely geographical; it is the symbolic threshold where the sun seems to die to be reborn again completely purified⁶. The west has

5. In Roman mythology, Aeneas is regarded as the legendary progenitor of the Roman people. In his journey, he seeks not only a physical homeland situated in the West – the Italian peninsula – but also his spiritual origin, uniting earthly and transcendent destinies.

6. In many Egyptian funerary/initiatory texts we find the same type of 'astronomical' symbolism, centred in the journey of the Sun-Ra moving across the sky and beyond into the Netherworld.



Aeneas escaping from Troy. Wikimedia

always been intrinsically tied to twilight, the closing of a cycle and the gathering of internal light as the external light fades away. In this liminal zone, the Italic imagination locates the promise of regeneration: the passing of an old age and the dawning of a renewed *Golden Age*. Ovid and later Latin writers recall earlier ages of abundance, justice and closeness to the gods⁷, suggesting that these golden times,

of springtime), *Victoria* (victory) and *Genetrix* (generative, life-giving force).

The Roman Path of the Soul

Unlike the more familiar mystery cults and philosophical speculations of the Greeks, the Italic tradition often took shape within a world of laws, armies and politics. Yet, at its core, it remained concerned with the human soul: its origin, tribulations and ultimate

soul is shown descending through the planetary spheres, while the elder Scipio tells his descendants that below the orbit of the Moon, “...there is nothing but what is mortal and transitory...” In these authors, the question ‘how should I live?’ is tied directly to the cosmos itself and reframed as: ‘In which direction should my life move?’ The choice is either downward into heavy, material distractions, or upward toward a clearer, more luminous way of being. The Italic tradition uses therefore this layered cosmic system to envision a disciplined, heroic journey of purification, ascent and eventual return to a divine source. By reviving Neo-Pythagoreanism, Nigidius Figulus championed the idea that the soul is an exiled divine spark that must seek purification, using astrology as the map to navigate its ascent back to the stars. Later, emperors like Augustus and Julian restored rites and mysteries that dramatized these ideas in public religion.⁹ Finally, Cicero famously wrote that “we are not born for ourselves alone, but for our country and our friends”, showing how the Italic tradition extends this civic ethic directly into the cosmos: the soul’s progress

is bound up with service to a higher order, both political and divine. To rise among the stars is not mere escape; it is the crowning of a life lived with *pietas*, duty toward the gods, courage and justice.

Pythagorean Echoes: Golden Tablets and Anamnesis

The Italic tradition did not arise in isolation. Southern Italy, known as Magna Graecia, had long been home to Pythagorean communities and Orphic cults whose famous ‘golden tablets’ served as ‘instructions’ to the soul in the afterlife. These tablets speak of remembering one’s divine origin, avoiding the waters of forgetfulness and choosing the right path among the dead. These concepts tie directly into the doctrine of *anamnesis*, the soul’s recollection of its true, divine nature. Channeling these earlier traditions, Plutarch describes souls that



Source Wikimedia

like the Spring, can return – but only through both inner and outer transformation. Venus, Aeneas’s mother, also incorporates other important symbols closely connected to this Tradition : *Amor* (Love, as the sublimated force of *Eros* which binds all living beings together), *Flora* (the abundance

