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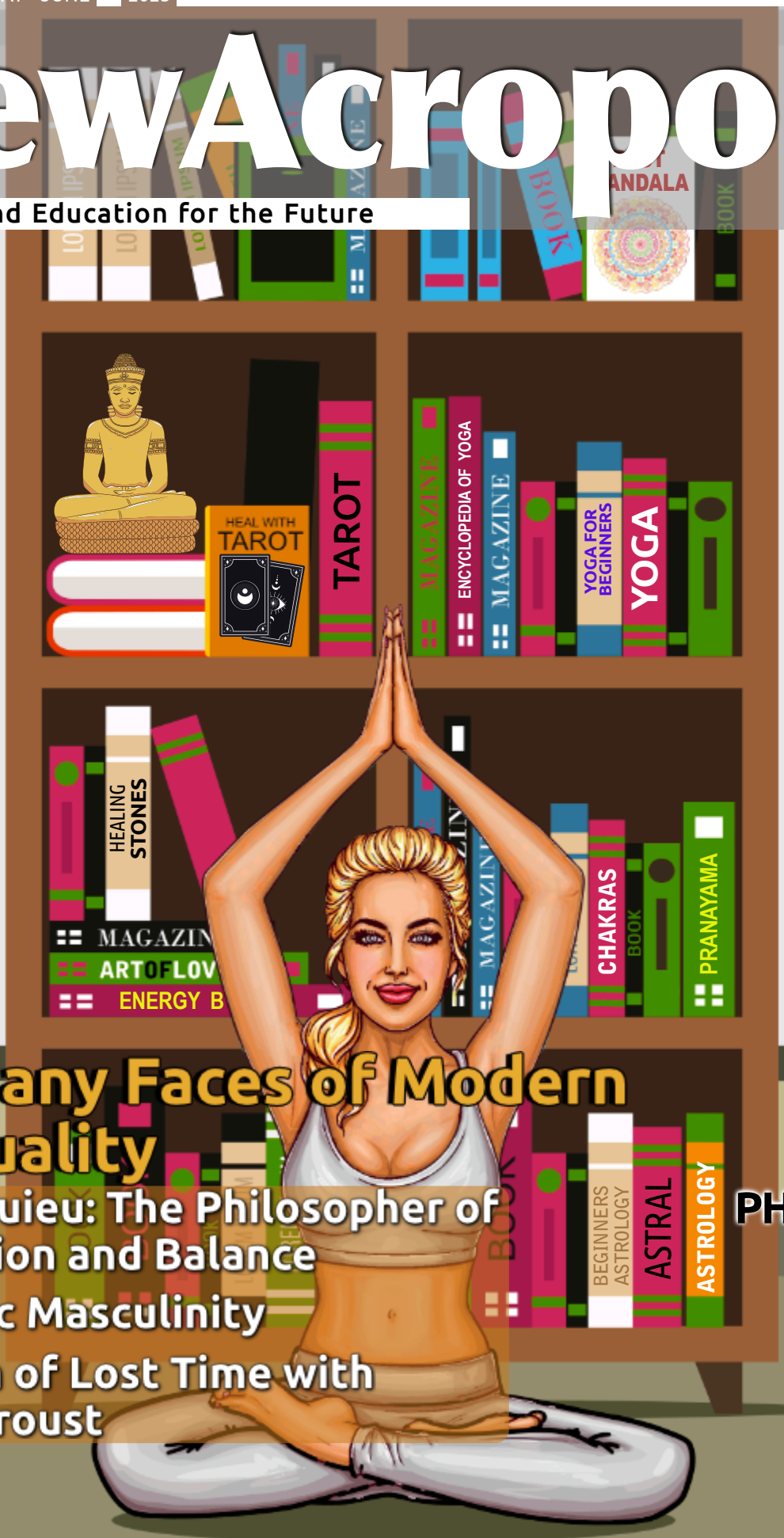
NewAcropolis

Philosophy and Education for the Future



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PHILOSOPHY
CULTURE
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ART
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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NEW ACROPOLIS
INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION
PHILOSOPHY CULTURE VOLUNTEERING

What's Inside

Editorial

Vive la différence!

The end of April is bluebell time in Britain. Every year we organize a walk to one of the best spots where these wonderful blue flowers cover large woodland areas and create an iridescent carpet that seems out of this world. A truly wondrous sight.

