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Philosophy and Education for the Future

The Wisdom of Ptahhotep

Honour... What can it mean
for us today?

The Mundus Imaginalis

The Creation Myth from
the *Kalevala*

PHILOSOPHY
CULTURE
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AND MORE



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

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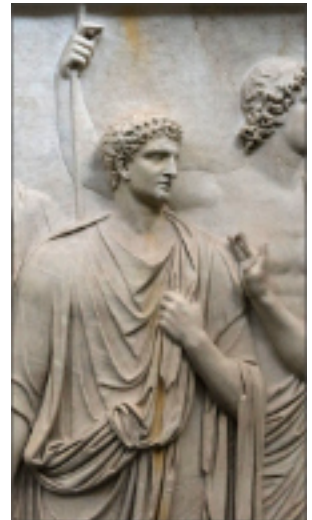
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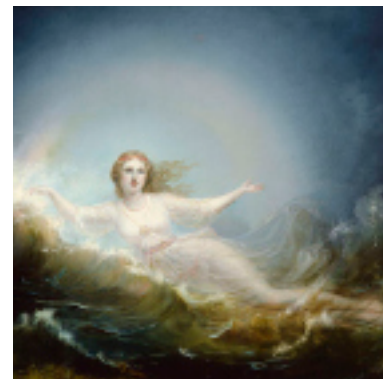
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Editorial

Personal responsibility

In 1956, while still suffering under the impact of the experiences of World War II, the Swiss author and dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt was pondering the question whether it was still possible in our age to write tragedies. He came to the conclusion that our time was not suited for tragedy because the true community and sense of responsibility (amongst other things), upon which tragedy is predicated, no longer existed.

This inspired me to think about the concept of personal responsibility. Almost 70 years after Dürrenmatt's statement, there is undeniable evidence that the sense of personal responsibility has diminished even further: rubbish on streets and in parks indicates that some people are too lazy to walk a few metres to drop rubbish into the designated bin; dog mess on streets; young (and not so young) people spilling something and not cleaning up afterwards; public facilities treated without any care by the public; etc...

Over the last few decades, there has also been a growing trend to sue fast food companies for health problems like obesity and diabetes or for burning oneself because the coffee that was served was 'too hot'. This shows that we are not taking personal responsibility for the excesses of our lifestyle or our own lack of attention, but rather blame manufacturers and service providers. At schools, the blame for underachievement of students is laid on teachers rather than students and even parents often don't accept responsibility for the behaviour of their children, blaming society and expecting schools to transmit the values which they have not been able to instil in their offspring.

The rise of a victimhood culture also makes it commonplace nowadays to blame parents, teachers or society for everything negative in our lives. This attitude is often supported by a psychology that only aims to make us feel better instantly without helping us to develop our potential to transcend adversity, create our own circumstances and become aware of our freedom to choose.

There are even those who think that the concept of 'personal responsibility' is a means devised by evil 'systems' to make people feel 'guilty' and to deflect from the issue of 'systemic failure'. Although there is a point in this, we must also not forget that every

system is made up of individuals, and that in every system, the behaviour of each individual will impact the whole.

Why has the sense of responsibility disappeared to such an extent? There are many possible answers to this question, but one of them is that we live in a world which tells us that the most important goal in life is maximum comfort and 'to feel good' at all times.

We all know the inner battle between our sense of responsibility and the effort it would require to act in alignment with it, and our selfish part that simply does not want to make an effort. We all know how 'unpleasant' it feels when we have to admit (at least to ourselves) that we have made a mistake. We all know how 'scary' it can be to make a big decision, knowing that we can only blame ourselves for its effects on our future life. There is no doubt that a sense of responsibility would urge us to make an effort, to face uncomfortable feelings and to fully accept the consequences of our life choices. But if we deny personal responsibility for our own life or circumstances, we will never develop our power to change them.

The word 'responsibility' comes from the verb 'to respond'. The sense of responsibility is our inner response to a situation that requires an action that we are able to take. In Latin it also retains the sense of 'obligation'. To be a responsible human being means to be reliable and trustworthy. A sense of responsibility is a sign of maturity, of inner development, a state of consciousness. It is the first characteristic of an awakened soul that feels connected with humanity, nature, the world. It represents the best we have within. It is our inner voice of conscience, our ability to respond to a problem. If we smother our sense of responsibility, we also smother what makes us human.

Are we prisoners of fate or is there in us the power to determine the course of our life and to create the world we would like to live in? If we feel that it is the latter, then assuming our personal responsibility is the only way forward.

It is not only tragedy that requires a sense of personal responsibility – a civilized society needs it as well! We can always recognize the great souls by their sense of responsibility. May it shine forth from our own actions, too.

Sabine Leitner

The Wisdom of Ptahhotep

An Ideal of Self-Realization and Service to Others

According to a medieval legend, the Greek philosopher Parmenides invented logic while seated on a rock in Egypt. This indicates a belief that Greek philosophy was very much inspired by the wisdom of Egypt, and it turns out that this is not merely a legend. Pythagoras – the very inventor of the word ‘philosophy’ in Greece – was advised by his teacher Thales to travel to Egypt, where Thales himself had been taught. And Plato himself spent many years studying with the Egyptian priests at Heliopolis.

Why, then, do most books tell us that philosophy began in ancient Greece? Because, according to our current world view, inherited from the 18th and 19th centuries, it is impossible to believe that a people like the Egyptians, who believed in magic, could possibly have had a philosophy. And yet, according to a recent book on the ancient Egyptian sage Ptahhotep¹, the ancient Egyptians had a word for philosophy: *merut nefret*, which means ‘wanting wisdom’ or ‘wanting the ideal’, which is almost identical to the Greek word *philosophia*, or ‘love of wisdom’. The philosopher is a person who loves wisdom and wants to become wise, or someone who loves the ideal and wants to achieve it in their

life. Ptahhotep makes this even more explicit in the following saying: “The educated person is the one who nurtures their soul by realizing on earth the ideal self within.” In other words, we all have an ideal self within, and someone who has a sense of that ideal strives to bring it into reality. This is the original meaning of ‘philosopher’ in both the Greek and the Egyptian traditions.