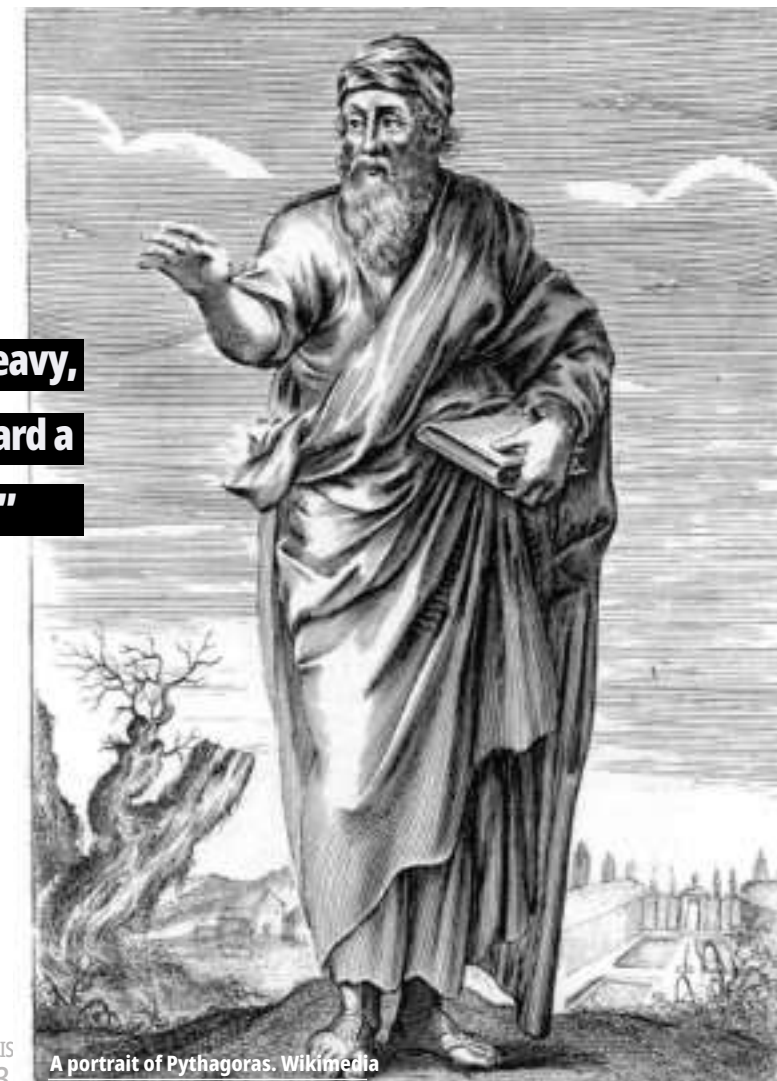
apotheosis – its elevation toward the divine.⁸ Cicero, Plutarch, and later Emperor Julian all described the cosmos as a living, ordered system, through which the soul travels, ascending and descending between mortal life and the stars. In Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* and Macrobius’s *Commentary*, the

7. This refers to a bygone Golden Age in archaic Italy, known as Saturnia Tellus and ruled by Saturn. In another legend, Saturn found refuge in Latium (the Lazio region), thus planting a symbolic ‘golden seed’ in the ‘Italian’ soil.

8. In ancient Rome, heroes and other exceptional human beings were believed, after death, to ascend to the heavens and acquire divine status. This idea appears at the very foundation of Roman tradition, with its founder Romulus ascending to heaven and becoming the god Quirinus.

“The choice is either downward into heavy, material distractions, or upward toward a clearer, more luminous way of being.”

9. A recent study by Aurelio Bruno, *Il Pantheon del Cielo: Culture e Riti per l’Ascesa Stellare nel Pantheon “Platonico” di Roma* (*The Pantheon of the Sky: Cultures and Rites for Stellar Ascent in the “Platonic” Pantheon of Rome*), argues that the Roman Pantheon was conceived not merely as an architectural marvel, but as a ritual ‘machine’ for the stellar ascent of the soul and of the emperor. By connecting literary and philosophical sources with archaeological and artistic evidence, the study presents the Pantheon as a three-dimensional image of the cosmos and of the soul’s celestial journey. In it, rituals of purification, circumambulation and vocal invocations were performed in order to bring about the emperor’s transformation into an undying, star-like divine being.



A portrait of Pythagoras. Wikimedia

undergo punishment and purification before returning to the world transformed, aligning closely with the Italic emphasis on rebirth and reformation. In this tradition, remembering who one truly is involves recalling not only one's divine essence but also one's duties, ancestral lineage and place within the cosmic order.

Magia and Imaginatio

Within this Italic world-view, *magia* (magic) and *imaginatio* (imagination) are central tools. *Magia*, understood as 'the art of the Magi' can be seen as the art of rendering invisible principles visible, that is, bringing hidden causes or forms to manifestation. But *magia* needs *imaginatio* which is the soul's form-giving power (*vis formatrix*). *Imaginatio* as a mental faculty, when properly purified and trained, becomes capable of receiving, 'capturing' and shaping images that participate in higher, even divine, realities. While *Magia*, the applied will or intent operating through such images, seeks to render them effective or manifest within the material realms.¹⁰ In the Italic tradition, *magia* and *imaginatio* were paired because they never separated 'inner vision' from 'outer action'. They also understood that a truly effective *magical rite* required both correct form, focused intention and a rightly directed imagination. In short, Virgil's *underworld*, Apuleius's *initiatory trials*, and Cicero's *cosmic dream* all functioned as active exercises of *imaginatio*, providing the imaginative scaffolding for the reader's own spiritual awakening and catalyzing a radical reorientation of self and society.