Sitting on a log and contemplating this beautiful scene brought a sentence from the *Tao Te Ching* back to my memory: "Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty, only because there is ugliness." In other words, beauty needs ugliness (i.e. the absence of beauty) to be beautiful.

After a brief moment of feeling sorry for ugliness having to play the much less popular role of this pair, another sentiment started to arise: a sense of reconciliation with the fact that without the complementary opposite, a thing would have no meaning and not even exist. That without shadow, we would not be able to perceive the light, without evil we would not know the good, without sorrow we would not experience joy. That all the opposites in this world are complementary and that only together do they form the whole.

Normally, we see beauty in specific things that stand out from the rest. But these things are only parts of the whole. However, there is also a beauty that is born out of being able to see and appreciate the whole, out of the acceptance of the complementarity of opposites. It is perhaps not so much a beauty that pleases the eye but more a beauty that touches the soul, a beauty of integration, a sense that all things belong.

If we want to experience the fullness of life, we need to embrace the contrast of both poles, without choosing one side over the other. Otherwise, we will only ever experience the beauty, goodness or meaning of a *part*, but not of the *whole*.

This principle of the complementarity of polarity is widespread in history and has been described by Heraclitus, Hegel, Jungian psychology, Tantric traditions, indigenous worldviews, Taoism and even quantum physics. But one thing is to accept the theory, which can be expressed in beautiful poetic ways of seeing life as a 'dance of opposites'; and another is to think about it and incorporate our conclusions into our daily lives.

For example, we all have to deal with people who seem to have opposite opinions, beliefs and values, and who do things in completely different ways than we would. Most of us find this difficult because our values and opinions are often tied to our identity, and when someone disagrees with us it can feel like a rejection of who we are (and not just of what we believe). A situation like this might be a good starting point to practise the realization that everything has two sides and that only by trying to come from the viewpoint of the whole will we be able to understand each other and sort out our disagreements.

Another practical application is the realization that, in order to complement one another, the differences must exist. If light and shadow became the same, there would only be an indistinguishable grey. If sea and land would merge, there would only be mud. If the masculine and feminine energies became the same, there would be no attraction, no completion, no life. In any kind of relationship that is energizing and inspiring, regardless of sex or gender, masculine and feminine energies work together and complement each other. The *Tao Te Ching* says: "When opposites arise, the Tao flows between them."

Trying to eradicate difference and to flatten everything to the same level would destroy life and we have to be careful with ideologies that try to eradicate differences. Even technology has a flattening effect in the sense that algorithms promote mostly content that appeals to the broadest audience and thereby drown out niche culture, local traditions and minority voices. The result is a world that is becoming increasingly a global echo chamber.

Rather than avoiding 'differences', we need to learn how to relate them harmoniously. Maybe we need to give more importance to the concept of 'wholeness'. Wholeness is not born from a singularity but from the unification of two complementary halves. Life can only flourish when there are two polar opposites which join together in a dynamic balance, working together like two hands, like our in- and out-breath, creating a dynamic harmony. Neither is superior, neither is complete without the other, but they need to be 'different' from one another.

Sabine Leitner

Montesquieu: The Philosopher of Moderation and Balance

"If I could make it so that everyone had new reasons for loving his duties, his prince, his homeland and his laws and that each could better feel his happiness in his own country, government, and position, I would consider myself the happiest of mortals."

Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*

The Age of Enlightenment was a crucible of ideas and intellectual innovation, and among its most influential voices was Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu. A noble by birth, a lawyer by training and a philosopher by vocation, Montesquieu helped shape the foundational principles of modern political thought. Born in 1689 at the Château de la Brède in the verdant, wine-rich region of Bordeaux, he pursued a legal education at the University of Bordeaux and later in Paris, laying the intellectual groundwork for a career that would combine law, governance and philosophy.

At just 27 years old, Montesquieu inherited two baronies, married and settled into a life that blended public duty, intellectual pursuit and land stewardship. He assumed his role as a hereditary president at the regional court of justice (Parlement) of Bordeaux, where for over a decade he presided over its criminal division – hearing cases, overseeing prisons and administering sentences. At the same time, he devoted himself to

Jacques-Louis David: *Le Serment du Jeu de paume* . Wikimedia.

embracing the responsibilities of a landowner. Alongside these commitments, he cultivated a deep interest in the natural sciences – particularly geology, biology and physics – through active participation in the newly established Academy of Bordeaux.