Ptahhotep was vizier (roughly equivalent to prime minister) to King Izezi, a fifth dynasty pharaoh who reigned from approximately 2410 to 2375 BC. He was thus a person with great responsibilities, who, at the time of writing the book, says that he was 110 years old. Whether or not this was literally true, he begins the book by realistically describing the pains and deficiencies of extreme old age and, despite his infirmities, nevertheless agrees to the king’s request to pass on his wisdom for the benefit of future generations: “so that they may act as a model for the children of responsible people (government officials and community leaders), who may be educated to listen to every bit of information told to them. [Because] no one will be born wise.”

The sayings in this book (and others like it, because in ancient Egypt there was a whole tradition of ‘wisdom literature’) are designed to instruct ‘responsible people’ in the best ways of being and

1. *The Oldest Book in the World: Philosophy in the Age of the Pyramids*, by Bill Manley. Thames & Hudson, 2023.

acting, which means living in accordance with *Ma'at*¹, the principle of truth and therefore of justice. *Ma'at* pervades the universe and personifies the basic laws of all existence. To live in accordance with *Ma'at* brings contentment and 'life', whereas to transgress the laws of life brings futility and 'death'. In this way, Ptahhotep does not make any appeal to religious authority, only to the natural laws of life, what in India is called *Dharma*.

Let us look at some examples from 'the oldest book in the world' and we will see how in spite of the passage of around 4,500 years, their relevance remains intact. The reason for this continuing relevance is that human nature has not essentially changed, and because "Truth (*Ma'at*) has not been changed since the beginning of time" [literally 'since the time of Osiris'].

The instructions can be divided into a series of 'Dos' and 'Don'ts':

Don't

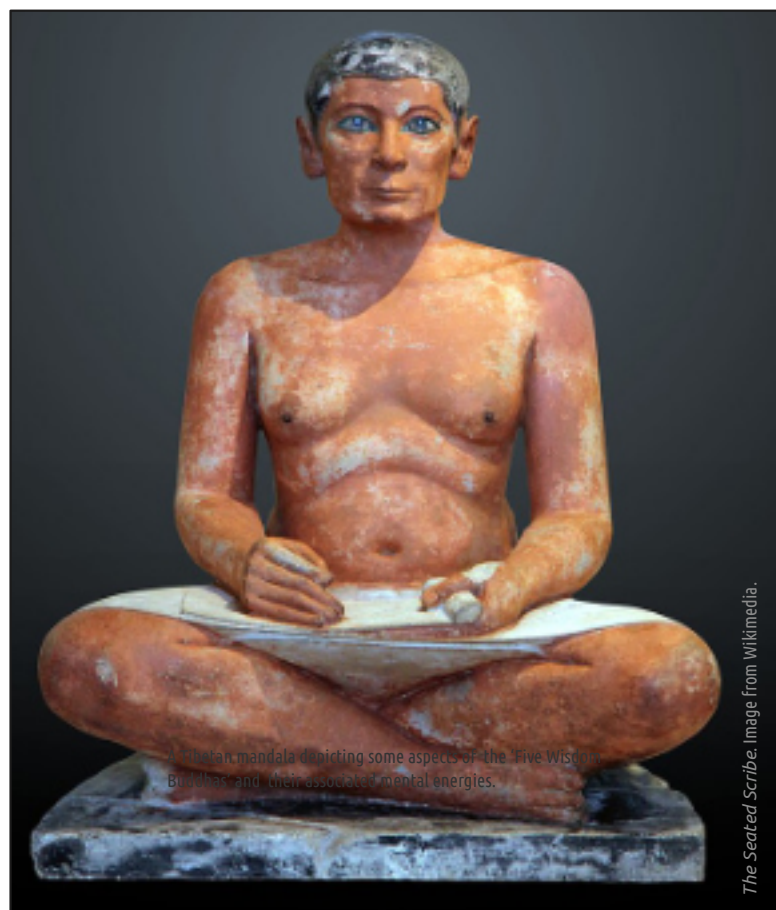
Don't be arrogant: "Do not be high-minded because you are educated. Rather, consult with the simple as much as the educated. Art has no limits and no artist ever reaches perfection³."

Don't get into arguments: "If you meet someone looking for an argument – a stubborn person, cleverer than you – reach out your hand and bow politely. Just as you disagree with them, they are not going to agree with you. Make little of nonsense by not getting into an argument with them. Let it be said of them that that one's a fool, and let your self-restraint match their advantages [alternatively, 'don't end up more angry than they are worth']⁴."

Don't be greedy: "If you wish your conduct to be exemplary and remove from yourself any

misconduct, resist any opportunity for greed. It is a sick infestation for which there is no cure. It infects fathers and mothers, brothers from the same mother. It alienates wife and husband. It is a compound of every evil, a bundle of everything detestable. A person gets through life by observing truth and walking a step at a time. This way they fashion a legacy but the greedy leave no leftovers behind."

Don't create fear: "You should not create fear among people, God responds accordingly. When someone says 'I am powerful', they are saying 'I am trapped in my self-importance.'"



A Thutak mandala depicting some aspects of the 'Five Wisdom Buddhas' and their associated mental energies.

The Seated Scribe. Image from Wikimedia.

2. *Ma'at* was symbolized by a goddess with a feather in her headdress, the daughter of the sun god Re, sometimes the wife of Thoth (god of wisdom) and associated with other deities, such as Osiris and Ptah, who were known by the title 'Lord of Maat'. She represents not only Law, but also Life.

3. Let us remember that the name Ptahhotep means 'Ptah is satisfied'; and Ptah, as a creator god, was (amongst other functions) the patron of artists. The High Priest of Ptah was known as the 'greatest of directors of artists'.

4. The reason for the alternative versions is that there is more than one surviving manuscript of Ptahhotep's book.

Don't repeat gossip: "You should not repeat gossip from someone who did not actually hear the matter. It stems from jealousy. Repeat only statements of fact."

Do

Learn from everything that happens to you: "Seek the meaning for you in every event until your conduct becomes impeccable. Truth (*Ma'at*) is

transformative, ever relevant. It has not been changed since the beginning of time.”

