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# NewAcropolis

## Gaia - Living Together with Mother Earth

Philosophy and "Voluntary Death"

Cultural Trends Shaping our Lifestyle

The Myth of Narcissus and Echo

PHILOSOPHY  
CULTURE  
SOCIETY  
ESOTERICA  
ART  
AND MORE



## About Us

NEW ACROPOLIS is an international organization working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society for the next generation.

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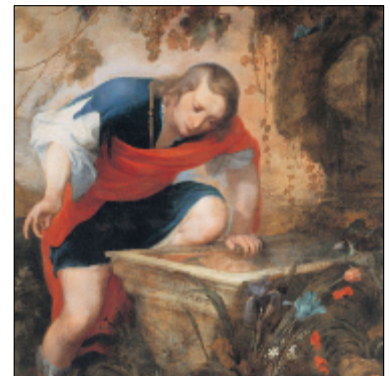
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## Editorial

### (Too) Great Expectations?

I read recently that expectations of government are now at a record high in Britain. There are obviously ideological differences regarding which problems governments should focus on most, but the general consensus seems to be that we expect our leaders and politicians to solve a wide range of problems we are facing. This made me think about expectations in general: what are expectations? And is it good or bad to have them?

The world we live in today constantly stimulates and raises our expectations. Hollywood films, social media, the election promises of politicians and an infinite stream of adverts create (often unconscious) expectations of a perfect partner, perfect job, perfect home, perfect looks, perfect parents, bosses, friends and perfect institutions and governments. But what happens when reality does not live up to our expectations? We will obviously feel disappointed, disillusioned, frustrated, angry, resentful and depressed.

Is it better, then, not to have any expectations? According to some, "Expectation is the mother of all frustration" and: "If you expect nothing from anybody, you're never disappointed." But on the other hand, teachers in Britain are taught that a good teacher should always have 'high expectations' of their students. Research seems to confirm that if we believe in someone and their abilities, they will be more able to transcend their current limitations than if we think they are unable to do it. The late American educator, author and businessman Stephen R. Covey put it like this: "Treat a man as he is, and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be".

So, as with everything, having expectations is neither good nor bad in itself. What matters is how we manage our expectations and to have realistic expectations. Because it is our unrealistic expectations that set us up for disappointment and frustration.

So, what are unrealistic expectations? Wanting our partner to be a constant source of our happiness is unrealistic. Expecting that our job will always make us feel fulfilled is another one. Expecting that all our plans will work out, that things will never go wrong, that tomorrow will be better than today, too. Any sense that life owes us something and

that we are 'entitled' to find the right partner, the right job, never get seriously ill, not live through times of crisis, etc. is also unrealistic. If we really think about it we will realize that life owes us nothing and that basically every generation throughout history had greater or lesser collective difficulties to grapple with.

Another obstacle is that we are not very good at predicting what will make us happy. We think that the achievement of certain goals will bring us joy and very often this is not the case. We don't really know ourselves well and this makes us pursue goals that don't bring us the longed for happiness, or we are oblivious to the fact that our levels of happiness might diminish over time (i.e. we will not be in love with the person we married for the rest of our life).

Another shadow side of expectation is that it tends to make us passive. According to etymology, the word 'expectation' comes from the Latin verb *expectare* which means "to await, look out for; desire, hope, long for, anticipate; look for with anticipation". These verbs describe a more passive attitude to life. But waiting, hoping and anticipating alone will certainly not get us far. According to Seneca: "The greatest obstacle to living is expectation, which depends on tomorrow and wastes today." Life is not going to fulfil our expectations if we don't actively do our bit.

So, how can we learn to manage our expectations more wisely?

First, it always helps to accept 'what is' - this is the basis, the reality. Secondly, we need to be grateful for what is and for what we have, because life could always be worse (and certainly is for billions of people). Thirdly, we need to get to know ourselves better and learn to differentiate between emotional short-lived 'highs' and a more longer lasting, deeper contentment. And lastly, we need to pull our weight.

I don't think we can live without expectations. As human beings we are creatures of hope and imagination and we cannot help but anticipate the outcome of our conscious actions. But in order to achieve what 'could be', we need to put in the right effort and create the right circumstances. And even then, the outcome is not certain...

*Sabine Leitner*

# Hope is the Thing with Feathers

*'Hope' is the thing with  
feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune  
without the words -  
And never stops -at all -*

Emily Dickinson  
(1830-1886)

For us in the 21st century, appeals to hope seem to carry more urgency, stridency, and despair. Not surprising perhaps. War rages across the world, barbarism is on the rise, the climate emergency is biting, many millions struggle with the cost of living, and humanity feels ever more shrouded in a cloak of uncertainty. We are urged to be more deliberate in summoning and nurturing hope – ‘a vital ethical disposition’, as a leader writer in The Guardian described it in December 2023. My sense is that humanity now needs more help in this endeavour than Emily Dickinson required – ‘when



the cultivation of a kind of committed faith in the future seems particularly needed in what are undeniably dark times' (Guardian Leader, 22 December 2023).

When Pandora slammed her box shut, what type of hope remained<sup>1</sup>? Is it Arthur Schopenhauer's 'folly of the heart', when hope confuses our desire for something to occur with the probability that it will, thereby condemning us to disappointment? Or hope as a catalyst for change, encouraging us to strive for better, regardless of outcomes? The



Germanic derivations of the English word 'hope' point to the latter, a sense of informed confidence in the future, an expectation of something better and desired (Old English – hopa, hopian; Dutch – hoop, hoopen; German – hoffen). In his few comments on hope, Aristotle distinguished the Greek words 'Elpis' and 'Euelpis'. Elpis conveys the notion of 'expectations', 'things will work out'. Euelpis prefaces Elpis with 'good' ('Eu'): more than just expectations of a positive future, also the courage to take steps to achieve these good outcomes, mastering understandable fears<sup>2</sup>. Barack Obama of course channelled this sense of courage

in his political mantras of 'Audacity of Hope' and 'Yes, we can!'

