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Philosophy and Education for the Future

PROMETHEUS

'Spinoza: Blessings for the 21st Century

The Importance of Mental Well-being

Traditions Around the Summer Solstice

PHILOSOPHY

CULTURE

SOCIETY

ESOTERICA

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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What's Inside

EDITORIAL | 04



PHILOSOPHY

Spinoza: Blessings for the 21st Century

05



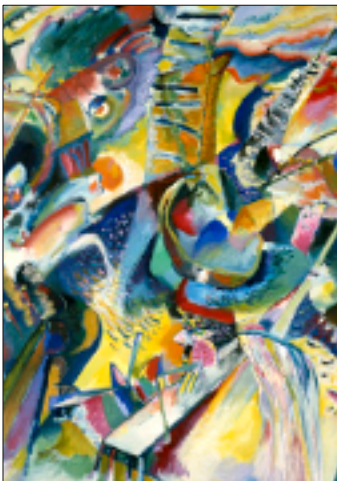
SOCIETY

The Importance of Mental Well-being

08

ESOTERICA
Some Insights into the Four Elements

10

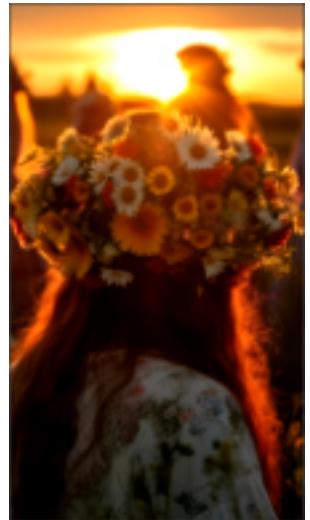


ART
'Inner Necessity' in Expressionist Art

13

CULTURE
Traditions Around the Summer Solstice

15



SCIENCE & NATURE
The James Webb Space Telescope

17



MYTHS OF THE WORLD
Prometheus

19



Editorial

Do We Need New Systems or New People?

Recently I have been inspired to look more deeply into the debate about whether systems or individuals are more important. On one side of the debate is the view that "What we need is not new systems, but new and better people." On the other side we find statements like: "Systems are more important than individuals." Other variants are: "People cannot overcome a 'bad' system." Or: "A bad system will beat a good person every time."

The last two statements seem to have many examples going for them. Think of a very good, decent person going into politics because they want to make a difference. It is easy to imagine that the current political system would either prevent them from getting anywhere or would corrupt them. Think also of how many teachers or nurses and doctors are leaving the profession because of 'the system'. They tried their best to make things work and to bring about positive change, but after some time they felt they had to resign and give up.

It is also valid to say that systems are very important. Philosophically speaking, everything in life is part of a system, whether we are aware of it or not. Life is based on universal laws, nature designs structures and patterns, everything is interconnected and interdependent, the parts can only really be explained by reference to the whole. The current emphasis in academia, management and science on 'systemic thinking' has led to many useful insights and enriched our understanding about organizational processes. We have learnt about 'systemic failures' and how difficult it is to bring about systemic change. And it is certainly true that without a system, we cannot join our efforts and work together towards a shared goal. In other words: we certainly need systems.

However, it is also true that individuals can change and have changed systems. Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, are just the first few who spring to mind. There are countless others throughout history, working in the fields of science, art, politics and religion (Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, Zarathustra, etc.). And, apart from nature or life, who creates systems? Individuals. Of course, it is often a collaborative effort, especially when systems develop over centuries (think of courts and judicial bodies, institutional, political or educational systems). However, even then systems are usually developed by individuals who are visionary leaders.

As always, we can see that it is not 'either/or' but 'both/and'. Systems AND individuals are very important. And it is systems AND people that can be at fault. But what is sometimes overlooked is the link between individuals and systems. Systems are an expression of the way we human beings think, feel and see the world. They reflect our values and our 'philosophy'. Every system is designed to achieve a certain goal or to get a certain result. If we believe that money and the economy are the most important things in our world to produce and guarantee happiness, equality, freedom and justice, then the majority of our systems will be designed with an economic focus.

We have never created more money in history than today. But are we happier? And was the environmental destruction a good 'price' to pay for the happiness we did achieve? Discuss...

In this sense, we get the systems we deserve. Plato already pointed out that when human beings change, the political systems change. He showed that even if a true 'aristocracy' (from the Greek *Aristos* = 'best') existed where 'the best' governed, the moment these 'men of gold' became a little corrupted and gave more importance to honour than to wisdom, the system would turn into a 'timocracy', as he called it. The moment wealth became more important than honour, the system would descend into an oligarchy or plutocracy... and so on.

If it is the quality of human beings that create and can change systems, then we do need 'new human beings' because without them we won't have better new systems. Human beings who are less self-interested, less corruptible, more compassionate, more idealistic, who understand that 'man does not live by bread alone', that we need meaning and that we need to develop our ability to love, forgive, understand... Only a 'new' type of human being will actually be able to design systems that develop the higher potential of the human being. Systems by themselves won't bring ethical and moral considerations into decision-making. Human beings will.

Sabine Leitner

Spinoza

Blessings for the 21st Century

“Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but is virtue itself; and we do not delight in it because we conquer our passions, but because we delight in it, we are able to conquer our passions” (Proposition XLII, Book V of Ethics).

The presence and philosophy of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677, Baruch until 1656, Benedict thereafter, both meaning ‘Blessed’) has deep resonance in the 21st century. Biographies and commentaries appear regularly. Several Spinozas sit in contemporary consciousness – critic of superstitious religion; herald of the radical enlightenment; anti-theological thinker of ‘pure immanence’; pantheist; early champion of equality, individual freedom and democracy. Introducing myself to his life and philosophy, six themes – ‘Blessings’ if you like – stand out for me in my quest to live as good a life as possible in the 21st century.