Listen: “Whenever you are in charge, you should enjoy listening to whoever comes to you with questions. Do not interrupt them until they have emptied their belly of what they wanted to say. Those who rely on you need to say what is on their mind even more than they need to get something done about it.... Not everything people ask you for can happen, but the purpose of listening is to clear the air.”



Detail from the Papyrus of Ani

“Listening transforms a student who listens... What could be better than a student learning as their teacher speaks? They shall grow old and still have this. Listening or not listening is a choice and a person’s choice is life, prosperity and health to them. As for the careless person who does not listen, there is nothing to be done for them.”

Smile: “Smile all the time of your being. Whatever has left the store cannot go back in.” [For example, harsh words, once spoken, cannot be retracted.]

Be self-controlled: “When your mind is overflowing, restrain your mouth. Take your time when it is your turn to speak and you will say appropriate things.”

Be a good leader: “When you hold power create respect by knowing your business and by speaking calmly. Do not give an order that is not appropriate. Confrontation brings in conflict.

Whoever worries all day will not inspire one positive moment. Whoever hides away all day will not build leadership.”

In summary, the teachings of Ptahhotep are wonderfully practical and yet they are based on a profound metaphysical cosmovision: a vision of an ordered cosmos, of which we human beings form an integral part, and which has an intrinsic meaning and purpose. The basic idea behind this is that everything, from the birth of the universe onwards, is founded upon intention. That intention acts upon the potential of energy and matter to produce a state of becoming, which is striving to become what it potentially is – “to realize on earth the ideal self within”, or simply ‘to be’. There is a way that everything is intended, as a seed is intended to become a tree. The same applies to a human being. Thus, for the ancient Egyptians, as the author of the above-mentioned book says, being “is true of humome ‘ideal’ or ‘perfected’ (nefru) and provide an enduring example to others.” Or, as king Izezi said, “no one will be born wise”. Wisdom and Being have to be won.

Julian Scott

Climate Change: Personal and Collective Responsibility

The vast majority of scientists now believe that climate change is real and that the changes in our climate and ecosystem are substantially manmade. And as this has become clearer over time we have been looking for particular culprits to blame: corporations, governments, or simply individuals with our flawed human nature expressed

through our greed or search for comfort and pleasure or simple ignorance.

We know that modern industrial nations and their corporations have driven our societies to expand and grow materially, and that a handful of those corporations, mainly fossil fuel related, are responsible for most of the extra CO₂ in our



Photo by Matt Palmer on Unsplash

atmosphere. However, this simple reduction to “fossil fuel corporations are evil and responsible for all our woes” would obscure what the fossil fuel energies were able to accomplish for human societies in terms of scientific and social development. Until the late 1960s there was little worry about the consequences of fossil fuels. From a handful of scientists to the great majority today, we have learned to measure our impact on the world on a scale never imagined before.

But it is not all doom and gloom, as the late Professor Hans Rosling demonstrated in his book “Factfulness” and more recently Dr Hannah Ritchie with her latest book “Not the End of the World”. Humanity has been able to undo some of the wrongs and change some of its ways in order to avoid certain precipices and ecological catastrophes: for example, the reduction of the hole in the ozone layer, the removal of lead in petrol or the creation of protected nature reserves worldwide. There are many positive examples out there that show good will and that it is possible to organize and bring positive change.

As philosophers we practise holding several ideas at the same time, some of them opposites. In our studies of the timeless traditions of philosophy, we learn that the union of opposites is a path to

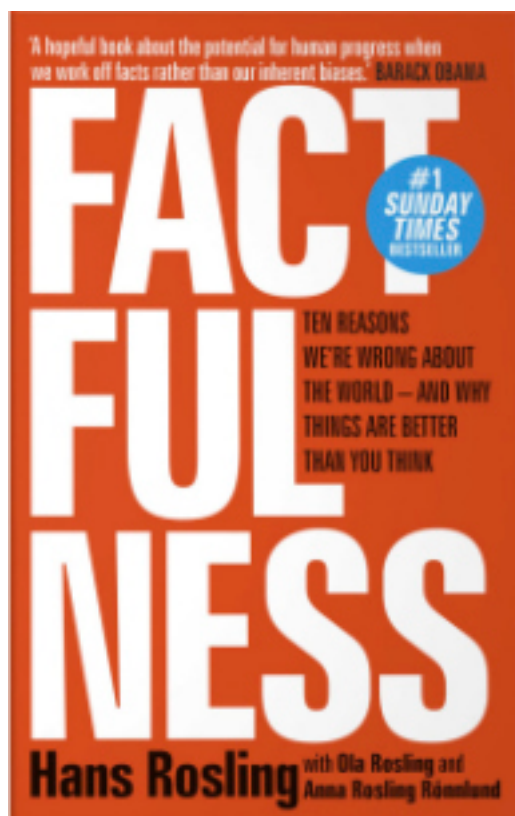


wisdom. The idea that things are looking bad for the world and yet at the same time they are getting better, and that we can still do much better are not contradictory. As the title of this article suggests, this is not corporations versus the people, or the government versus the individual, it is about the realization of one’s place in the world and what can one do to make a difference, however “small” it might be.

One of the best investments one can make is in the inner development of the human being. In New Acropolis we promote the practice of philosophy through action and volunteering. Putting into practice the virtues and good intentions is part of the journey to becoming whole, one with Nature, others and oneself.

There are ways to find out which actions would have the most positive impact, and this is what Dr Hannah Ritchie shows brilliantly in her book, which could be the subject of another article. Ultimately, however, it is about finding a cause to fight for, whatever that may be, and giving it our best, putting our whole heart into it.

Florimond Krins



The *Mundus Imaginalis* in the practice of active imagination and visualization¹

Some time ago, I was struck by a sentence that I read in a book:

“Close your eyes, create an image and behold it!... In the darkness of your induced blindness, you will see with a sight which, though common to all men, is not the product of ordinary ‘seeing’. In this way, this very simple operation will bring you the awareness of an *ethereal light*, differing greatly from the light of physical sight...”²

What the author implied in these few words raised in me many questions: what is the power that gives

birth to the thoughts and images in my mind? What is this *light* that illumines the images that populate my dreams? Or the images appearing in my mind when my eyes are closed? Why can I manage only for a few seconds to keep my thoughts focused where I want? Why is it so difficult to keep even the image of a familiar object vivid in my mind? What is visualization and how is it related to imagination? Let’s begin this journey into the mysterious world of *mind* and *imagination*.