Neuroscience is on the trail of hope. Neuroimaging studies have found that hope is associated with networks in the frontal cortex<sup>3</sup>. In defining hope as 'a cognitive process by which an individual can identify their personal goals and develop actionable steps to achieve results', the neuroscientists follow in the footsteps of C.R. Snyder's hope theory, developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. Snyder saw hope as deriving from knowing what one wants to achieve, being able to plan how to get there, and thereby nurturing confidence that one can change the future for the better, overcoming obstacles along the way. Aristotle would have applauded Snyder, who was adamant that hope is strengthened through learned habit.

Two great European 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers wrote of the metaphysical character of hope, its power to connect us to our higher selves, guiding us towards truth, propelling us towards the greater good, a better future. Here is Ernst Bloch in his magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*:

*'The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them... The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong.'*

And statesman, writer and dissident Vaclav Havel:

*'Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons... I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works,*

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1. *Works and Days*, by Hesiod, c. 700 BC.

2. *Aristotle on Hope*, by G. Scott Gravlee, *Journal of Philosophy*, October 2000; and *Hope in Ancient Greek; Aristotle on Hope, Optimism and Courage*, by Cherie Block, 2016.

3. *Hope for Brain Health; Impacting the Life Course and Society*, by Jayashree Dasgupta, Joyla A. Furlano, and Zach Bandler; *Frontiers of Psychology*, 30 June 2023.

4. *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There From Here*, by C.R. Snyder, 1994

*and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from 'elsewhere'.*<sup>5</sup>

Bloch and Havel paint hope as spiritual; soulful; creative; inspiring; broadening; liberating; enrolling; transcendent; catalytic of the greater good; of heart, mind, and body; from 'elsewhere'; connected to eternal truths.

In his writings on hope, my friend and colleague Harry Hutson underscores its spiritual, metaphysical character – a force of nature that lifts mood, improves well-being even in the most difficult of circumstances, and gets us moving with a constant iteration between movement and feeling:

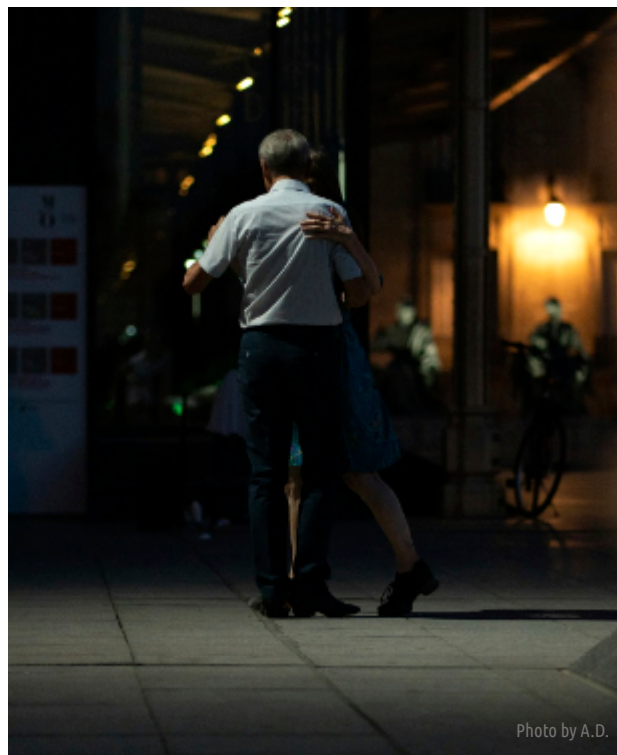
*'Hope is a life force, out of reach of those who would manipulate it or extinguish it. It's unafraid of trauma, the prospect of death, and even fear itself.'*<sup>6</sup>

Harry posits that we can choose hope or it can choose us, in its inherent wisdom. In our leadership roles, we can choose it through clarity of purpose; through the generation of ideas that evoke possibility and momentum; through action and movement; and through connection and collaboration. And it can choose us, as if by magic, appearing Mercury-like in the darkest of times and places, in the hospice, the war zone, the aftermath of a climate disaster, the crisis centre.

It is in this spirit that contemporary writers on hope encourage us to cease regarding uncertainty as a stifling, suffocating threat. Instead, we might confidently step into what Rebecca Solnit describes as the 'spaciousness of uncertainty'<sup>7</sup> to find hope perched there, ready to choose us, and for us to choose it: embracing uncertainty-in-action to figure out our many challenges, calming our fear of the unknown and liberating our imagination.

So it is in mastering a dance that embraces both 'not knowing' and 'knowing' that we can best follow

in the tracks of these poets, philosophers, activists, neuroscientists and psychologists to engender a deeper sense of hope, this 'vital ethical disposition'. A dance of hope that guides us to lean more effectively into the increasing complexity and uncertainty within and around us; to explore better ways to think and rethink, imagine and re-imagine, exchange and converse, as we seek new possibilities; and to resist more dependably our understandable



default of settling for safety, security, comfort, the status quo. A dance of hope that gives us more access to the accumulated wisdom of the elders, seers and philosophers who have throughout time been heralds of hope, illuminating possibilities and eternal truths for humanity to ignite and elevate our souls. A dance of hope to 'the tune without the words', returning to Emily Dickinson. Requiring courage? Undoubtedly. Difficult? Certainly. Hopeful? Hopefully so!