For Spinoza, God is not a thinking or creative being but nature itself. God alone qualifies as substance. Human beings, like everything else, are modes of that substance. Regardless of cultural or religious background, all of us are imbued with the capacity to reason; we can actively seek the truth about ourselves and the world, unfettered by the dogma of religious or political institutions; our rational faculties provide us with a path towards a happier life and a better politics. “Each finite human consciousness is part of God’s infinite consciousness, and each finite human body is part of the physical universe, interconnected with countless other beings” (Clare Carlisle, editor of George Eliot’s translation of Spinoza’s Ethics). Spinoza stood against the dualism of Descartes, the separation of mind and body, arguing that they were deeply connected in God’s substance, in nature. And

he advocated a free republic, under the governance of reasonable people able to cope rationally with conflicting demands.

Spinoza’s extraordinarily radical philosophy – contained in his major works: *Ethics*, *Theological-Political Treatise* (“a book forged in hell by the devil himself”, according to one scandalized critic), and a critical exposition of Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy*; together with an extensive philosophical correspondence – appeared in the latter part of a blazing 17th century in Europe. There was almost constant warfare, some 8 million dying in the religion-fuelled Thirty Years War (1618-1648); humanism was gathering strength in literature, art and science, ushering in the Enlightenment; global trade was on the rise. Spinoza lived and worked in the relatively tolerant Republic of the United Netherlands, in Amsterdam, the Hague and Leiden. He was brought up and deeply educated in the large Jewish community that had fled the horrors of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. Amsterdam was known by that community as ‘Hokum’, meaning ‘Safe haven’.

Six ‘Blessings’ stand out for me from Spinoza’s life and work for us in the 21st century:

Tribeless

In 1656 at the age of 24, Spinoza was permanently banished from the Jewish community, never to return, for his insistence on thinking freely for himself and for his idea of God as the infinite substance of nature and not the all-powerful Divine Creator. (His ‘Herem’ – excommunication – contained the chilling words: “Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up.

Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not forgive him.”). He subsequently joined neither church, nor organization, nor fraternity. He engaged energetically in dialogue and correspondence with friends and peers and loved theatre and music. But he stood to the side, directing his attention towards the universe, nature and the whole of humanity. If alive today, he would surely have trained his sometimes polemical style on contemporary preoccupation with defining identity in divisive contrast with others, building our walled defences in our different tribes.

“Living now as we do in a time of book banning, intellectual intolerance, religious bigotry and populist demagoguery, his radical advocacy of freedom still seems fresh and urgent” (Ian Buruma, author of *Spinoza: Freedom’s Messiah*).

Unfettered, autonomous, accessible thinking

“True philosophy is the discovery of ‘true good’ and without knowledge of true good human happiness is impossible”. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza moves rationally and relentlessly through a profound conversation with himself and his readers, stepping from short proposition to short proposition (there are 258 in total), each with supporting commentary and assumptions. Tightly argued, we are in the presence of full mind. Rational of course. But he rates intuitive understanding of nature more highly than rationalist, scientific thought. And his conversational humour appears from time to time in phrases like “But enough of this” and “But more of this by and by”. His writing stands in stark contrast to contemporary polarization, our trading of opinionated conclusions untethered to supporting data and underlying assumptions.

Frugal stance

Spinoza’s prized possession was his parents’ large bed. There was not much else. He earned a modest living by grinding lenses for microscopes and telescopes (a medium for his study of nature, perhaps, but also, in the dust created, probably one reason for his early death aged 44). He lived and worked in humble surroundings, reminiscent of William Blake’s accommodation in 19th century London, one room for his engraving and art, one

room for living. Spinoza declined several offers of tenure in his lifetime. Riled by a sense of injustice, he won an inheritance court case against his siblings, and then promptly returned the disputed funds. He was celibate. Apart from his writings and philosophy, he left little other imprint in the sand.

Circumspect courage

Spinoza’s paradigm-shifting philosophy took immense courage. Even in the relatively tolerant Republic of United Netherlands, political and religious conflict brought torture, violence and death. In 1672, a short walk from where Spinoza was then living in the Hague, the Grand Pensionary (Political Leader of the Dutch Republic) Johan de



Witt and his brother Cornelius were brutally lynched by a mob (Spinoza’s landlord only just restrained him from rushing to the scene with a sign reading ‘The Lowest of Barbarians’, in Latin of course). Spinoza’s Latin teacher, Franciscus van den Enden, was hung in front of the Bastille in Paris for sedition against Louis XIV. Spinoza’s courage was sensibly leavened by circumspection. His signet ring bore the Latin word *Caute*, ‘Caution’. He kept his counsel in the public realm; he wrote only in Latin; he insisted on most of his work being published

after his death. Spinoza's circumspection allowed his courageous voice to reach us.