The reason why imagination is such a powerful and important concept to understand is because without it human creativity would be dramatically diminished. But this concept is subject to various interpretations (psychological, philosophical, spiritual, etc.) and is therefore very difficult to pin down to a simple definition. For the moment it will suffice to say that imagination is ‘the faculty of the mind to generate images’³. With this definition, I can also bring the focus of our discussion towards another key concept, that of *mind*. This is another concept which is even more difficult to pin down, a great mystery indeed, something which lies at the root of human and cosmic activity. And I am adding here the adjective ‘cosmic’ because all the cosmogonies of antiquity postulated as the first act of creation, an act of ideation. The Demiurge (i.e.



1. This article was inspired by a talk given by Loris Solmi at the Ibis Bookshop in Bologna.

2. Found in Giuliano Kremmerz’s book *Il Mondo Segreto*.

3. In this article, by ‘images’ I always mean internal images, what can be seen with the ‘eyes of the mind’, which also means thoughts or ideas from the Greek *idein* ‘to see’.

the Cosmic Mind) first ‘imagined’ the universe and then brought it into manifestation. Likewise, the myriads of objects that fill (and often clutter!) our lives were first imagined in our minds and then given a physical, tangible form.

Henry Corbin and the *Mundus Imaginalis*

The term *Mundus Imaginalis* was coined by the French Islamic scholar, Henry Corbin. As he himself admitted, he had to resort to this ‘wonderful’ term because otherwise he wouldn’t be able to convey the subtleties hidden behind the doctrines he was studying. As we will see, he didn’t really discover anything new. He just brought to light, through the study of mystical philosophers like Ibn Arabi and Suhawardi, teachings which were at least as old as Plato.

The *Mundus Imaginalis* describes a special kind of world that exists beyond what we can see and touch and what we can only think about. It is not only imaginary or constituted by images that are mere figments of imagination, but is a real place, made of a special kind of substance (i.e. mental substance) and entities (mental entities). It’s the same ‘stuff’ which makes up the world of dreams, but even more the world of symbols (Islamic philosophers called it *alam al-mithal*, ‘world of the image’).

This ‘imaginal world’ serves as mediator between the empirical and the spiritual world. It provides a space where spiritual insights and realities are ‘translated’ into forms (symbols) accessible to the human consciousness. In other words, the human being, through the faculty of imagination (or through the symbolic function if you like) can get in touch with the ‘spiritual’ world⁴. But the key idea to keep in mind is that it is not the passive, mediumistic, day-dreaming form of imagination that is implied in these teachings. That’s more the product of fantasy in which fiction and reality are mixed together. The source of this confusion is precisely what I mentioned earlier, namely that we don’t really understand the nature of *mind*. So let’s try to shed some more light on it.

4. Especially in the Western esoteric tradition by ‘spiritual world’ is often meant the world of the Archetypes or Divine Ideas.

Eliphas Levi and the *Astral Light*

Nearly a century before Corbin, another French figure, Eliphas Levi (called the father of contemporary ‘occultism’), in his esoteric works also emphasised the importance of imagination. His approach is different to Corbin’s because instead of philosophy and mysticism he discusses hermeticism and magic, but the conclusions implied in his works are very similar. For Levi, the ability to use the faculty of imagination correctly allows one to make contact, begin to perceive and manipulate the fundamental substance (the same mental ‘stuff’ encountered earlier) from which the world is made.



According to many philosophies, that substance is considered a kind of *prima materia* or *energetic matrix* which Paracelsus called *astral light*⁵.

Obviously this term should not be understood literally. By *astral light* Paracelsus did not mean the light which comes from the stars, because at this point the light of the sun or even the moon is also *astral light*! In this context, "Astral" refers to the Greek *A-stereon*, where the *A* is the privative alpha and *stereon* means solidity, fixity (also what is tangible, has form and is therefore visible). So,

5. Levi in his works speaks of the *Astral Light* in many different ways: ‘the true light of the intellect’, ‘the storehouse of all the forms, thoughts, and images’, ‘the mirror of the imagination and the vehicle of dreams’, etc.

astral light is the light that cannot be seen through physical vision because it has no form, it also cannot be fixed as it is evanescent. This is the *occult* or *dark light* found in Hermetic texts or implied in the term *Ohr* as found in the Kabbalah (or even in Genesis I.3. *Yehi ôhr*, 'let there be light'). So it is referring to a *primordial light*, created by the Demiurge of the ancient cosmogonies that became the substance by which, through *coagulation*, the physical world was fashioned and through *sublimation*, the angelic (i.e. spiritual) world was also created.



As we can see, there are interesting parallels between Corbin's *Mundus Imaginalis* and the concept of *astral light* presented by Eliphas Levi. In reality, we could go even further back in time, to delve into Renaissance magic and discover that in the works of thinkers like Giordano Bruno, Tommaso Campanella or Francesco Patrizi the underlying theme is precisely the one I am discussing. The so called 'art of memory' of Giordano Bruno, for instance, is nothing but the practice of visualization needed in order to develop the right kind of imagination and to learn to manipulate the mind 'stuff' from which the world is made. In any case, we shouldn't be surprised by the fact that we find this practice in a 'magical' context

because the words *imagination*, *image* and *magic* are all etymologically connected.

Eventually, Levi's works became an important part of the study-material that gave rise to the Anglo-Saxon school of occultism known as the Golden Dawn. But at this point some 'misunderstandings' seem to have arisen. In reality the practices (see the *flying rolls* papers) that came out of these misunderstandings clearly show the dangers incurred by those who fall prey to fantasy and an uncontrolled imagination. I am referring here mainly to the New Age practices known as 'channelling' and even 'astral projection' which can be traced back to the Golden Dawn's teachings.