*Julian Powe*

5. *Disturbing the Peace*, by Vaclav Havel and Karel Huizdala, 1991.

6. *Putting Hope to Work*, 2006; and *Navigating Organisational Crisis*, 2016; both by Harry Hutson.

7. *Hope in the Dark*, by Rebecca Solnit, 2016.

# Václav Havel

“Lying can never save us from another lie” – said Václav Havel, a symbolic figure of the turn of the millennium, who became world famous and is remembered not just as a good playwright, but as one of the most prominent politicians of his time. He was the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic. He was also a prominent author, poet, and playwright, supporter of the ecological movements, human rights, and democracy.



Václav Havel. Image from Wikimedia.

Though he became a much loved politician domestically and internationally, he never trained to be a politician. Coming from an influential and highly educated family, he had the opportunity to become whatever he wanted to be, but the rise of the communism changed his career path. His family was regarded as bourgeois, so his options to study or work in his country were limited. After his compulsory military service he found a job in a theatre as a stagehand, then later became a

playwright and assistant director. He also studied dramatic arts and started to write plays that gained success in the 1960s. His plays, written according to the style of the ‘theatre of the absurd’, brought him international fame. He believed that “theatre is there to search for questions, and it doesn’t give instructions” for understanding the world. The theatre of the absurd focused on the ideas of existentialism and expressed the meaningless or purposeless nature of human existence. Some well known writers of this kind of theatre were Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. Many of Havel's plays, such as *The Memorandum* and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, became so well known that The Public Theater in New York added them to its repertoire. After 1968, when the Warsaw Pact countries marched into Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring, Havel was banned from the world of theatre as he had supported the anti-communist resistance. He found a job in a brewery in the countryside and continued to write plays, although these plays were not performed any more in his home country, only abroad.

During these years he became a leading dissident and his plays were distributed in *samizdat*<sup>1</sup> copies. He took part in the so-called Charter 77 manifesto, which was a civil initiative motivated by the arrest of a rock band in Czechoslovakia, which criticized the leadership of the country for failing to respect human rights. The reaction of the regime was

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1. Samizdat (Russian: самиздат, lit. 'self-publishing') was a form of dissident activity across the Eastern Bloc in which individuals reproduced censored and underground makeshift publications, often by hand, and passed the documents from reader to reader (Wikipedia).



tough, labelling the manifesto as anti-state, socialist, demagogic writing and the creators of the writing traitors. Many people were arrested by the police, including Václav Havel. He served about five years behind the bars for political reasons. Havel did not break down, instead, his hope became stronger. Hope was a central part of his ideas, and he wrote about it many times. "Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good."

Despite his imprisonment, Havel remained a key figure of the dissidents, and at the end of the 1980s, he acted as a leader of the Civic Forum. The Federal Assembly, the highest organ of state power in Czechoslovakia, voted him president in 1989. He believed that the ruling system can be changed through civic initiatives, not by violence, and he was in favour of a smooth transition from the one-party rule communism to plural democracy. In those months many anti-communist demonstrations were held and a general strike occurred, and by the end of the year the ruling communist party lost its ability to lead. When the first free election was held in 1990, Havel remained the president of Czechoslovakia. He had a key role in leaving the Warsaw Pact and ensuring that the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from the country. Even after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992, when the Slovaks formed an independent country, Havel was reelected as president of the newly created Czech Republic. Though the real power was not vested in him, but in the prime minister, he remained a moral compass. However, there were some decisions he made that marred his reputation. For example, he released prisoners by amnesty, and not only allowing political prisoners to escape, but also criminals. This led to an increase in crime in the country and the number of murders doubled. Despite this fact, Havel remained president after his five-year term for another five years. During that decade, he took the country into membership of NATO and

formed strong bonds with the Western alliance. Havel was very popular in the U.S. as an advocate of democracy and also as a playwright, even after his presidency.

But Havel's private life and health declined during these years. His wife died of cancer, and Havel himself contracted lung cancer in the same year, although he managed to recover. Two years later, his illness returned. He had to give up smoking, although he was a chain smoker. After



he finished his second term as president of the Czech Republic, he remained an influential politician, supporting green politics and fighting for human rights. In his last years, he returned to the world of the theatre and wrote new plays. He died peacefully at the age of 75, a week after meeting his long time friend, the Dalai Lama. Havel's ashes are buried in Prague.

*Istvan Orban*

# Philosophy and “Voluntary Death”

Plato's dialogue *Phaedo* is a conversation between Socrates and his students in his prison cell on his final day before he had to drink poison, as sentenced by the court. The main topic of the dialogue is the exposition of the immortality of the soul. For a subtle background to the story, Plato used the myth of the Minotaur, a beast with the head of a bull and the body of a man. From the beginning we are told that Socrates's execution was delayed, as his death sentence coincided with the celebration of the Athenians' thanksgiving festival, which was a remembrance of Theseus slaying the Minotaur and saving the young Athenians from a horrible death. According to the story, Athens had wronged king Minos of Crete and as a

compensation he demanded from them every nine years seven youths and seven maidens. Minos used those fourteen Athenian youths to feed the Minotaur, who was hidden away in a labyrinth constructed by the famous craftsman and architect Daedalus. All this continued to occur until the hero Theseus came to the rescue and slew the Minotaur. Theseus was helped by the Minotaur's half-sister Ariadne, who gave him a golden thread so that he could find a way through the labyrinth and return safely. Plato draws parallels with Socrates, comparing him with Theseus, the fourteen youths being Socrates's students visiting him in his prison cell, who were also fourteen in number.