Interdependence of all things

We also owe a debt of gratitude to the circumspect courage of George Eliot, one of the greatest novelists in the English language. On the eve of her stellar writing career (*Middlemarch*, *Mill on The Floss*, *Silas Marner*, etc.), she dedicated long hours to the first ever translation of *Ethics* from Latin to English in the 1850s, while writing for, and informally editing, the *Westminster Review* as Marian Evans (her real name). Such was the continuing radicalism of Spinoza's thinking even 200 years later, that Eliot in her own circumspection asked for the translation not to be published in her name and it did not finally appear until the 1980s. In musing on the impact of



Portrait of George Eliot. Source Wikimedia

Spinoza on Eliot's novels, Clare Carlisle points to a contribution to her emotional insight and depth (Book IV of the *Ethics* is a scintillating study of emotion). She also alludes to a spiritual kinship between Eliot and Spinoza of the kind that is explored in many sympathetic relationships in Eliot's novels. And Carlisle posits that Spinoza's emphasis on the interconnectedness of finite things helped Eliot frame her own philosophy of character

formation. Just as Spinoza believed that individuals could develop through a process of encounter and transformation, so Eliot came to depict character formation through the quality of interaction with others and with nature. As the clergyman Farebrother in *Middlemarch* puts it, "Character is not cut in marble – it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing and may become diseased as our bodies do". Reading Spinoza and Eliot, we are invited to attend to the quality of community relations and exchange that support character development and evolution.

Dishabituation entrepreneur¹

Spinoza's radical, moral voice calls us to our higher selves. Re-imagineer of paradigms of thought, he is a 'dishabituation entrepreneur' par excellence, guiding us to reframe and re-think our habits of thought, being and doing – habits reinforced by our surrounding social and political systems and cultures – habits that can lull us into gliding across the existence of our lives. The challenges and possibilities of our time call us to great feats of re-imagining and re-thinking. We urgently need dishabituation entrepreneurs like Spinoza by our side, encouraging us to be dishabituation entrepreneurs ourselves.

Blessings from Baruch Spinoza for a purposeful stance in the 21st century.

[A postscript as we stand against the rising barbarism of our own age: of the 80,000 Jews who lived in the Hokum, 'Safe haven', of Amsterdam by 1940, only 5,000 survived the Holocaust].

Julian Powe

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1. A 'dishabituation entrepreneur' is a sociological-psychological term referring to people who have not habituated to the evils of their society.

The Importance of Mental Well-being

When someone asks us how we are, do we answer sincerely? Or do we just say, without conviction, that we are okay and everything is fine? There is a sarcastic, grotesque dialogue from a Hungarian writer called István Örkény (1912-1979), who wrote a lot of short literary works that he called "one-minute stories". One of his famous dialogues is about his state of health:

Good morning.

Good morning.

How are you?

Thanks, I am good.

And how is your well-being?

I have no reason to complain.

But why do you pull that rope behind you?

Rope? – I asked looking back. – Ah, those are my guts.

We live in a difficult time when external and internal pressures are constantly challenging our state of mind. We try to resist the stress we have to face and keep the pieces of our lives together, which is not an easy job. It is very important how we feel, not just physically, but psychologically as well.

Mental well-being is not just about mental health or whether we have a mental disorder or not.

Mental well-being, in general, is how we feel in our body and how we function in our family and in our society. Health often has the connotation of



something biological and physical: the condition of our bodies, what we eat, the physical exercise we do. These are important things, but our health not only depends on them. Mental well-being encompasses our inner workings and the way we describe how we are in our lives. It is about how we respond to the ups and downs of our lives. It includes how we think, how we feel and how we act in our everyday life. To be in a state of mental well-being does not mean that we have no problems and our life is always happy. Rather, it is about being balanced in our life and having the ability to make it better and happier by working for it, despite the difficulties.

Our mental health is based on our mental well-being. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of general health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in.

There are many risks that can affect our mental health and well-being. There are individual psychological and biological factors such as emotional skills or genetics that can make people more vulnerable to mental health problems. But there are social, economic, geopolitical and environmental circumstances too, like poverty, violence, inequality and environmental deprivation, which also test our mental health and can reduce our mental well-being. Those who suffered a lot during their childhood or experienced bullying are likely to have mental health problems if they do not get professional help.

How we can improve our mental well-being? There are many ways to make our life better. Here are a few of them.

- **Eat healthier, sleep more and drop the bad habits, like smoking or drinking too much alcohol. Binning the bad habits and replacing them with good ones improves the body and the mind too.**
- **Recognize our way of thinking and change it. There are many thoughts and behavioural patterns that are not helpful but prevent us from moving forward. If we recognize these patterns and dare to**

change them, the resultant different way of thinking will improve our mental well-being.

- **Connect with other people. It might be good to be alone sometimes, but not all the time. Find ways to reach other people, understand them and spend quality time with them. This will stop us feeling lonely and make us happier, especially if we can create something good together with others. If we do not have friends or family members, then we can find people who have similar interests or connect with people in our neighborhood.**