C.G. Jung and 'active imagination'

Many years after Levi's death, the importance of the imaginative practice was relaunched by the great Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst C.G. Jung. Within the analytical settings and at the centre of his therapeutic work Jung emphasized the importance of *active imagination*. Jung believed that the unconscious mind contains valuable insights and symbols that can help individuals to understand themselves better. Especially within the practice of dream analysis, individuals can consciously engage in a dialogue with different aspects of their psyche and by working through unconscious material (i.e. symbolic images) can reconcile inner conflicts and heal emotional wounds.

What did he do in his practice? He took a significant image, preferably one that appeared in a patient's dream and asked them to fix it with the 'eyes' of their mind, in order to recreate it. Then through the instructions given by the analyst the patient would make the image become, as it were, alive and engaging. It is important to emphasize that, if something happened that was 'off the mark', where it was evident that the patient had fallen prey to fantasy, the analyst would be ready to intervene. Clearly Jung was aware of the dangers of an imagination which is left to run wild. In the practice of active imagination, the adjective 'active' highlights the fact that in order to achieve the 'best' results, this faculty of the mind must be directed and guided along specific lines. In summary, even though Jung's approach remained within the

scientific domain, it is clear that, like Corbin, he was also aware of the existence of a symbolic reality and the importance of accessing this *Mundus Imaginalis* through the use of an *active imagination*.

Mind and the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism

In the 20th century, the clarifications supplied by people like Corbin, Jung and even Mircea Eliade⁶, helped to decipher the Buddhist teachings that in the 1960s came to the West from Tibet. It is surprising to find that the message brought by Tibetan lamas in relation to our topic mirrors the ideas expressed by all these earlier thinkers (Renaissance thinkers and Sufi mystics included).

It is widely recognized that the mind holds significant importance in both the teachings of yoga⁷ and Buddhism. However, not many people are aware of what lies at the basis of Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual teachings, namely *meditation* or rather *visualization*. Only through visualization and the control of one's imaginative power, can stability in meditation be achieved. I am referring here specifically to the advanced meditative practices known as Deity Yoga⁸.

The first stage of this practice involves mentally picturing the chosen deity in vivid detail. The image must appear as if I were looking at a photograph, down to the smallest details. I do not visualize or imagine whatever I like but a very precise image, which originally manifested in the mind of an accomplished teacher and can therefore be considered authentic. In the following stage (called 'completion stage'), thanks to the use of mantras, mudras and other techniques, this image has to become 'alive', so that it can have an effect on the practitioner's psyche (his soul).

It is clear that all this 'work' can no longer be done with normal psychological techniques. Only those individuals who have excelled in the practice and have received from their teachers the corresponding initiations, would be able to reap the gifts of their imaginative practice. In synthesis, the goal of the practice lies in the ability to create an imaginative support for a real entity to manifest. An entity that originally dwells on a higher and more spiritual plane. These teachings therefore transcend into a metaphysical doctrine of a spiritual nature, which goes beyond all the possibilities found in ordinary books that talk about imaginative techniques, or any of the DIY occult practices found online!

In conclusion

I want to end this article in the same way I started, by posing another question: will we continue to be passive observers of our thinking process, or can we change this inner stance and learn to actively guide our own thoughts? The mind is indeed a very powerful tool. Its power lies in the ability to connect the world of matter with the world of spirit, and an important aspect of our mind is precisely the 'imagination' I have been talking about. But in order to use the imaginative function effectively we have to learn to control our mind. Through a constant practice of right attention, concentration and visualization, we can learn to generate in our mind stable image-ideas. This will also develop in us the ability to bring ideas down into manifestation, thus bridging the gap between *mind* and *matter*, and this is real magic⁹. But active imagination and the creative will must draw their energy from the impersonal dimension of the archetypes. And this takes us back to the fact that I cannot visualize or imagine just anything I want. Every mental image is a thought (an idea) and each thought refers to a particular *being*. It can refer to a *being* of light or darkness. What *being* (or thought) do we want to attract and manifest?

Agostino Dominici

6. Regarding our present topic, the historian of religions M. Eliade researched imaginative practices especially in the context of Shamanism and its techniques of ecstasy.

7. Patanjali opens his Yoga Sutras with the sentence: *Yoga citta-vṛtti nirodhaḥ* (i.e. yoga is the ability to control the fluctuations of the mind).

8. Most of these advanced meditation practices involve the use of the well known but very little understood mandalas, which can only serve as theurgical 'tools' after decades of hard practice.

9. "Magic is the concrete manifestation of an image-idea (which is the goal) combined by a sacralised and ritualised intent and action". Quoted in Giorgio Sangiorgio's *Manuale di Alchimia Interiore*.

Honour... What can it mean for us today?



Photo by Egisto Sami - found in www.flycker.com

Honour...it's almost an obsolete word these days. What does it mean to live an honourable life? Does it mean holding your head above others, having a sense of pride or superiority for your status or achievements, and striving to prove to be better than others? Perhaps this is what we think it is now because of a cultural shift that happened throughout the last century or so, and other shifts before that. We'll explore this from a Western culture perspective, starting with going back nearly two and half thousand years to the time of Socrates.

We know Socrates spent a great deal of time thinking and talking about the right and the good, about justice, and about how to have the best, fullest life possible: a life well-lived, a life worthy of admiration and respect; in other words, an honourable life. For him, this was achieved by fearlessly pursuing and promoting the truth, no matter where it led him. This is an important point: Socrates said you ought to pursue and promote the

truth even when it does not appear to be in your best interest, even when it seemingly gets you into trouble, even when you can get away with lying and cheating, even when no one can see you. He said that, in the end, acting dishonourably in those ways lessens who you are. It harms you, even if you get what you want. Socrates thought that when you lie, cheat, act disrespectfully, unjustly, dishonestly, etc., while of course you harm the other person (or you may think that they haven't yet noticed); more importantly and fundamentally, you harm yourself because you harm your soul. He also said that even worse than doing the wrong, is "getting away with it" and not admitting it – this is basically doing it a second time, harming your soul again and again by not righting the wrong. We can see here that honour is therefore an intrinsic concept – based on inward moral virtues and character traits. We can also see that the reverse side of the coin of the sense of honour, is the sense of shame and even guilt

– not the existential sort, but the sort where we feel ashamed if we do something which is not aligned with our morals.