Why did Plato compare Socrates with Theseus? Not because Theseus was a great hero and later became the most famous king of Athens, but because slaying a Minotaur is a philosophical act. According to the Platonic esoteric doctrine, more thoroughly discussed by Proclus and Iamblichus, when the soul descends from the divine realm it uses three vehicles to interact in the material world. The first is called the luminous body, which allows the soul to stay connected with the realm of pure knowledge and ultimate reality. The second is called the irrational body, which enables the soul to experience the world through feelings and emotions. The third is the physical body, through which the soul interacts with the material world. As the soul is immaterial and subtle, while the physical body is very gross and passive, there has to be an intermediate vehicle that allows full connection between two very different entities. That intermediate vehicle is the irrational soul. The whole process of the soul's descent is not easy and straightforward, because we also have to bear in mind that the soul doesn't enter the body in a localized way, it is more true in a relationship sense, and we only speak figuratively when we say it is placed in the body. The soul enters the relationship with the physical body by necessity and sympathy. The necessity and sympathy is the soul's providential care of the material world by which it extends the providence of the divine order, while on an individual level there is a certain unresolved bond or emotional attachment that each individual soul has to resolve; in the East this is called *karma*.

When the soul creates a connection with the physical body, it is 'pulled' in, the light is obscured, everything is constantly changing and powerful drives are acting upon the soul, which can be quite confusing for it. This is why the symbol of a labyrinth corresponds to the physical body and the symbol for the irrational soul is the Minotaur, which dwells in the middle of the labyrinth. By slaying the Minotaur, it does not literally mean that we have to kill the irrational soul, as the irrational soul is part of Nature and is needed for the functioning and survival of the physical body. Slaying the Minotaur means not being taken over

by bodily instincts, passions and very strong drives of survival and procreation, with which the soul identifies and builds up the false sense of self. A true philosopher is one who is purifying himself from those impulses and influences. This process of separation is called "voluntary death". Normally we mean by death a cessation of bodily functions, and when Socrates speaks so positively about death it is not a happiness of leaving the physical body, but



The Death of Socrates by Jacques-Philippe Joseph de Saint-Quentin, Wikimedia

happiness due to being free of the body's desires. By definition, death is not a liberation by nature, it is only a physical separation of the body from the soul, because the soul can still continue with certain attachments and emotional links even after leaving the body, which prevents the soul from liberation. In various cultures, many rituals and ceremonies took place during the funeral rites at the time after death to help to guide the soul to safety. But it is much easier to traverse these other worlds when the life lived on Earth has been virtuous and pure. Philosophy in practice is nothing but a preparation for our "final act". In ancient Egypt, various fragments from the Book of the Dead were placed in the tombs, but the ideas and teachings were not meant to be instructions for the dead, but for people who were still alive. To die is natural and the body will eventually be separated from the soul, but

to be able to free the soul from the body and bodily passions comes with discipline and effort. But we shouldn't fall into the trap of just condemning the passions, as they are not evil by default, but only when they are not properly directed and occupy the centre of our consciousness. To be a philosopher is not to be devoid of feelings and emotions, quite the opposite, the notion of beauty and awareness only increases as the consciousness becomes elevated and expanded.

Philosophically speaking, the soul has three movements, downwards in relationship with the body, upwards towards the transcendental realm of eternal ideas, and inwards, looking into itself. When the soul is looking into itself, we speak of catharsis or purification. For Platonic philosophers, the soul is a "sacred image uniting all forms", which means that in the soul we possess the principles of all



things that exist, and that is why we have all the knowledge within already; we just need to remember it. In ancient Greece people were able to accelerate this spiritual process with the help of the institution of the Mysteries, which existed for a very long time – we can confirm two millennia of existence, if not more. The Mysteries created an experience which would give a participant a verified sense of the soul and its destiny and, it is said, the Greater Mysteries would further establish the vision of the greater universe and God. There is a strong connection between philosophy, initiation and death; all of them are centred around the theme of rebirth.

If Socrates, Plato, Plotinus and other great philosophers had lived in India, they would have been considered great yogis or saints. In India, yogis are known for transcending ordinary states of consciousness and having the experience of true oneness and unity with God. Such great saints were even able to choose to leave their physical body at a conscious level. This is called *Mahasamadhi*. When a saint entered *Mahasamadhi*, people would build a tomb around the physical body and it would be considered that the saint's spiritual essence continued to be present in the tomb, hence the idea of making pilgrimages to such sites.

And let us not forget that Theseus was helped to navigate the labyrinth by Ariadne's golden thread. The golden thread that helps us to find the way out of the confusing pathways of matter is our connection with the divine or, as the philosopher Olympiodorus said, it is the "divine power attached to us." Philosophy in its true sense is a way of life that helps to liberate the soul and to continue the upward journey to the heights of divine consciousness.

*Miha Kosir*

#### **Further reading:**

Prometheus Trust course on *Phaedo*, by Tim Addey, 2024

*The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo* by Olympiodorus, L. G. Westerink, 2009

*The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo* by Damascius, L. G. Westerink, 2009

*Death and Immortality in Late Neoplatonism, Studies on the Ancient Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, Brill, 2011