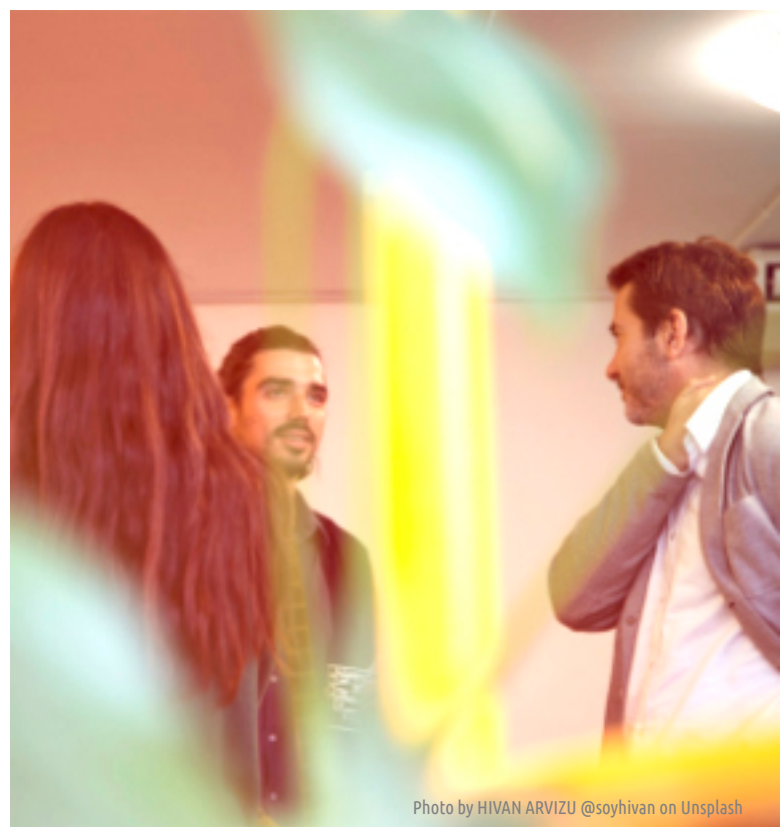


Photo by HIVAN ARVIZU @soyhivan on Unsplash

- **Do something for yourself. It can be a hobby, learning a new skill, or just simply listening to your favourite music, or travel somewhere. Such experiences can give pleasure and boost well-being.**

As a result of our efforts, we can feel better in our body and will have more confidence, joy and stability. Mental well-being is not something we got when we were born, but something we have to build and maintain every day. Just like a bonsai tree.

Istvan Orban

Some Insights into the Four Elements

The study of the Four Elements has always been at the root of Western esotericism, but in order to discover their deeper meaning and practical applications, we have to approach the topic from a truly holistic perspective. For the philosophers and sages of antiquity, both the Cosmos and the Human Being formed part of a 'Great Whole,' made up of physical and metaphysical realities. In order to describe and penetrate into these realities, they used a very effective method of reasoning. A method which is neither deductive or inductive but

analogical. In fact, through analogy and symbolism (a direct expression of this type of reasoning) the ancients created representations of the Cosmos and Man which are still helpful today.

In simple words, we can say that whenever the ancients spoke of the heavens above, they always implied a correspondence with the Earth below. Whenever they spoke of physical phenomena they also implied the presence of metaphysical forces. And whenever they made representations of the surrounding world 'outside', they also meant to teach us something about the world 'within'.

In these teachings, therefore, the Four Elements (Earth, Water, Air and Fire) exist simultaneously as metaphysical essences, as philosophical concepts, as energy states and as tangible physical realities. At the densest level, they are seen as embodying the four basic states of matter: Fire is the igneous and radiant state, Air is the gaseous, Water the liquid and Earth the solid. These states of matter belong to their visible manifestations but they can also be thought in subtler ways. A candle flame is the manifestation of the element Fire but so is an erotic passion, a choleric disposition, a forceful act of will or a spiritual intuition.

By observing the elemental powers present in Nature and around us we can also gain an understanding of the human being, his subtler components and functions. A human being, in fact can be seen as a psycho-physical compound, made up of Earth, Water,



The Four Humours from "Quinta Essentia" by Leonhart Thurneisser

Air and Fire. Earth is the physical body, the instincts, all the automatic behaviours and drives, the metabolism and physical sensations. Water is all that animates (from the Latin *anima*: the life principle) and vitalizes the human being. It is therefore related to one's vitality but also to the spontaneous flow of emotions and feelings. Air is everything that involves the mental functions and therefore relates to thoughts and ideas, but also to the feelings and emotions that are processed or controlled by the intellect. Fire is related, on the one hand, to higher mental faculties (intuition, imagination, memory, etc.) but also to willpower and the ability to focus intentions and desires.

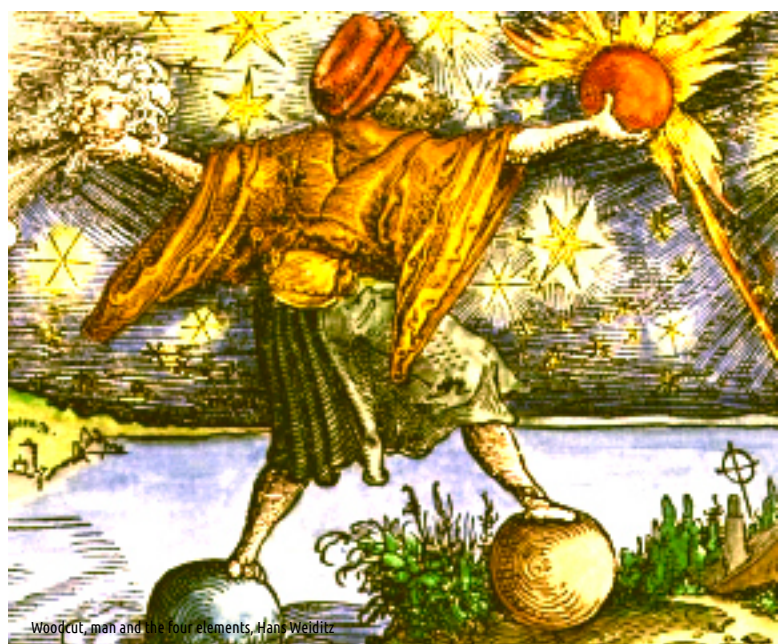
Symbolically speaking, each human 'compound', with its own temperament and psychological make-up (i.e. personality), is subject to the way each of these four elements combine together. Due to the fact that each element has its own peculiar behaviour and quality,¹ each human compound is particularly unstable and chaotic. The faster the compound is dominated by one or two elements at the expense of the others, the quicker a physical or psychological structure is bound to 'deteriorate'. Therefore, the art of balancing the four elements in the human compound plays an important part in man's spiritual journey. As the alchemists would say, 'in the process of inner transmutation, each element has to be refined and sublimated many times, until a quintessence (a fifth element) can be finally realised.'