Death and Rebirth: From Aeneas to Dante

Centuries after Virgil, Dante Alighieri would cast his *Divine Comedy* as a journey through three realms of consciousness, *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*, guided first by

Virgil himself. Echoing earlier teachings, Dante's poem speaks of a confrontation with one's own shadows, followed by a long path of purification and a final ascent through the celestial spheres, culminating in union with the divine. The triadic structure of his masterwork underscores the esoteric and initiatic path found across the Italic tradition.

In Dante's *Comedy*, the three realms should be read as an inner alchemical process: *Nigredo*/Inferno: the blackening stage, a descent into one's inner 'cave' or shadow, where the soul confronts its own distortions;



A scene from Dante's *Inferno* by Gustave Doré. Wikimedia

Albedo/Purgatory: the whitening stage of purification and sublimation of desires and intentions; *Rubedo*/Paradise: the reddening stage, a fully awakened love and direct participation in the divine light.

Along this path, Dante dramatizes two more crucial Italic themes. As presented in his *La*

Vita Nuova (*The New Life*), we find *metanoia*, an inner turning, a radical shift of orientation away from egoic drives toward higher truth. A second theme is that of *katabasis*, the courageous facing of darkness, both personal and collective. Only by going 'through the middle of the earth', as Dante does, can the soul emerge on the other side, ready for ascent.¹¹

Ignis and the 'Warrior Spirit'

The Italic path, unfolding under the symbol of *Mars* – the complementary counterpart to *Venus-Amor* – takes on a distinctly 'warrior-

steadfastness and fidelity to the *Good* and the *Just* (see Plato). Cicero praises *virtus* as the highest quality of the statesman, while Emperor Julian, alluding to Hercules's *Twelve Labours*, speaks of the fiery Sun as a divine king whom the soul must emulate.¹² The warrior's journey is to pass through fear, loss, and adversity while maintaining in the mind the steady image of a higher order of reality. In this sense, Aeneas, the philosophical statesman, the initiated emperor and Dante's spiritual pilgrim all walk variations of the same road.

Fire (*ignis*) plays a central role in this martial journey of inner transformation. In both ancient mysteries and Dante's poem, fire burns away what is unworthy while strengthening what is noble. This is not merely a physical flame but a sacred, alchemical fire: a sublimated *Eros* or *Amor* that, when rightly directed, becomes a force of purification and transmutation rather than destruction. Dante himself famously declares that "the love that moves the sun and the other stars" is the deepest power of the universe, echoing both Platonic and Italic intuitions.

Towards a New Golden Age

As mentioned at the beginning, a single, persistent theme runs through the various themes discussed: *regeneration*. The Italic tradition longs for the renewal of both soul and society – a restoration of the lost *Golden Age*, or *Age of Heroes*. This hope reappears at different moments in the history of the peoples of the Italic peninsula, and the western light of *Venus* at evening – *Hesperia* – serves as its emblem. It shines when the sun has set, when the world of appearances loosens its hold on waking consciousness, and the sky begins to unveil its majestic expanses: a field of stars, symbols of the unchanging archetypes, revealing ages yet to be born and the promise of a *New Age*.

10. See also the article *The Mundus Imaginalis*, New Acropolis Magazine Issue 62 (May-June 2024)

11. This stage is epitomised in the alchemical motto V.I.T.R.I.O.L. ("Visit the interior of the earth; by rectifying, you will find the hidden stone.")

12. In the alchemical tradition, these Twelve Labours are not just symbolic; they belong to a series of transformative operations, related to internal processes of purification, dissolution, and fixation. In the alchemical writings this process is called *Ignis Rotae*, the 'wheel fire'.

SYMBOLISM

BY
MICHAEL LASSMAN

THE SYMBOLISM OF BREAD

Image by Adam T. Hui from Pixabay

"Across ancient cultures, bread has always been a marker of identity, spirituality, and a social structure."