# Art and Proportions: the Golden Rule

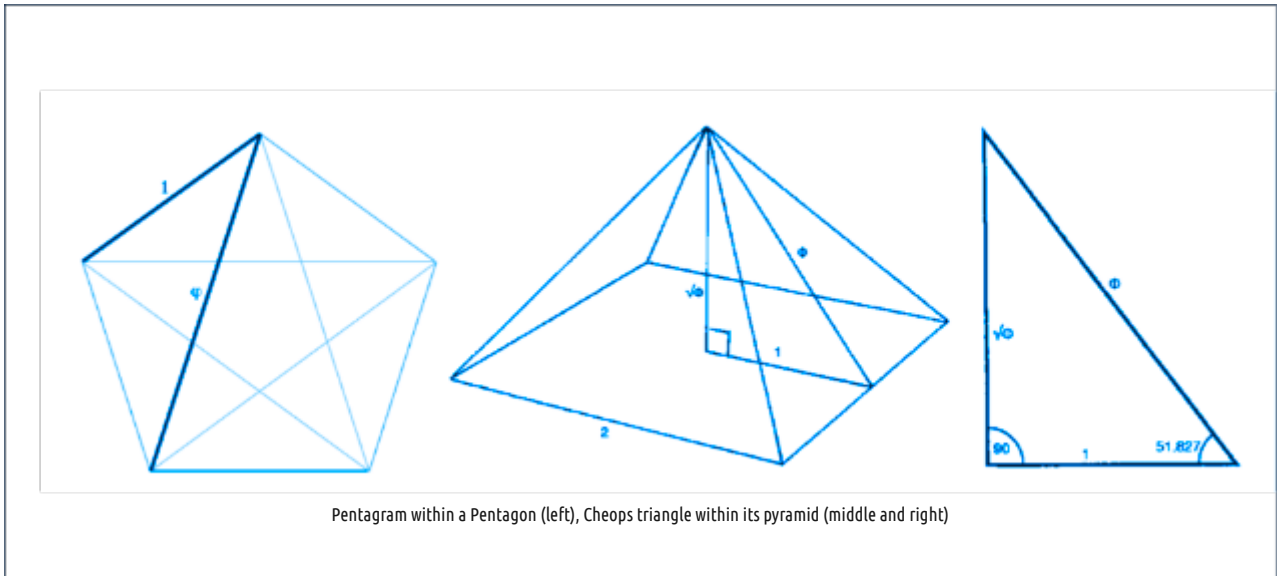
‘There is one particular proportion or ratio that bears the name Golden and has been known by artists, sculptors and architects for thousands of years. But its first user was Nature itself. The natural development of plants, flowers, animals and humans follows this mathematical ratio.

The golden ratio, often represented by the Greek letter Phi ( $\phi$  or  $\varphi$ ), is an irrational number which, like Pi, has an infinite number of decimals. It’s

roughly equal to 1.618 and can be found in many classic geometric forms: the pentagram, the pentagon, the golden rectangle, the sublime triangle, the Cheops triangle and the golden spiral, to name a few.

Phi has remarkable mathematical properties that have been explored ever since the Middle Ages, starting with the Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci in the 12th century. But it is





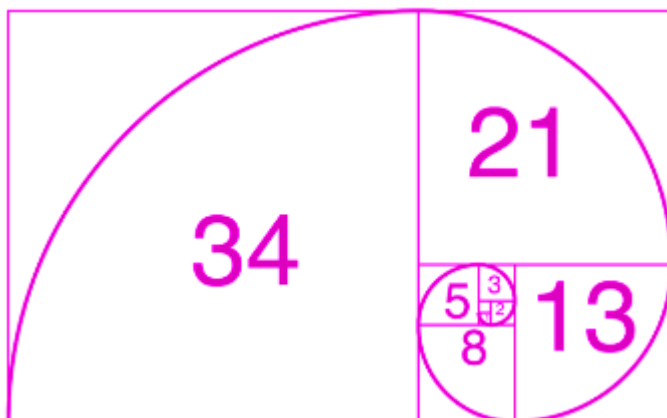
undeniable that the ancient Egyptians and Greeks were very familiar with this number, as we can find it in the Great Pyramid and the Parthenon, as well as many other temples and sculptures.

An easy way to recreate the harmonious proportions of the golden ratio is through the drawing of a golden spiral by recreating the Fibonacci sequence: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89... By drawing two jointed squares of the same dimensions, let's say one centimetre, and adding next to it a square whose side now has the dimension of the two initial squares, creating a rectangle of 2 by 3 and so on, until your canvas is full of ever-growing rectangles, the dimensions of which will get ever closer to the Golden ratio. Within the rectangles you can draw the golden spiral. Such geometric spirals are very common in Nature, and therefore in Art.

Artists and architects can also come to the golden ratio by chance as it has aesthetic qualities. Painters who depict natural landscapes, animals, plants and human beings would naturally incorporate the golden ratio in their drawings but also in their canvases, as the golden rectangles have pleasing shapes. The golden ratio is often found in many commonly used objects for that reason. The shape of our credit, oyster and other cards have a ratio of 1.6 which is very close to the golden ratio.

As the golden ratio is so harmonious and natural to us, it has been used throughout our modern world and in many designs: from flower pots, chocolate bars and cars to the cooling towers of nuclear power plants. The golden ratio is used, not necessarily by choice, but by happy accident, as it seems to resonate with us.

*Florimond Krins*



# Cultural Trends

## Shaping our Lifestyle

Globalisation has enabled us as individuals and societies to have a broad and deep interconnection at social, cultural and financial levels amongst others, which has had very positive impacts on what we believe, how we think and on our lifestyles. With the world at our fingertips through technology, this often happens at rapid speed; from a young age we're exposed to an immense variety of choices and told to decide for ourselves – and sometimes it's hard to keep up. This article presents two cultural phenomena which are shaping the way we live and are largely in response to the effects of globalisation and our rapidly evolving lifestyles.

The first phenomenon is that individuals and communities are starting to return to tradition. From a collective standpoint, many communities feel like they have lost their local traditions and identity, as well as having new resource and financial issues, which is making some countries move towards “localization”

while some nations are prioritising self-reliance. On a material level, this means for example that instead of opting for cheaper options abroad, they're leaning toward local markets and resources to meet the nation's demands as much as possible. However, many people are also looking at their historical and spiritual past.