Let's look a bit more closely at the characteristics of each element within the human compound and discover how can we balance some of their deficiencies or excesses. Keeping in mind that we are always surrounded by elemental powers, by becoming aware of their presence and working with them, we can effect changes to our character and temperament. There is another aspect of these teachings that is worth mentioning. This relates to the so-called *Spirits of Nature* (known also as *Elemental Spirits*), which were traditionally considered to be the inhabitants and rulers of the Four Elements.

1. For instance, water tends to move downward, while air scatters itself everywhere. Water is 'cold' and 'wet' while Fire is 'hot' and 'dry', etc.

Earth

It symbolizes the foundation upon which we build our lives, providing structure and support. The metaphysical quality of Earth lies in its ability to ground and stabilize, offering a sense of security and rootedness. When the element Earth is made permeable and fertile one can gain self-confidence and thoughtfulness, self-control and stability, and achieve tangible results in life. Thanks to it we can connect with the body's deepest memory and our ancestral roots. The Earth which during the process of spiritual transformation has the function of



holding the compound together, brings constancy, humility and patience into the spiritual journey.

An excess of this element in the human compound tends to make it slow and heavy, too much concerned with material possessions and too fond of physical sensations. This element can be stimulated by the colour dark-brown. An excess of it can be balanced through sculpture and its deficiency can be balanced by activities like gardening or working with clay. The elementals of Earth, known as *Gnomes*, often show their presence in old cellars, underground spaces, caves, rocky ravines, and dense forests. *Gnomes* can also be felt in quartz and other hard stones, uneven rocks and in forest products like mushrooms and truffles.

Water

It has been revered in various cultures for its life-giving and purifying properties and that is why it is associated with the ability to cleanse the human compound. The element Water plays a crucial role in dissolving the dense and coarse aspects of our ordinary reality, often bound to our body sensations. By harnessing Water's dissolving power, we learn to transform the rigid components of our being into more fluidic states of consciousness. Water's effect is to enable an increased flow of powerful emotions and



The Four Elements. Image from Wikimedia

sentiments, thus breaking down rigid patterns of rationality, loosening bodily tensions, and unlocking stagnant energies.

An irregular flow of the Water element can produce an oversensitive and changeable character, excessive emotions, jealousy and resentments. Water can be stimulated by the colour turquoise-green, by music and singing. According to the esoteric tradition, the presence of Water elementals, known as *Undines*, can be sensed in the waves, ripples and splashes produced by flowing water.

Air

Thoughts, ideas, and intuitions nourish the mind through Air, carrying around the seeds of life (the

meanings and values that shape human existence). Air expands our mental boundaries, helps us to face life's events with detachment and serenity, and grants us greater freedom of action and judgement. It also helps us to detach ourselves from the mundane and prosaic side of life. This inspired state of mental freedom is especially enhanced in high altitudes.

In places where the Air element is strong, we find the *Spirits of Nature* known as *Sylphs*. Their presence can be sensed in the wind's movement, in clouds drifting across the sky, in the sound of swaying trees or the flower scents carried by the breeze. An excess of Air in the human compound can lead to shallow and evanescent feelings and thoughts, making one prone to psychic disorders. It can also make an individual dominated by his thoughts becoming too detached from reality. The element air can be stimulated by the colour purple-lilac and its deficiency can be balanced by various forms of writing, poetry, and drama.

Fire

It symbolizes the dynamic force of spirit and willpower. It also represents the transformative powers latent in the human being. It represents the spark of life that ignites our inner motivation and propels us toward higher goals. The element Fire is pivotal for burning away impurities and igniting the process of self-transformation. It can inspire individuals to dedicate their lives to higher ideals and to initiate profound inner changes, giving rise to internal resolutions and external actions. Fire also represents the ability to concentrate thought and to bring into focus internal images, impressions and visions. A good presence of the fire element fixes and purifies the mutable components of the human soul (i.e. emotions and sensations).

The presence of the Fire elementals known as *Salamanders* can be perceived in bonfires, sparks, in glowing matter, embers, and the crackling and colours of flames. Too much Fire in the human compound inflates the ego and exacerbates certain psychological conditions, leading to physical inflammations, neuralgia, arthritis, manic states and even religious fanaticism. The element Fire is stimulated by the colour scarlet-red, by sporting activities or martial arts, while its deficiency can be balanced through painting and music.

Agostino Dominici

‘Inner Necessity’ in Expressionist Art



Details from *Improvisation Klamm - GMS 74*, by Wassily Kandinsky, 1914

I have been thinking a lot recently about the Neoplatonic idea that spiritual knowledge and an ethical life are essential to gaining a deeper understanding of art. So I was struck by a current exhibition at the Tate Modern, London, entitled ‘Expressionists: Kandinsky, Münter and The Blue Rider’, which deals with the call of this group of artists for an ‘inner necessity’ – “an inherent drive or will towards spiritual expression” in art (Tate Modern Exhibition Guide).

The Expressionists were a group of artists who responded to the negative political and social conditions of the early 20th century and looked to remedy these with cultural renewal. They possessed from the beginning a vision that valued philosophy, as

the following quotation from Expressionist Franz Marc shows: “[as] art was concerned with the most profound matters, renewal must not be merely formal but a rebirth of thinking” (Sidlina, 2024).