Montesquieu immersed himself fully in every aspect of his duties and surroundings. In a letter to a friend in Paris, he reflected with endearing irony: "I hear people talk of nothing but grapevines, hard times, and lawsuits, and fortunately I am fool enough to enjoy all that, that is, to be interested in it." (Introduction to Montesquieu, *the Spirit of the Laws* by Anne M. Cohler).

However, soon his life took a new turn after he gained literary recognition through his anonymously published *Persian Letters* (1721). This witty satire skilfully critiqued French society, religion, and political absolutism through the fictional perspectives of Persian travellers. He subtly unveiled human prejudices and societal follies, by showing how an outsider's perspective might reveal the arbitrary or absurd nature of customs taken for granted by insiders, thus emphasizing the need for critical self-awareness in social and political structures.

Montesquieu's intellectual horizons expanded significantly during his Grand Tour of Europe between 1728 and 1731, a journey he undertook in his forties – unusual at a time when such travels were typically reserved for young aristocrats finishing their education. His visits to Italy, Hungary, Germany, Austria, Holland and especially England provided a rich comparative backdrop to evaluate diverse political and legal systems. In England, he was particularly struck by the emerging constitutional monarchy and its nascent system of checks and balances, which would later become central to his theory of the separation of powers and his vision of political liberty.

Back in France, Montesquieu returned to his estate at La Brède and began work on what would become his philosophical masterpiece – *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). The book was the product of tireless scholarship, spanning almost two decades of reading, note-taking, drafting and rewriting.

Montesquieu immersed himself in travel literature, classical texts, legal treatises and historical accounts. He tested his theories in correspondence and discussion with other thinkers in Parisian salons. *The Spirit of the Laws* cites around 300 works across more than 3,000 references. "I can say that I have worked on it my whole life... But I swear that this book nearly killed me; I am going to rest now," he confessed after its completion (Introduction to Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* by Anne M. Cohler). Upon publication, it sparked immediate widespread interest. Celebrated for its depth and

Portrait de Montesquieu, Collection des Grands Hommes. Wikimedia

insight, it was simultaneously hailed by Enlightenment thinkers and condemned by the Catholic Church, which placed it on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1751.

The Spirit of the Laws is a complex mosaic of analysis of human laws and social institutions throughout history. Montesquieu tackled the questions of why laws are so different from one country to another, and why some governments preserve freedom while others sink into tyranny, as well as how to design laws and governance that actually work? He recognized that unlike the physical laws instituted and sustained by God, positive laws are created by fallible human beings who are "subject… to ignorance and error".

Nevertheless, by studying various factors like geography and climate, economy and commerce, religion and tradition, the nature of government and the "general spirit" of a people – their customs, culture and way of life, one might understand the laws and know how to avoid unnecessary reform and implement needed improvements. He defined laws as "necessary relations deriving from the nature of things", and rejected one-size-fits-all solutions (*The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1).

His idea of freedom was limited to the rule of law, and in no way meant an unbounded will. He wrote: "It is true that in democracies the people seem to do what they want, but political liberty in no way consists in doing what one wants… Liberty is the right to do everything the laws permit; and if one citizen could do what they forbid, he would no longer have liberty because the others would likewise have this same power." (*The Spirit of the Laws*, 11.3)

Eugène Delacroix: *Liberty Leading the People*. Wikimedia.

Central to Montesquieu's political thought was the categorization of governments into three principal types: republican, monarchical and despotic. Each type functions according to distinct core principles – virtue in republics, which can be democratic or aristocratic, honour in monarchies and fear in despotisms. He argued that political virtue in a republic requires citizens to prioritize the common good, defining virtue as "love of the homeland". Monarchies, driven by honour, depend upon intermediary bodies to moderate royal authority, whereas despotisms rely exclusively on fear, lacking institutional constraints on power. His nuanced understanding of how governments thrive or decay offers profound insights relevant today.

Exploring the idea of liberty which is so essential for the prosperous development of society, he found that "Political liberty is found only in moderate governments" (*The Spirit of the Laws*, 11.4), and in search of the best way to ensure it in a state, he developed the doctrine of the separation of powers which became his most important contribution to political philosophy. Montesquieu famously declared, "Power must check power" (*The Spirit of the Laws*, 11.4), advocating distinct legislative, executive and judicial branches. When these powers are combined in the same hands, tyranny results. But when each is held by a distinct body each with the ability to restrain the others liberty becomes possible. This idea profoundly influenced

constitutional structures in modern liberal democracies, most notably the United States Constitution.