Having to constantly adapt to our changing environment has made us a society quite good at change (even though we can get frustrated at those who don't cope well with it); however, it's evident that the uncertainty and fatigue this causes has created a strong nostalgia for our memories of stability and a return of the desire to be rooted in tradition. From an individual perspective, our constant need to navigate amidst diverse societal opinions and contradictions when we're trying to mature a sense of self, makes us seek out guidance in our lives.

For millennia our myths, rituals, ceremonies and customs have helped us make sense of the world and



navigate it with a view of our northern star. They've helped us feel some control and allowed us to find meaning where there is chaos; in fact, in moments of crisis, we've often sought for answers of refuge in the past, and this is happening again in our modern day. These aspects of tradition remind us that there is something greater than we are able to perceive and add depth and purpose to our lives. They create an awe of the universe and help us understand paradigms of unity, connection, continuity and devotion. Rituals and ceremonies in particular are a gateway of relating to the power of existence, they connect us to the divine, to that which is incomprehensible to our minds.

We therefore need these traditions to thrive in our life, to give us sense and direction in our human existence. They can connect us deeply to ourselves and to the higher source that gives all life, and give us the comfort of feeling we belong somewhere by engaging with a community. Observing traditions with others creates unity instead of separation and shows us how we are all longing for and striving for the same things in life, which helps relieve that loneliness and pressure of being alone amongst the abyss of choices.

The second cultural phenomenon is the change of consumerism. There are many signs of us as consumers taking personal control of the impact on the environment. We see a lot of upcycling, of buying from more sustainable sources and buying locally - but not wanting to spend more for the privilege of it either! This is called value-driven consumption, and we see industries responding to this trend with the increasing use of electric vehicles and sustainable automotive technologies, as well as in the organic food



industry and fair trade in retail. The cost of living crisis seems to have boosted consumer action even more, like reducing food waste and household energy consumption. Considering our continuously growing population, both these things - the change and reduction in our consumption - can largely be seen as positive initiatives for our society, unless of course they start to negatively impact on our wellbeing (i.e. if we cannot afford food, items or activities essential for our wellbeing).

The question is: how can we stay centred with our values and not get carried away by the strong currents surrounding the epicentre of these positive initiatives? When the cost of living crisis eases, how can we continue to consume in a conscious way, rather than return to previous ways of following trends despite their impact on our society and our environment? It's important that the values highlighted by this cultural phenomenon are stamped on our collective consciousness long term, since businesses will always prioritise their profitability by capitalising on consumer behaviour, and consumption reduction is counter-intuitive for them.

As consumers, we hold power and can put pressure on businesses to be sustainable and circular; but we may be able to shift business paradigms even more, and the young generations especially have shown how effective our influence can be on global trends. Imagine if we could change business models so that profitability isn't the top priority, but perhaps reaching some sort of ceiling which harmonises the concerns of the business and our environment. The key to solving the problems that we created is also within us, and we might just need to look at the problem with fresh eyes.



Photo by Krizjohn Rosales

*Sofia Venuti*



# Gaia – Living Together with Mother Earth

## Part 1

To regard the Earth as a living being or as our mother may seem absurd to us today. To ancient cultures, however, it was a fact. For all indigenous cultures, it is their lived reality. Biologists and cultural ecologists such as Stephan Harding, David Abrams and Andreas Weber now agree. From their point of view, this new ancient view is vital for the survival of our civilisation.

In this article I would like to address the question of whether an "animistic view" of our Earth and ecosophical practices can help us to overcome our current ecological crisis and create a sustainable coexistence with nature.

At the end of the 1970s, James Lovelock brought a completely new view of the Earth with his Gaia theory. Until then, mechanistic science viewed the Earth as a large lump of rock, where a thin layer of living organisms develops on its surface and adapts to the prevailing conditions. Lovelock turned this view on its head.

### The Earth functions like a living being

Lovelock recognised that the biosphere has an enormous effect on the Earth, as well as on the composition of the atmosphere, the waters and the rocks, which interact with the biosphere through complex feedbacks. The Earth thus appears to act like a harmoniously composed life system that perfectly balances its environment for life: the atmosphere and the oceans as well as the composition of the soil and rock layers. Without these living organisms, the atmosphere of our planet would consist of 98 % carbon dioxide and 1.9 % nitrogen. Oxygen and other gases would only be present in trace amounts. We would have average wind speeds of 350 km/h and the air pressure would be 60 instead of 1 bar<sup>1</sup>. This is because over the course of hundreds of millions of years, plants, living creatures and numerous organisms in the sea have sequestered atmospheric



carbon in humus and fossil deposits, although most of it as calcium carbonate in rock masses.

Our body does not adjust its temperature to the outside temperature, but has an inner knowledge that 37 degrees is the right temperature and constantly balances this by sweating or heating. Similarly, the Earth seems to know which composition is just right for the atmosphere and the water and balances it out. CO<sub>2</sub> is taken from the air, e.g. via photosynthesis and all marine animals that build up calcium carbonate. If this process only went in one direction, the Earth would cool down more and more. This is why CO<sub>2</sub> is also released again through fires and



volcanic eruptions. The Earth balances its temperature with these and many other (highly complex) mechanisms – because without life we would have average temperatures of 240 - 340 °C on Earth<sup>2</sup>.