Beyond the Neo-Socratic communities which held on to this profound key to living an honourable life, the Stoic-Christian cultures adopted a view that honour is something that is recognized and bestowed by the community – based on our outward behaviours being judged by community members. We lived in small villages surrounded by family and people who knew us well, and they could keep a track of our and neighbours' doing and judge them according to shared beliefs and the laws and morals of the time. Note here then, that the other side of the coin – the shame and guilt – has become dependent on the beliefs, attitudes and feedback from our social environments rather than our inner compass.

This shift continued during the Middle Ages when the concept of chivalry was added as a code of honour that emphasised bravery, loyalty, hospitality and generosity amongst the knights, which then spread to the nobles, upper class and beyond in quite a few cultures – of course not all cultures. These were closely bound up, however, with fame and glory, and thus the purity of the “honourable life” idea was further tainted by shadows.

In more recent centuries, our communities transitioned from living in villages and rural communities to living in urban areas where relationships are more

impersonal and anonymous – most city dwellers could agree to experiencing a sense of being in large groups, yet feeling alone. In large cities we can live our whole lives without close ties evaluating our claims to honour, judging our reputation or checking what we're doing, and thus the possibility of honour diminishes.

Lastly, the psychology movement of the 20th century raised our awareness of the shadow side of

shoulders and say “it's none of my business, who am I to judge?”. We have lost the sense of an immediate connection between an individual's behaviour and its effect on society as a whole. A prevailing modern view is that one person's lifestyle choices will have absolutely no effect on the lifestyle choices of another, or on society as a whole.

We know however, that our interconnectedness is deeper than it appears on the surface; so we need



shame and guilt and how it was misused for centuries throughout many cultures. By shutting out these emotions as much as possible, however, we may have bounced too far to the other end and become desensitized to the circumstantial shame and guilt which makes us recognize we've done something dishonourable. Yes, we've become a society of tolerance, acceptance, openness and other good things... but we're also cultivating an attitude of “anything goes”, where if someone does something dishonourable, we shrug our

to raise our consciousness of our impact on others and our world. Very importantly, and recalling the Socratic ideas mentioned earlier, as we're aspiring to be good people and on a path of self-development, we should live a life pursuing that intrinsic honour with vigour, getting to know ourselves and our inner compass, admitting when we fall short, and making amends to those we harm, even if we could have got away with acting dishonourably.

Sofia Venuti

Gaia – Living Together with Mother Earth (Part 2)

Following in the footsteps of Arne Næss, the founder of 'Deep Ecology', Andreas Weber¹ and David Abram² are calling for an 'erotic' ecology. How can we allow ourselves to be touched by nature again and learn to touch it lovingly? The mechanistic view of the world and the one-sided emphasis on rationality and logic since the Enlightenment have stunted our sensory

perceptions, the awareness of our feelings and our empathy. One-sided science has taught us to view everything rationally and objectively: sensations, feelings and subjective or even subtle perceptions or intuitions interfere with this. Nature is mainly studied in laboratories and with quantitative methods and taught to children in classrooms with sterile textbooks or films.

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

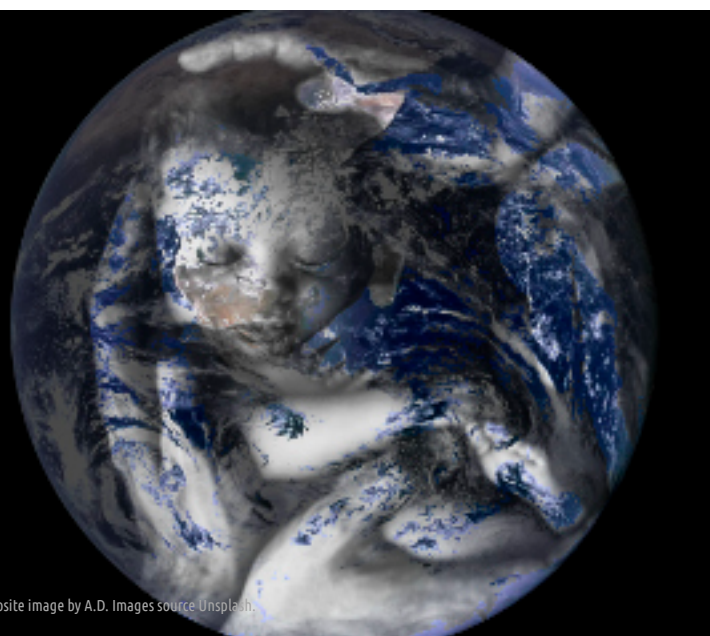
2. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage Books, New York 1996.



What other sensory experiences and feelings do we get from a walk in the woods, the attentive contemplation of a flower meadow or a single flower, listening to the concert of birds before sunrise, or sinking into the starry sky at night? What other experiences are made possible by working physically together with other people in a permaculture garden?

A philosophical turn towards animism

It is precisely this approach that we find in ancient and indigenous cultures of all times. Mechanistic science pejoratively labelled this as animism and explained seemingly objectively and rationally that these "primitive" people were afraid of nature and therefore convinced themselves that it was



Composite image by A.D. Images source Unsplash.

animated. But rational philosophers such as Plato also spoke of the *Anima Mundi*, the world soul. Since the middle of the 20th century, it has also been accepted in anthropology that the mythical-animistic world view is by no means primitive, but complex, just as rational and therefore an equally valid system for explaining the world³. The Andean cultures of South America worshipped and still worship the soul of the Earth as Pachamama and succeeded in having the International Earth Day, which was proclaimed by the UN around 50 years

ago, renamed "International Mother Earth Day" in 2009. Doesn't it make a big difference to our feelings, our soul, whether we regard the Earth as a storehouse of raw materials or as our mother?