For the philosopher, moderation is the true goal of political systems, otherwise a danger of despotism arises. "The political good, like the moral good, is always found between two limits" (*The Spirit of the Laws*, 29.1). Moderation is achieved through the system of separation of powers and checks and balances, which is rooted either in political virtue or honour, and is put into practice by well developed institutions and supported by education.

The Education of the Virgin. Workshop of Georges de La Tour. Wikimedia

What separates moderate from despotic governments is not merely their structure but also the nature of the relationships they foster among citizens. In despotisms, individuals are atomized – cut off from one another and governed solely by the unpredictable will of a ruler. Fear becomes the universal bond, replacing civic or moral connection. By contrast, in moderate governments, laws act as a stable framework that enables citizens to relate to one another through shared norms, customs and institutions.

Montesquieu's other important contribution was his perspective on commerce. He wrote "Commerce cures destructive prejudices" (*The Spirit of the Laws*, 20.1), emphasizing that trade encourages tolerance by binding nations together through shared benefit, in stark contrast to conquest – which enriches a few through force but destabilizes many. Commerce, for Montesquieu, was a path toward moderation, cooperation and lasting stability.

In the spirit of the Enlightenment, Montesquieu also defended religious tolerance, noting that coercion in matters of faith leads to fanaticism and tyranny. He argued that laws should accommodate the religions present in a society but must remain independent in function.

Montesquieu built a philosophical bridge between classical philosophical concerns of justice and virtue and the modern imperative for institutional design in politics. He offered a lucid vision of liberty grounded in moderation, pluralism, knowledge and empirical realism. In an age of polarized ideologies, erosion of civic trust and crumbling social harmony, his voice urges us that liberty thrives in the cultivation of balanced power, thoughtful laws and political virtue.

Nataliya Petlevych

Further reading

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The Consolation of Philosophy in Tumultuous Times

The adage 'Man is a rational animal' has, in recent times, become increasingly comical. Our politics seem to increasingly resemble theatres of bombastic nonsense whilst the world plunges further into absurdity. Consequently, even in our personal affairs we find little reprieve as many of the markers of ordinary success, such as raising a family, owning a house and having a stable job, seem to be further from our control than before. During such times, when these problems may take more than a lifetime to solve, where should the human being seek happiness and contentment?

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480–524 AD), simply known as Boethius, is a figure of much use for us in answering this question. Born after the collapse of the Roman civilization and into an aristocratic family, he became a scholar who translated much of Plato's and Aristotle's work into Latin, and also a statesman who tried to civilize the then Ostrogothic king Theodoric. The latter was to be his downfall as the paranoid king suspected Boethius, after a lifetime in public administration, of foul play and promptly condemned him to death. However, it was while waiting for his execution in confinement that Boethius composed his great book *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which continues to fascinate students of philosophy and literature alike.

"For myself I have been parted from my possessions, stripped of my offices, blackened in my reputation and punished for the services I have rendered… This is what stirs my cry of lament." And so, our

'Wheel of Fortune' from Epitre d'Othéa; Les Sept Sacrements de l'Eglise

Boethius teaching his students

downtrodden philosopher opens the first part of The *Consolation*, despairing of his predicament in prison as he waits for his death under torture. But through his tears Boethius sees a figure of "glowing eyes" and "tireless energy". He recognises her as Lady Philosophy who, upon seeing one of her pupils in dismay, proceeds to console Boethius by explaining, with her majestic calm and sweet reason, the true end of life for the human being.

"In your present state of mind, you are not as yet fit to face the stronger remedies. For the moment, then, I shall apply gentler ones, so that the hard swellings where the emotions have gathered may soften under a more caressing touch, and may become ready to bear the application of more painful treatment." In proceeding with the gentler 'remedies' Lady Philosophy first diagnoses the cause of Boethius's sickness. "You have forgotten your own identity", she says. How? Because his happiness has become dependent on his wealth, reputation, career and fame. All these are in the control of fortune who gives or takes these gifts at her whim. Thus, it has left Boethius confused and in despair when fortune has decided to take them away. But, Lady Philosophy asks, since it is in the nature of fortune to be capricious, why complain if she acts accordingly? And would the wise be so dependent on her favours when they are so ephemeral?