Bread is as old as civilization itself. Wherever humans learned to grind grain into flour, mix it with water and apply heat, bread emerged – not just as sustenance, but often as a symbol of life itself, of order, and at times, of connection with the divine. Across ancient cultures, bread has always been a marker of identity, spirituality, and a social structure. Dating back to when humankind first began its journey as hunter-gatherers, there is evidence to suggest a primitive form of bread-making existed, perhaps as long ago as 30,000 years; ground grains mixed with water and baked on hot stones.

In many cultures, bread stories emerged – in Ancient Egypt in 3000 BCE bread was considered a gift from Osiris, the god of grain and rebirth. In Mesopotamia, Gilgamesh enabled Enkidu to become human with the sharing of bread and beer. In Ancient Greece breadmaking became an artform with up to seventy still-known recipes. In Rome bread became politicized, as a hungry population meant revolt and a well-fed one meant peace¹. In Persia, bread was linked to Zoroastrian purity laws and in Mesoamerica, maize breads were tied to the belief that humans were made of corn. Today, every culture across the world shares in the daily taking of bread in one form or another.

More than Just Food – Ordinary and Sacred

Bread is the oldest known sign of devotion that we still hold in our hands.

It begins as dust and water, rises with invisible breath, and meets fire to become something new, surely alchemy in action. Over the centuries and across the world, bread has been the quiet companion of the sacred – a reminder that the divine often hides in the ordinary, waiting to be broken open and shared – a bringing together of communities.

1. The grain dole in ancient Rome, known as the *cura annonae*, was a massive state-run social welfare programme that provided subsidized or free grain to up to 200,000 adult male citizens (Source: Wikipedia).



Image by Taras Yasinski from Pixabay

"Over the centuries and across the world, bread has been the quiet companion of the sacred. "

We live in a world that moves at relentless speed, but bread (good bread) remains stubbornly slow. It asks us to pause, to work and to pause again. And in that waiting, something ancient can arise. Bread connects us to our ancestors, if we allow ourselves this thought, to our communities, and to the quiet mystical truth that nourishment is both physical and spiritual. Bread is not just food, it is a symbol, a ritual, and has the potential to be a philosophical and spiritual teacher.

The Elemental Miracle

Bread begins with the four classical elements, each one carrying its own spiritual resonance.

Earth provides for us the grain – the seed that holds potential, planted at sowing time, growing into the grain and harvested to sustain life. Wheat or barley, oats, corn or rye, every loaf begins in the soil, in the mystery of growth, supported by the quiet work of sun, aided by plenty of rain and the turning of the seasons. Water binds the flour into something malleable, something with potential, capable of becoming. Water is the element of emotion, intuition and flow, and the movement of time itself. In breadmaking, the water awakens the dormant, softens the rigid and encourages the transformation. Air enters through fermentation – the unseen breath energizes the dough.

We can imagine how the ancient cultures saw leaven as a kind of spirit, a living presence that animated the mixture. Even today, watching dough rise feels like the witnessing of a little piece of magic.

Fire completes the metamorphosis. Heat transforms the living dough – and as the yeast reacts with the sugars in the grain, it is alive – into nourishment, finalizing the alchemical process. What emerges from the oven is no longer grain, water and yeast, but something entirely new. Bread is a daily depiction of creation – a reminder that transformation is woven into the fabric of our existence.

Bread as Divine Gift

Across religious and spiritual traditions, bread appears not just as food but as a sign of divine presence, provision, care and community. A connection of people to the divine through ritual and practice.

Hinduism and Buddhism: bread as offering and simplicity

In Hindu practice, simple breads like chapati are offered as 'prasad', food blessed and shared with the divine. The act of offering transforms the ordinary into the sacred. In Buddhism, bread embodies mindfulness – being aware of each hand that has been involved in its creation: farmer, miller, baker, and even of the earth itself. Eating the



Source Pexels.com

bread is in itself a mindful act, a representation of gratitude.

Judaism: bread as blessing

In the Hebrew Bible, bread is a symbol of partnership between humanity and the divine. The blessing recited before eating any food – “*Blessed are You... who brings forth bread from the earth*” – acknowledges that while humans bake the loaf, the earth itself is a gift.