Learning to feel part of Mother Earth

Stephan Harding also suggests concrete⁴ methods for how we can reconnect more with Mother Earth. For example, everyone can look for a Gaia place in the wildest nature possible, which they visit regularly to connect with the soul of that place, the plants, animals and stones there and with the soul of the Earth. Or you can imagine that we do not walk "on" the Earth, but "in" the Earth. Because the atmosphere is part of the Earth as a living being. We are not a subject that stands at a distance from nature, but we ourselves are a part of this nature. From the point of view of the Gaia theory, we are something like body cells in the living being Earth: we have a certain degree of autonomy, but we are also subject to certain limitations, natural laws, into which we should and must fit harmoniously. The Earth as a whole embraces us like a mother, providing us with its nourishing substance for our bodies, surrounding us with billions of animals, plants and micro-organisms that live outside and partly inside us and with us.

Develop inner and outer nature holistically in harmony

Plato and many other philosophers agree with him that our psyche is also part of the psyche of the world (*psyché tou kósmou* or *anima mundi*)⁵, while our spirit is part of the cosmic spirit. Goethe, Schiller and the Romantics spoke of world soul and world spirit in this context. Even though German Idealism and Romanticism were a strong counter-movement to the one-sided rationalism of the Enlightenment, we Westerners, following Descartes, ultimately reduced the spirit to the mind and cut it off from intuition. We have almost completely split off our soul and our sensitivity to life. Is it possible that our inner nature is in a

3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press 1966.

4. Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth*, various exercises throughout the book.

5. Plato, *Timaeus* 30b



similarly deplorable state today as the outer world, with its devastating exploitation and countless wars? If we want to help nature, we should therefore endeavour to the same extent to develop our inner nature with spirit, soul and body holistically again.

What story defines your life?

According to Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone⁶, today there are three narratives or stories⁷ of how we can interpret the world and assign meaning to events. And it is our free choice which story we choose. They call the first story "Business as Usual". It focuses on the economic and technological developments that make our lives easier and is the "success story" of modernity. In this approach to life, the problems of the world are either categorised as distant or completely irrelevant to our personal lives. The second story we can choose is "The Great Unraveling". Proponents of this story see and accept economic decline, resource depletion, climate change, mass extinction of species, social division

and war. And they resignedly assume that the process is already so far advanced that the point of reversal is impossible. Both stories lead to no change in their outcome, because while in Business as Usual the problems are secondary and it is assumed that we will soon get them under control through even better technology, in the second story there is no point in changing.

The third story is "The Great Turning". It refers to the transition from the doomed economy of the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society in which we support the self-healing powers of the Earth. This "ecological revolution" is the essential adventure of our time – and this transition is already well under way.

Change is happening right now

Today, we see many people and movements striving for sustainable and life-sustaining ways of living and doing business, as well as for connectedness. In his book *Blessed Unrest*⁸, ecologist Paul Hawken writes, "I soon realized that my initial estimate of 100,000 organizations was off by at least a factor of ten, and I now believe there are over one – and

6. Joanna Macy, Chris Johnstone, *Hoffnung durch Handeln*, Junfermann Verlag 2014, p. 25 - 42; original edition: *Active Hope. How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*, New World Library 2012..

7. You can find the 3 stories here: http://www.mercymidatlantic.org/PDF/Active_Hope_Chapter_One_12032015.pdf, accessed 30.12.2023

8. Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and No One Saw It Coming*, New York: Penguin, 2008, p. 2

maybe even two – million organizations working towards ecological sustainability and social justice.” Film documentaries such as "Tomorrow", "En quête de sens – A Quest for Meaning" and "Code of Survival" tell the stories of people who are in the process of developing and living this new philosophy. You can also find countless films on YouTube by people who are transforming degraded gardens and fields into fertile natural oases that produce food almost in abundance in harmony with nature.

Three ways to shape change

According to Macy and Johnstone, there are three dimensions of the *Great Turning*⁹, which simultaneously represent three possibilities for engagement. On the one hand, these are "Holding Actions" that attempt to save lives, species or ecosystems. Campaigns, petitions, boycotts, rallies and direct actions have already led to many important victories in this area. However, as it is not enough to put a stop to destruction, another dimension is needed: "Life-Sustaining Systems and Practices". This involves Sustainable Agriculture, Permaculture, Fair Trade Initiatives, the Economy for the Common Good and Green Building: these and many other measures contribute to the patchwork of a life-supporting society. Through our decisions on where and what we buy, how we work and live, we can promote the development of sustainable lifestyles.

But all this will not be enough in itself: these new structures won't take root and survive without deeply ingrained values to sustain them.

This requires the third dimension: "Shift in Consciousness". It arises from shifts taking place in our hearts, our minds and our views of reality. This includes wisdom and practices from venerable spiritual traditions, many of which are in line with revolutionary new scientific findings such as those of Gaia theory. Quantum physics and systems theory have given rise to a holistic scientific paradigm that offers a new view of life and

evolution, underpinned by an understanding of networkedness and interconnectedness.

At the same time, we are witnessing the birth of a new practical and spiritual philosophy in many areas that helps people to develop holistically. The philosopher Jorge Angel Livraga¹⁰ describes people themselves as the key to a sustainable and nature-loving society¹¹. Contact with the wisdom teachings of all cultures allows them to get in touch with their inner wisdom and then transform themselves into wiser and better individuals. Based on their own transformation, they can help to create a more harmonious coexistence with other people and with nature.

The scale of the change taking place today goes unnoticed by many, as the millions of people and movements mentioned by Paul Hawken are not the focus of media coverage. But even if little is heard of them, it is my personal view that the future belongs to them. According to the Tibetan wisdom saying: *A falling tree makes more noise than a growing forest.*

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

10. Founder of the non-profit organization New Acropolis, which today trains people in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering in around 50 countries worldwide.

11. Jorge Angel Livraga, *The Crisis of the West and the Coming of the New Times*, <https://library.acropolis.org/the-crisis-of-the-west-and-the-coming-of-the-new-times/>, accessed 30 December 2023.