But "let us suppose fortune's gifts were not transitory and fleeting", Lady Philosophy hypothesizes, "what is there in them which you could ever possess, or which when scrutinized and pondered is not tawdry?" Those who hoard wealth are in part looking to be self-sufficient and independent, but this is undermined by the external protection they need to protect their affluence. Additionally, the objects one can buy with wealth, such as jewels and nice clothes, do not confer any additional virtue onto the owner. To believe that glory lies in the possession of lifeless goods devalues the human to below the level of the beasts. "For if every good belonging to an individual is truly more valuable than the person to whom it belongs, then on your own reckoning you men rank yourselves below the tawdriest of things, when you pronounce them to be your goods."

Fame is also one of the false goods of fortune. No matter how renowned we are there will always be spatial and temporal limits to those who know us, much less praise us. At some stage on these scales, we will be consigned to oblivion, underlining the triviality of this pursuit. Furthermore, even fame earned on merit should not lend itself to the philosopher's attention, who instead "measures his worth not by common gossip, but by the truth of self-knowledge."

Much of the same can be said about political power. Whatever power we may have will always be limited. Even if we were to rule the whole world, we could still die from the bite of a fly. What kind of power is it when such a humble creature can take it away? This precariousness means that those in power often live in a state of paranoia for fear of losing it. Even those who renounce power are not able to escape the grasp of its consequences. See Seneca, Lady Philosophy explains, who tried to escape his position of power by consigning his wealth to Nero, yet who still could not escape his execution. Additionally, as we can see today, high positions often flaunt the unworthiness of those who occupy them. We must, therefore, remember that power "does not confer honour on the virtues; rather, virtue confers honour on high positions." Ergo, the only power worth seeking is power over oneself.

This is why, when the wise are met with misfortune, they do not disdain it, for it provides them with the "chance to lend substance to their wisdom… Virtue (*virtus*) is so-called because it relies on the strength (*vires*) not to be overcome by adversity." Thus, difficulties are not only to be tolerated but welcomed by the wise as an opportunity to practice virtue. Moreover, fortune's reminder of the wretchedness of mortal goods also gives us the opportunity to rediscover the true good in which happiness lies.

Lady Philosophy defines true happiness as the perfection which encapsulates all good within itself. This true good contains all the things which people seek when they chase after the false goods. For example, people chase wealth thinking it will make them free or they seek to be kings in order to be powerful. Yet, as Lady Philosophy has outlined, the true and perfect good does not lie in the sensible world, it instead lies in the eternal world of divinity "for nothing better than God can be imagined". Therefore, when we attain perfect happiness, we share in God's divinity and in this sharing of divinity we satisfy the intimate human need for unity with something greater than ourselves. Hence, those who are truly happy are those who pursue God through prayer, contemplation of eternal things and the cultivation of virtues.

What are we to make of this philosophy? Much like our time, Boethius lived during a period of economic, intellectual and cultural decline. His *Consolation* shows us the internal attitude of a true philosopher in facing such adversity. Namely, by using their powers of reasoning and imagination, the wise are able to view present troubles in the context of a larger whole, widening their scope in space and time, and in doing so are able to access and identify with the beauty and mystery of the universe as a whole. The religious may call this whole 'God' while others may have other names, but in unifying ourselves with it, we break through the prison walls of the finite self. In doing so, present troubles, even a lifetime of suffering, can be seen as a passing moment that is simply to be traversed.

Furthermore, such a perspective will, like with Lady Philosophy, give us the poise, courage and clarity about what is to be valued amongst the passing things in daily life. This contemplation of God, which we may also take as Nature or our ideals, married with the active life of virtue, has the power to give us the dignity and inner contentment to navigate through our age. In such a life, power comes not from the impossible goal of trying to control external things but by mastering the self through the cultivation of virtue and contemplation.

However, such a life is not easy. "Those of you who are in the course of attaining virtue have not travelled this road merely to wallow in luxury or to languish in pleasure", Lady Philosophy reminds us.

Portrait of a Young Woman, Sandro Botticelli. Wikimedia

In our age this seems very pertinent. Many people nowadays feel impotent against the injustices in the world – whether personal or political. But we must remember that this is what Boethius must have felt initially when he was condemned to death. Yet, it is his name and wisdom which have shone through to future ages while his oppressor is long forgotten. Similarly, we in our age must look inwards to fortify ourselves against adversity, look upwards to our ideals, and fight to be the person Lady philosophy asks of us so that we may offer a gentle and warm ray of hope to those who come after.