Manna, the mysterious substance that sustained the Israelites in the wilderness, is described as appearing with the morning dew, resembling small loaves, tasting like honey, and arriving only in a portion of the size needed for each day’s sustenance. It was nourishment wrapped in a lesson: one of trust, gratitude and daily dependence on the divine spirit. Indeed, we still use the phrase “Manna from Heaven” as a descriptor for a much-needed gift.

Islam: bread as “rizq” — sustenance and respect

In many Muslim cultures, bread is treated with deep reverence. It is considered rizq, a form of divine provision. Dropped bread is lifted from the ground and kissed. To waste bread is to disregard a blessing. Bread becomes a daily reminder of gratitude and humility.

Christianity: bread as presence and communion

Bread reaches a profound symbolic expression in Christianity. At the Last Supper, Jesus breaks bread and says, “*This is my body, given for you.*” For Christians, the Eucharist bread becomes a meeting point between the human and the divine – a rite of remembrance, unity and spiritual nourishment. The Lord’s Prayer echoes the ancient plea for sustenance: “*Give us this day our daily*

bread.” Here, bread represents everything we need to live – physically, emotionally, spiritually.

The Symbolism and Alchemy of Transformation

Breadmaking is a spiritual practice disguised as a recipe. Kneading: the work of letting go – Kneading is physical prayer. It requires presence, rhythm and surrender. The dough resists, then softens. It teaches patience and the art of working through resistance – both in dough and in ourselves. What is important should not come to us easily. Rising: the wisdom of waiting – Fermentation cannot be rushed. The dough rises in its own time, not ours. In a culture obsessed with immediacy, bread invites us into the sacred rhythm of waiting. Growth happens in the quiet, unseen places. Taking the opportunity to stop, contemplate and allow a time for spiritual growth.

Baking: the fire of transformation – Heat changes everything. What enters the oven is not what emerges. Bread teaches that transformation often requires intensity – the fire of challenge, the heat of experience. Yet the result is nourishment. We can acknowledge that the fire symbolizes the divine spark that is within each of us. Sharing: the completion of the ritual – Bread is not complete until it is shared. A loaf eaten alone is only food; a loaf broken with others becomes something more, a ritual. The importance of creating a community with which to share is part of our journey. Breadmaking takes us through a spiritual journey of effort, transformation and offering.

Bread as Community and Communion

Bread has always been a social food. To break bread is to welcome, to reconcile, to celebrate. In ancient cultures, sharing bread sealed agreements and forged alliances. In many traditions, bread is the first thing offered to a guest – in restaurants we are welcomed at table with a bowl of bread. In times of conflict, bread becomes a symbol of peace. Even today, a table without bread feels incomplete. Bread gathers people. It softens conversation. It creates space for connection. In a fragmented world, bread



Photo by cottonbro studio.Pexels.com

reminds us that we belong to one another.

The Ordinary to the Extraordinary

Perhaps the greatest spiritual lesson of bread is this: the divine is not elsewhere. It is here, in the everyday, in the simple, in the humble and within us all. Bread is made of almost nothing – flour, water, salt – yet it becomes something extraordinary. It teaches that the sacred does not require

extravagance. It requires attention, a call to be mindful, conscious and aware. In the baking of bread, we are at one with creation. In the breaking of bread, we acknowledge its part in our sustenance. In the sharing of bread, we affirm our place in community. Bread is the sacred ordinary – a quiet, steady reminder that spirituality is woven into the fabric of daily life, waiting to be tasted, broken, and shared.



ISBN: 978-1-0684138-1-0

Price: £11.99

Size/format: 272pp

240mm x 170mm –

Paperback

Publication Date:

11 June 2026

**Published by
Eclectic Books**



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Inspiration for Reimagining the Future

by Julian Scott

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About the Author



Julian Scott has for 30 years been leading lecturer at 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. He edits the bi-monthly New Acropolis magazine and has translated several works on philosophy and culture, including *The Mystery Theatre in Greece: Tragedy* by Jorge A. Livraga, *The Spirit of the Renaissance* by Fernand Schwarz and Isabelle Ohmann, and *Philosophy for Living* by Delia S. Guzmán. He is also literary executor for the estate of his grandfather Christopher Dawson, and in this capacity has given lectures and written articles about his work. Alongside his teaching and writing, Julian works as a Spanish translator.

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