This rebirth in thinking for them was both spiritual and moral, described as a movement “forwards and upwards” by Kandinsky in his book ‘Concerning the Spiritual in Art’. We might generally understand this ‘forwards and upwards movement’ as a movement towards spiritual improvement. A sense of living life and creating art for the purpose of collective nourishment rather than personal self-interest. Kandinsky repeatedly cautioned against this... ‘The artist [who] uses his strength to flatter his lower need;

in an ostensibly artistic form presents what is impure... betrays men and helps them to betray themselves... Such art does not help the forward movement but hinders it.' He also writes 'At such a time art ministers to lower needs, and is used for material ends. She seeks her substance in hard realities because she knows of nothing nobler... The question 'what?' disappears and only the question 'how?' remains... Art has lost her soul' (Kandinsky, 1977).

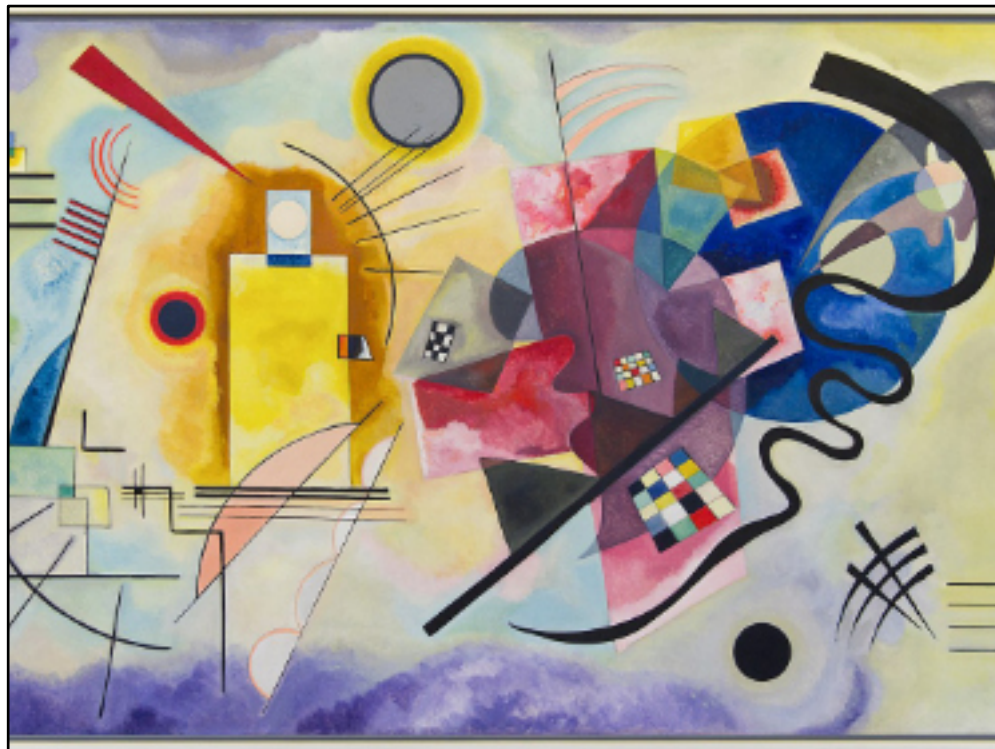
According to Münter, the Expressionists were trying to create art in which one could 'feel the content of things', to imbue their art with deep spiritual content. Their ideal of the artist was of a spiritual, moral, fundamentally open-minded person who freely expressed the inner necessity of the soul in accordance with its natural (forwards and upwards) movement. An ideal which they saw as resulting in innovation, creativity and renewal for both the artist and society. They sought this movement towards the spiritual without negating the central importance of material 'expression' – the action itself. Much like the philosopher in the classical tradition who strives to raise their consciousness, not to flee the material world but to act wisely and to do something good within it.

To 'feel the content of things' is both an inner and outer process. Philosopher Jeremy Naydler explains that the human being in

fact lives two experiences: the outer sense perception (formal) and the inner contemplative and imaginative (spiritual). The part more concerned with form, he relates to day consciousness and the spiritual to night consciousness (Naydler, 2007). If we are to rediscover our spiritual 'night consciousness' in art then we need to remember what the night is for, i.e. for seeing the

stars and for dreaming... Perhaps many of us increasingly feel this 'inner necessity' to express a dream of life, to seek out a horizon where spirit and matter touch each other, helping us all see the way 'forwards and upwards'.

Siobhan Farrar



W. Kandinsky, *Gelb-Rot-Blau*, 1925

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Traditions Around the Summer Solstice

The summer solstice, also known in Europe as Midsummer, is a significant celestial event that marks the longest day of the year and has been celebrated with various traditions and rituals across different cultures for millennia. In the Northern Hemisphere it occurs around 21st June and in the Southern Hemisphere around 21st December. Symbolically, it represents the interplay between light and darkness, which gives this day its spiritual significance. As the sun reaches its highest point, it symbolizes the triumph of light over darkness, both in the physical world and within our own consciousness. In many spiritual traditions, light is

associated with wisdom, clarity, cyclical rhythms and divine inspiration.

In many ancient cultures, the summer solstice was a time of great celebration and reverence for the sun, which reaches its highest point in the sky on this day. One of the most well-known summer solstice traditions is the festival of Litha, observed by modern pagans and Wiccans as a time of honouring the power of the sun and the abundance of nature. It has been influenced by more ancient traditions such as the Celts, Druids and Norse, and follows some ancient practices such as gathering at stone circles like Stonehenge on the summer



solstice, which is oriented to highlight the rising of the sun on this day.

There is a story inspired by Celtic and Druidic beliefs about Litha being the time when a battle between light and darkness takes place. In this battle, the Oak King and the Holly King fight for control. During each solstice, they fight for power, and the balance shifts. The Oak King, who represents daylight, rules from the winter solstice (Yule) to Litha, and at this time the days steadily get longer. Oak trees were revered by the Celts as symbols of seasonal death and regrowth, and they formed a bridge between Earth and the heavens. In Welsh mythology, oak trees were often associated



Midsummer Eve Bonfire by Norwegian artist Nikolai Astrup (c.1915)

with magic; and oak groves were considered the most sacred places by the Druids. However, during Litha, the Holly King wins the battle, and the days get steadily darker until Yule. The holly plant represents eternal life, fertility and the White Goddess, or Earth Mother, and her aspects in other cultures included Maia, Demeter and Diana.