10. http://www.mercymidatlantic.org/PDF/Active_Hope_Chapter_One_12032015.pdf, accessed 30.12.2023

The Creation Myth from the *Kalevala*

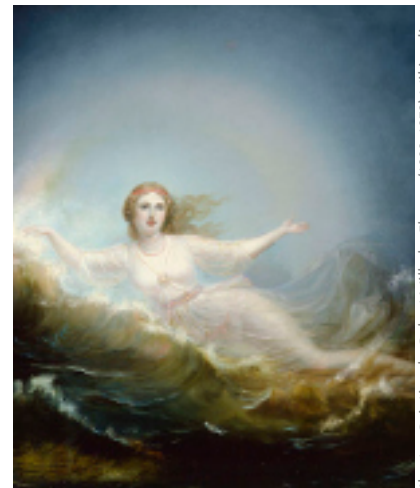
Myths are not just stories the ancients used to explain things; they play a significant role in shaping cultures, transmitting timeless ideas and values, and providing elements for us to understand the world and our place within it. Our lack of knowledge makes it harder to grasp the depth they contain.

It was in the 19th century when Elias Lönnrot - a Finnish folklorist and philologist amongst other professions - realized how traditions were getting lost, and he embarked on a mission to rescue them by travelling, compiling songs and poems, and putting them together into a coherent narrative that seems to go back 3,000 years. This epic poem is called the *Kalevala*. Although it has been exposed to criticism by scholars who questioned the authenticity of this work, it definitely contributed to Finnish literature and culture; bringing a sense of belonging and identity to its people. Not many people are familiar with this myth, despite the fact that it has been

translated into more than 50 languages, but J.R.R. Tolkien made reference to it, and it is believed that he was greatly influenced and fascinated by the *Kalevala*.

There is an earlier edition published in 1835 (The Old *Kalevala*) but the edition that is widely recognised of the *Kalevala* was published in 1849 (The New *Kalevala*). It contains 22,795 verses, organised into 50 folk tales, which are also referred to as songs, poems, or runes. There are multiple themes and messages within the *Kalevala*; this name, meaning 'land of heroes', symbolically represents Finland.

The *Kalevala* begins with a creation myth. The actions of Ilmatar - goddess of the air - lead to the creation of the Sun and Moon and the Earth. Interestingly, there are always similarities with other creation myths. In many traditions the creation of the world relates to water. The Incas in South America for example, had Viracocha as their Creator God. According to legend, Viracocha



Ilmatar. Painting by Robert Wilhelm Ekman (1808–1873) Wikimedia.

emerged from Lake Titicaca and created all the things in the world, including man.

This passage in the *Kalevala* describes how the air goddess Ilmatar comes down to primal waters, becomes Water-Mother and gives birth to things. She was initially the Maiden of the Air, a fairy who lived in the vast emptiness of the sky. However, she descended to the sea and became pregnant with the wind and water, transforming into Water-Mother. For some reason she regretted her decision to leave the sky, feeling cold and uncomfortable in the water. She asked the god of sky and thunder

Ukko to help her and end her suffering. After this request, a female duck then approaches Water-Mother, seeking for a place to nest and chooses her knee for laying the eggs. After sitting on them for a few days, Water-Mother feels a burning sensation, causing her knee to shiver and the eggs to fall and break. Land was formed from the lower part of one of the eggshells, while sky formed from the top. The egg whites turned into the moon and stars, and the yolk became the sun. During the birth, Water-Mother's actions shaped the landscape of the Earth, creating bays, shores, depths of the sea, islands, and reefs.

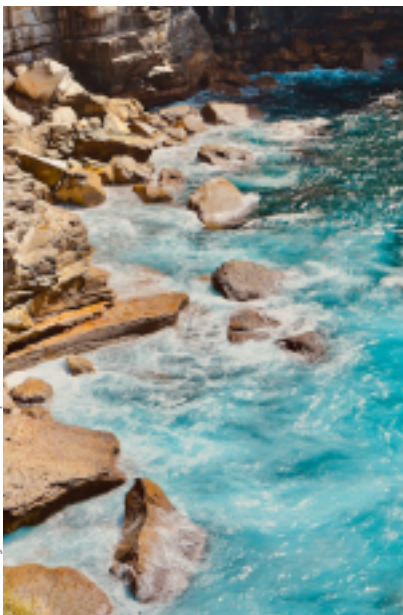


Photo by Jack Bass on Unsplash

There are a few symbolic elements here to explore.

Firstly, water is often seen as a symbol of life and purification. It helps to cleanse, to heal and to nurture life. Even in the Bible, Genesis 1:9 says “*Let the water*

under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.”

If we think deeply about it, we can observe how water supports all life and how much we as humans depend on it even for survival. As mentioned above, it is that descent from sky to water that generates the creation; a force from above is brought to a lower level of manifestation.

Secondly, we have the duck. Ducks do appear in various cultures as a symbol that is linked to fertility and prosperity, signifying abundance, and blessings. Ducks are known for their ability to adapt, being able to move on land and in water. Sometimes they are perceived as symbolizing the capacity to navigate through life's challenges with ease. But more aligned to the myth, they are also a representation of new beginnings.

Thirdly, the eggs that are laid by the duck reinforce the meaning of new life because eggs contain all the potential life force within them. You might recall how the myth mentions how each part of the egg contributed to the creation of different aspects. Eggs are often associated with fertility and the potential for life. In many cultures, eggs are symbols of birth, renewal, and the beginning of new cycles. For Christians for example, during the celebration of Easter, the eggs are symbols of resurrection and spiritual rebirth.

Overall, the first canto serves as an introduction to the mythological world of the *Kalevala*, laying the



Mistress of the North, Louhi attacking Väinämöinen in the form of a giant eagle. Source image Wikimedia

foundation for the epic journey that unfolds throughout the subsequent cantos. Soon after the creation, Ilmatar gives birth to the first man on earth, Väinämöinen. He is born as a grown and wise man. And not only that, but also a powerful hero, wizard and master musician. Väinämöinen is considered one of the most important heroes in Finnish mythology, embodying the cultural ideals of wisdom, strength, and perseverance. The *Kalevala* includes Väinämöinen's adventures, struggles and victories. The main theme is undertaking quests and finding ways to navigate the challenges of life. And this sounds exactly like what we are trying to pursue: walking a journey that has meaning but nevertheless contains trials to be overcome and new horizons to be conquered.

Natalia Lema