Adhiyan Jeevathol

The Many Faces of Modern Spirituality

Introduction

In the last fifty years, spirituality has undergone a significant transformation. Traditional religious institutions have lost much of their influence, leading many people to seek spirituality outside of structured systems. This has given rise to various trends and ways in which spirituality has been perceived and practised. We find, for instance, a kind of Do-It-Yourself spirituality, where individuals create their own personal spiritual paths, often mixing elements from different traditions without committing to any single one. This trend is also connected to the rise of what has been called the 'spiritual supermarket', where various spiritual beliefs and practices are sold as consumer products. Finally, we have been witnessing another interesting trend, the psychologization of spirituality, which has turned religious and spiritual teachings into tools for self-help and personal development.


Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

Let's start from the beginning

What lies at the root of this transformation, we may ask? There are two cultural phenomena that I would like to highlight here: Postmodernism and the New Age movement. Postmodernism promotes the mixing of different cultural styles and influences, celebrating diversity. It also embraces the idea that truth is subjective and context-dependent. If there is not universal truth, people might be more inclined to shape their own spiritual identity and their sense of personal importance. Spiritual materialism often thrives in this postmodern landscape where multiple spiritual beliefs are available and individuals can pick and choose aspects of spiritual practices they like, constructing in this way their own personal belief system.

The New Age introduced the idea that spirituality should be 'personal', 'experiential', and 'non-dogmatic'. It popularized esoteric teachings and spiritual practices such as meditation, energy healing, astrology, yoga and channeling,

encouraging individuals to explore spirituality in a way that suited their needs. Key slogans from the New Age movement include: 'follow your intuition', 'live your truth', 'the universe loves me', 'spiritual but not religious' and 'all religions are one'. In short, both cultural phenomena emphasize: personal empowerment, individual freedom, subjectivity and a tendency to a wishy-washy spiritual approach wrapped in hazy language.

Another important aspect of modernity that has had an impact on the way people perceive and approach spirituality, is digital technology and the social media. The internet has made spiritual knowledge more accessible but often in a fragmented, superficial manner. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Facebook and Instagram promote bite-sized spiritual content, often reducing complex teachings to quick tips, power-point presentations and motivational quotes. Here people are encouraged to create their own personalized spiritual blends, engaging with online content by sharing their cherished opinions in the chat box.

Spiritual materialism and its marketplace

The concept of spiritual materialism was coined by the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa in 1973. In his book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, he argued that many individuals adopt spiritual practices, such as mindfulness meditation, not to gain a deeper understanding of themselves but rather to reinforce their sense of self, achieve status, or gain power. Interestingly, a few years later, spiritual teachings started to become marketable products, designed to provide quick fixes or superficial solutions to spiritual seekers' problems.

In this commercialization of spirituality, spiritual practices have evolved into multi-billion-pound industries. We now witness a booming spiritual marketplace offering a wide variety of books, online courses, retreats and workshops. All kind of products which promise to help individuals achieve personal happiness, if not enlightenment, or to find a refuge from chaotic modern living. Spirituality has suddenly become a 'consumer choice' offering a wide range of products. One can buy crystals and healing stones to balance energy, tarot card readings to find spiritual guidance and a variety of online courses on how to become a shaman, an energy healer, a medium and even a diviner. Not to mention the Yoga retreats that offer relaxation from busy life and 'opportunities for self-discovery'!

Perhaps one of the most concerning aspects of spiritual materialism has been the commodification of ancient spiritual practices and sacred rituals, leading to the exploitation of indigenous wisdom. In this process, ancient teachings are often stripped of their spiritual and ethical frameworks, to fit the

demands of Western consumers seeking spiritual novelties. At the same time, self-branded spiritual 'teachers' are on the rise, particularly on social media, where individuals present themselves as spiritual leaders, often prioritizing personal profit over genuine teaching.

But do we really believe that spiritual transformation can be achieved quickly and effortlessly, perhaps with a few thousand pounds investment? Let's think for a moment: people learn a few breathing techniques and present themselves to the world as pranayama instructors. But mastering pranayama is not just about breathing. It implies the ability to control and direct at will, within oneself and externally, prana, the vital force.

And this is not something that you can learn from the first passer-by in a couple of weekends!