During Litha, people gather to celebrate the peak of the sun's energy and the fertility of the earth. It is a time of gratitude for the warmth and light that

sustains life on our planet, and the rituals and traditions have themes of growth, abundance, and vitality.

One common practice during Litha is the fire ritual, or the lighting of bonfires, symbolizing the power of the sun and its transformative energy. This might be a large bonfire, or a small fire in a fire-safe pot in the house. Another fire ritual is to set large wheels on fire and then roll them down a hill into a body of water. The fire wheel would represent the sun, which is extinguished by the water after it comes down the hill, just as Litha marks the point when the days become shorter again. People decorate their homes and altars with symbols of the sun, such as sunflowers, yellow candles, and gold-coloured fabrics. Some also spend time in quiet places meditating about the light and dark forces in their world.

During Litha it's also important to connect with nature and the outdoors. People often spend time in the sun, go for walks in nature, and harvest herbs and flowers for use in rituals. It is a time to appreciate the beauty and abundance of the natural world, so foods and drinks are made from seasonal ingredients like berries, fruits, and vegetables. Overall, Litha is therefore a time of joy, connection, and celebration of life.

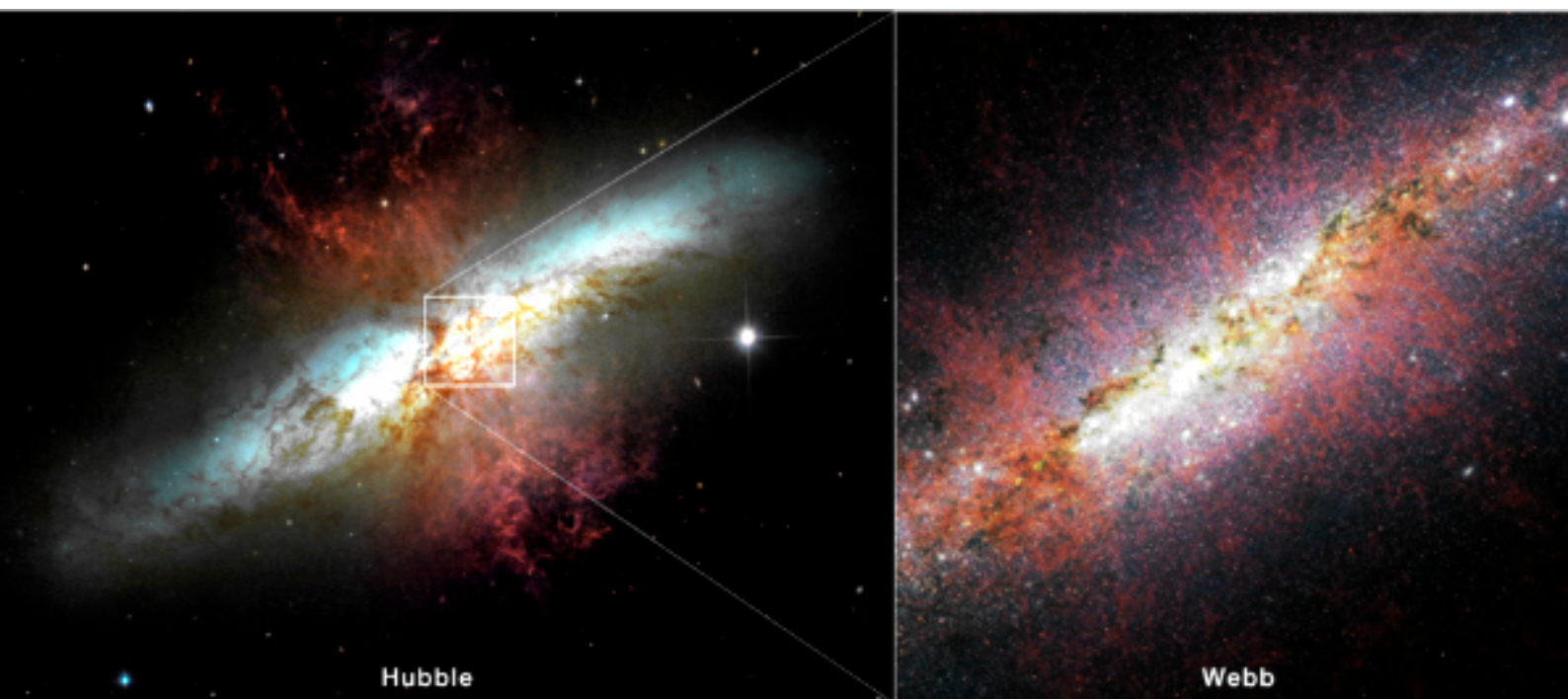
In summary, the summer solstice, with its abundance of daylight, represents a time when we can connect more deeply with our inner wisdom and gain greater insight into our life's purpose. Conversely, darkness is often associated with the unknown, the unconscious, and the shadow aspects of ourselves. The summer solstice reminds us that even as we celebrate the light, we must also acknowledge and integrate our own shadows. By embracing both light, darkness and the rhythms of life where these manifest, we can achieve a greater sense of wholeness and balance.