### The Earth is a living being

While Lovelock still shied away from calling the Earth a living being, other scientists are going further today. For Lovelock's friend and long-time colleague

1. James Lovelock, *Gaia: A new look at Life on Earth*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 36 and <http://www.jameslovelock.org/planetary-atmospheres-compositional-and-other-changes-associated-with-the-presence-of-life/>, accessed 30.12.2023

2. James Lovelock, *Gaia*, p. 36

at Schumacher College, Stephan Harding, it is clear that we need a paradigm shift. From the ecologist's point of view, viewing the Earth and life as a machine was for a while a useful model for researching and understanding interrelationships. But it is not a suitable guiding metaphor for living and surviving as humans on Earth. For this, it is necessary to combine scientific knowledge with values, meaning and significance and thus develop an ecosophy, i.e. an ecological wisdom. From this perspective, it is essential to view the Earth as a living being<sup>3</sup>.

### Nature as an exploitable resource

Descartes created the machine image of life in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He claimed that only humans have a soul in the form of their spirit. He denied nature, animals and plants a soul. He told his students during animal experiments that agonised screaming did not mean that they were suffering, but that it was comparable to the squeaking of a machine. With Galileo and Newton, this scientific view of the world began its triumphal march. Francis Bacon called for scientific researchers to “bind” and constrain nature using mechanical inventions so that she “could be forced out of her natural state and squeezed and moulded”, and thereby “tortured” into revealing her secrets. Even today, we Western people still regard nature, plants and animals as resources to be utilised or exploited at will. Our relationship with nature is characterised by struggle and subjugation, because Darwin explained to us with his theory of evolution that in nature only the strongest survive and prevail.

We forget that if we defeat nature, we ourselves will be among the defeated. Globally, we are currently consuming 70% more resources each year than the Earth can regenerate<sup>4</sup>. The Living Planet Index, which records the populations of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians, shows a 69 % decline in observed wild animal populations since 1970<sup>5</sup>.

3. Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth. Science, Intuition and Gaia*, Chelsea Green Publishing 2006, p. 26ff

4. Footprint Data Foundation, York University Ecological Footprint Initiative, and Global Footprint Network: National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts, 2022 edition. available online at <https://data.footprintnetwork.org>

5. Living Planet Report 2022 of the World Wildlife Fund, available online at <https://livingplanet.panda.org/>

130 - 150 plant and animal species die out every day<sup>6</sup>, which is why we are currently experiencing the greatest extinction of species since the end of the dinosaur age 65 million years ago<sup>7</sup>. Species extinction today is at least ten to one hundred times higher than the average of the last ten million years. 75 % of the land surface and 66 % of the ocean surface have been altered by human influence. The global forest area, for example, is only 68 % of what it was in the pre-industrial age<sup>8</sup>.

This loss of biodiversity is threatening because we know from the Gaia theory that a high level of diversity increases an ecosystem's ability to balance itself. The lower the diversity, on the other hand, the more ecosystems and the Earth as a whole reduce this ability and the risk of the collapse of entire ecosystems increases. When Lovelock was once asked during a discussion how Gaia - the Earth's ecosystem as a whole - would function at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with ten or twelve billion people, he did not reply that people would then have to live more ecologically. Nor did he talk about new technologies or ways of doing business. He said that by the end of the century there would probably only be around one billion people left on the planet<sup>9</sup>.

### What do we need for the turnaround?

Anyone who understands these connections also knows that we cannot reduce the current crisis to a climate crisis, but that we are in a global ecological crisis. Focussing on the issues of climate and global warming is seen as a mistake by some ecologists today. This is because many people today live under the assumption that we can solve this crisis by reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. It would therefore be enough to drive electric cars instead of cars with combustion engines and switch from fossil fuels to renewable energies.

However, replacing one technology with another would probably not change the roots of the

problem, which is expressed in the extinction of species. As Einstein said, we cannot solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that created it. And the root of the problem lies more in the world view that we have inherited from Descartes, etc. Feeling separated as humans from nature and from Mother Earth.

According to philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour, in order to understand the ecological crisis, we must first learn to understand that there is no nature at all from which the human world can separate itself in order to function according to its own rules. The conceptual pair of nature and culture must be replaced by a view that allows us to describe the interplay of countless things and living beings, human and non-human actors beyond the distinction between nature and culture. They all form a complicated network in which everyone influences everyone else<sup>10</sup>.

To get to the root of the problem and put an end to the exploitation of nature, Stephan Harding and other scientists are now calling for a philosophy of life that allows us to perceive the Earth and every living being as animate. The founder of deep ecology, Arne Næss, said that every living being has an intrinsic value and must not be reduced to the value that we humans attribute to it as a resource<sup>11</sup>.

To be continued in the next issue...

*Heribert Holzinger*

### Recommended reading:

Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth. Science, Intuition and Gaia*, Chelsea Green Publishing 2006

Joanna Macy, Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope. How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*, New World Library 2012

Andreas Weber, *Matter & Desire, An Erotic Ecology*, Chelsea Green Publishing 2017

David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage Books, New York 1996

6. Greenpeace Germany, <https://www.greenpeace.de/biodiversitaet/artenkrise/artensterben>, accessed 30.08.2023

7. World Wildlife Fund, <https://www.wwf.de/themen-projekte/artensterben>, accessed 30.08.2023

8. Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, Global IPBES Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, <https://www.de-ipbes.de/de/Globales-IPBES-Assessment-zu-Biodiversitaet-und-Okosystemleistungen-1934.html>, accessed 30.08.2023

9. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/es-sieht-nicht-gut-aus-fur-den-menschen-6608296.html> (in german language), accessed 30.08.2023

10. Leander Scholz: Bruno Latour, "Battle for Gaia". In the age of the ecological crisis (in german language), 24/09/2017, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/bruno-latour-kampf-um-gaia-im-zeitalter-der-oekologischen-100.html>, accessed 30/08/2023

11. Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth*, p. 57

# The Myth of Narcissus and Echo



*Echo and Narcissus* by John William Waterhouse. Source: Wikimedia

Well known from a version by Roman poet Ovid, the popular myth of Narcissus and Echo has inspired artists throughout centuries, and was later implicated in the naming of the psychological type, Narcissism. However, this myth and its symbolism have more ancient roots than even Rome; for example, the flower narcissus appears in the stories of Persephone, associated with the Eleusinian mysteries (Addey, 2020). Born of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Liriope, Narcissus is

beautiful from birth. Cautious to protect him, his mother seeks advice from the prophet Tiresias and asks if her son will live a long life. The old seer replies “Yes, so long as he never comes to know himself”. As the youth grows, many a heart falls for him but none interest Narcissus who is hardened and cold in his rejection. One day whilst out hunting, Echo the nymph catches a glimpse of him: ‘the closer she followed, the flames of her passion grew nearer and nearer, as sulphur smeared on the

tip of a pine-torch quickly catches fire when another flame is brought in close proximity...; yet with her strange and babbling speech which cannot initiate words of its own, Echo is unable to address him. Until Narcissus becomes separated from his companions and calls out ‘Is anyone there?’ ‘One there?’ Echo replies... ‘Come here!’ ‘Come here!’ throws back Echo... ‘We must come together’ and with the most joyous cry ever uttered ‘We must come together’, sang Echo... With arms outstretched towards her beloved she runs, yet Narcissus shrieks ‘I would rather die before you enjoy my body’... ‘enjoy my body’, wept Echo... (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*).

Ashamed and grief-stricken, Echo withdraws into a cave until her body withers, her bones turn to stone and only her voice remains. Another youth, once injured by unrequited love, makes a prayer which is heeded, that Narcissus too should never obtain the object of his desire. One day after hunting, Narcissus spies a silvery, virgin pool untouched by human hand. Sitting down by its edge, he drinks, but as

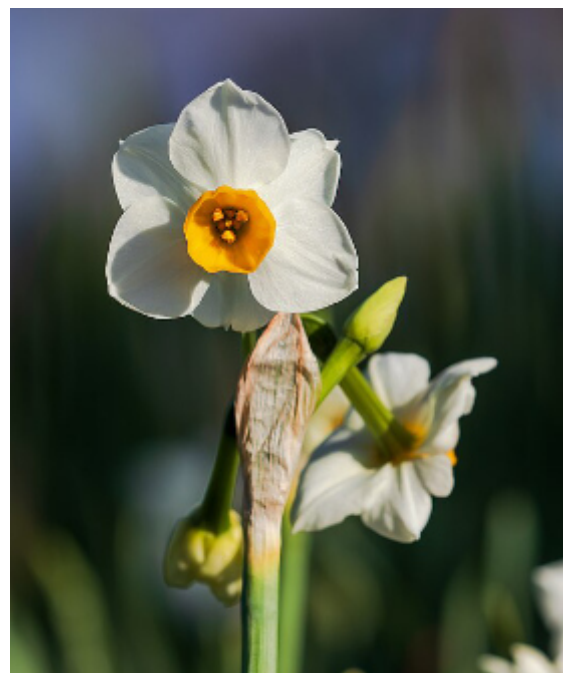
one thirst is satiated another one grew. In front of him he sees the most beautiful youth and unaware of his own reflection, Narcissus becomes completely enraptured and frozen like 'Parian marble'. There he stays, unable to avert his gaze until all that remains are the fragrant flowers that now bear his name, Narcissi... It is this flower that Persephone picks in the Eleusinian mysteries and through this flower that the Earth opens up and the chariot of Hades flies out to capture her (Addey, 2000).

The psychological caution of self-obsession is plain: ensnared and trapped by his own image, had lived in unreality about who he was. Echo too, punished by Juno for her former loquacious speech, now cannot initiate words. Both are in a stagnant state which seems complementary (Greene and Sharman-Burke, 2000). However, there are perhaps more subtle, spiritual keys suggested,



the mystery of the soul, its beautiful fragrance and the symbol of water. For the philosopher Porphyry, nymphs as related to water and precipitation belonged to the order of divine beings that assisted the soul in its descent into matter. The pool is where Narcissus is caught and the soul seeing its own beauty becomes trapped in matter (Addey, 2000). The pool acts as the conduit of the image and to behold images is quintessential for human experience on all levels. Yet it seems to matter greatly what internal state we bring to this activity of beholding. That we look at ourselves and at life is inevitable but the way we look is significant. Too much self-importance and we are caught as marble like Narcissus, but too little and we are impotent, like Echo.

To behold some beauty of life or awareness of our soulful essence is cruelly intermittent and living with this condition is certainly strewn with strife and failure. For renaissance polymath Leon Battista Alberti "The inventor of painting... was Narcissus ... What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?" (Atwood, 2024). We can think of painting but also of art more broadly and the art of living. Perhaps one key is to move from attaching to the 'want' of what we behold towards 'participation' and 'action', like the artist making so-called dreams reality... Being aware of our shortcomings can enable us to



channel what we behold and what we dream of more effectively into conscious action. To look at ourselves, at life and each other in fullness without fixation, helps the transformative process of living to occur. To embrace the inevitability of life's trials that cannot be avoided, without becoming frozen or stagnant, is one key which will perhaps help our fragrant souls to flower.

*Siobhan Farrar*

#### **Reading List:**

- Attwood, Mary. (2024) *The Myth of Narcissus*. Lecture Video.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. (2004). London: Penguin Books.
- Addey, Tim. (2000). *The Seven Myths of the Soul*. Somerset: Prometheus Trust.
- Greene, Liz and Sharman-Burke, Juliet. (2000). *The Mythic Journey: The Meaning of Myth As a Guide for Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.



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