Sofia Venuti

The James Webb Space Telescope

When it comes to international cooperation for the benefit of mankind, one might not immediately think of space projects. But the new James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) is one such project that has brought many benefits for the advancement of science. With the cooperation of NASA, ESA (European Space Agency) and CSA (Canadian Space Agency),

and over 25 years of planning, building and assembling, the JWST took off on 25th December 2021. It reached its solar orbit in January 2022, one and half million kilometres from Earth, and went through six months of commissioning, deploying its shield and mirror before sending back its first image in July 2022.



Webb versus Hubble image definition. Photos by Webbtelescope.org



The 10 billion dollar telescope is one of a kind and is a big step forward from its older brother, the Hubble Space Telescope. It can detect objects 100 times fainter than Hubble.

Like Hubble, JWST focuses on the infrared spectrum which is invisible to the naked eye, and its pictures are then coloured to give us of an idea what is out there. Infrared light can travel through dust clouds, but it cannot be observed from Earth because our atmosphere absorbs most of it. Hence the importance of space telescopes like Hubble and JWST.

Of course, JWST's mission is not to just send us beautiful pictures from space. It has four key goals: to search for light from the first stars and galaxies that formed the universe after the Big Bang; to study galaxy formation and evolution; to understand how stars and planets are formed; and to study planetary systems and the origins of life.

So far, with only a couple of years of deep space observations, JWST has produced some interesting results. Not only has it been able to observe galaxies more than 12 billion light years away, but it has also been able to detect the presence of organic molecules in such galaxies.

It has been able to see the merging of the farthest known black holes only 740 million years after the Big Bang, which raises the question: do galaxies form and evolve around black holes, or do black holes form at the centre of existing galaxies?

Some of its observations have also called into question our cosmological model; for example, distant galaxies that have been observed seem to have appeared well before we thought galaxies were able to form after the Big Bang. Another intriguing observation seems to indicate that our universe is not expanding in a constant way, as we had previously thought. Early data from Hubble had suggested the possibility that the universe was behaving in such a way and this was called "Hubble Tension". Now data from JWST confirms the model anomaly and is forcing physicists to review their model.

Great advances in astrophysics are made on the basis of such challenging data. In such cases it is not the theory that shapes the data but the data that guides the physicists to rethink their view. These discoveries are pushing the boundaries of science and are telling us that our theories are meant to be challenged.

Florimond Krins

Prometheus



Prometheus was a Titan – one of the earlier generation of gods in Greek mythology – who always looked kindly on human beings and often tried to protect them from the wrath of Zeus. One of the reasons for this benevolence is that, in some versions, he is depicted as the creator of men. He fashioned their bodies out of clay, and Athena blew the breath of life into them.

He was the son of Themis, whose name means "Justice" or "Order", like the Egyptian goddess Maat. He inherited her wisdom and his own name means "Forethought" – "he who thinks ahead".

It is said that, some time after its creation, mankind became so wicked that Zeus and the other gods decided to destroy it. One of the ploys they used was to create a beautiful woman, whom

Hermes then offered as a gift to Prometheus's foolish brother, Epimetheus (his name means "he who thinks after the event"). Prometheus warned him not to accept the gift, because although Pandora was undoubtedly beautiful, she had a bad character. But Epimetheus would not listen. Pandora was given a box by the gods, with strict instructions not to open it. They knew, of course, that she would do so, and one day she did. Out of the box flew all the evils in the world, the only mitigating element being hope. From this time on humans had to earn their bread by sweat and toil.

On another occasion, Zeus tried to wipe out mankind with a flood, but Prometheus warned his son Deucalion of the impending catastrophe and advised him to

Prometheus brings fire to mankind, Heinrich Fueger, 1817. Wikimedia.

build an ark and stock it with provisions. In this way, Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha survived the flood, after floating on the waters for nine days and nine nights, only to find that they were the only two humans left alive when the waters subsided. On asking the Oracle of Delphi how they could repopulate the world, they were told they had to throw the bones of their mother behind them. Horrified at such a thought they at first refused, until they realized that the Oracle spoke in metaphors. Understanding that the mother referred to was the Earth, they threw stones behind them. These turned into men and women, who formed a new race of mankind.

Epimetheus was so extravagant and thoughtless that there were no gifts left for mankind. As a result of this, according to one version, Prometheus decided to steal fire from the gods and bestow its benefits on humanity.

Accordingly, he went up to heaven and stole the divine fire from the forge of Hephaistos. He also taught mankind many arts which put this gift of fire to use, such as metallurgy. But for Zeus, this was too much. Prometheus had broken the laws of heaven and had to be punished. He was arrested by the 'Olympian police' in the form of two Titans, who chained him to a mountain. Thereafter, the eagle of Zeus came daily to devour his liver and every night it grew back again, so



Image by Gordon Johnson from Pixabay

All of these stories are deep in esoteric teachings. They tell of the evolution of humanity, the knowledge of good and evil, and the successive destruction and regeneration of mankind. Above all, in the figure of Prometheus, these Greek myths tell us that we have a protector, a saviour who has sacrificed himself for our happiness and that one day, when all humans become heroes (like Herakles), that sacrifice will be seen to have been worthwhile. In some way, this figure of Prometheus represents all the great teachers of humanity, the 'god-men' who, at great sacrifice to themselves, help humanity to reach its spiritual goal.

Julian Scott



Prometheus animating man with fire from heaven by Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617). Image source Wikimedia.

Another story that illustrates Prometheus's love for mankind is that when he and his brother were assisting in the process of creation, Epimetheus had the task of providing for animals and Prometheus for humans.

that the torture could continue. It was not, however, eternal. After many ages, Zeus allowed his torment to end and Herakles, a son of Zeus, shot the eagle from the sky and released the saviour of mankind.