Nor is spiritual progress about collecting out-of-body experiences, lodge titles or mystical visions. It always implies humility, hard work and commitment to a lifelong journey, which should lead to the gradual but radical transmutation of the 'human compound'. Furthermore, spiritual growth requires embracing simplicity and detachment. It is often nurtured in silence, contemplation, and through the daily trials of life. The challenge is therefore to resist the pull of superficial spiritual trends with their spiritual bazaars full of glittering but useless products.

The psychologization of spirituality

Another major shift in modern spirituality is its psychologization. Spiritual teachings have been transformed into psychological tools for emotional healing, for achieving mental well-being or for personal development. In short, they are often used to validate personal desires rather than transcending them.

Traditionally, spirituality focused on the idea of liberation, enlightenment or union with the divine, and therefore had transcendental aims connecting to higher realities. But modern spirituality often reframes these teachings as tools for personal and material success, happiness or self-esteem. Thus we find yoga and meditation, once rooted in metaphysical and ethical principles, marketed as fitness routines, mental well-being therapies or relaxation practices. While ancient spirituality taught that the individual self is not the ultimate reality, modern psychologized spirituality focuses on personal experience and subjective truth. Self-realization no longer means understanding the illusory nature of the self, but rather becoming the "best version" of oneself.

It is true that in a traditional spiritual path, the psyche is the central theme, but only in the sense that it has to be transcended, not indulged! Spiritual initiation is about the death of the personality, not its exaltation. It is about the extinguishing of all that belongs to the biographical self. Ultimately, all those little masks with which we tend to identify have to be dropped off. Genuine spirituality implies following a radical path. It must take us away from what we are – our beliefs, our identifications, our past conditionings, our personal desires or individual expectations. Here, there is no room for self-acceptance or other psychological escapades. These are just expedients born from a mind which is not willing to face the dark abyss, the complete dissolution of the 'old self'. This and more is spiritual initiation and we must humbly admit that it's not for everyone. Therefore, while psychology and spirituality can complement each other, we must be careful not to reduce the sacred to mere self-help.

DIY spirituality

Spiritual DIY is the idea that people can forge their own spiritual path using resources like books, online content, self-help guides and personal experimentation, bypassing the more formalized systems of spiritual transmission, initiation and mentorship. In this approach to spirituality, one might read about meditation techniques from one tradition, explore astrology from another and practise yoga from a third. The problem is that without a guide or a traditional framework, these practices can remain disconnected from deeper spiritual insights and unassimilable by the consciousness.

A lot of DIY spirituality is focused on finding easy access to extra-sensory phenomena, quick

enlightenment or mere intellectual curiosity. People are readily attracted by the idea of becoming the new sorcerer's apprentice, yet they often lack true understanding of the spiritual realms. Immersed in the practice of a newly translated Grimoire ritual, they are often unaware of the danger implied in these types of interactions, thus entering in contact with a field of forces of which they know practically nothing.

It's also worth mentioning the role of ethics, not only in outward behaviour but as a fundamental principle of inner transformation. Spirituality is meant to dismantle the ego and foster a deeper connection with all beings. Yet, when approached as an independent project, without ethical accountability, the ego can subtly hijack the process, thus fostering arrogance, creating an illusion of being more 'awake' or 'enlightened' than others. A spiritual seeker without proper guidance can easily misinterpret teachings, reinforcing harmful patterns or, even worse, manipulate others under the guise of 'enlightenment'. The ethical grounding remains, therefore, a great safeguard against ego-inflation.

A part from ego inflation, DIY spirituality can also bring serious dangers to one's mental and physical health. Climbing K2 demands not only theoretical knowledge but also extensive training, experience and real-time guidance – along with a special vocation found only in the greatest artists. In any case, everyone would agree that the idea of attempting to climb K2 after watching a few YouTube tutorials or going on weekend mountain excursions is simply absurd. Actually, climbing K2 is never a solo endeavour. Mountaineers work in teams, relying on one another for support, encouragement and protection in case something goes really wrong.

Evidently, the spiritual path is not meant to be walked alone either. Communities and spiritual guides provide not only a safety net and support but also act as mirrors, reflecting our progress, challenges and possible ego bloating. Many spiritual traditions of the past emphasized spiritual initiation or transmission, a ritual or moment where a teacher imparts an energetic quality or a deeper understanding to the student. Without this form of transmission, one may miss out on the experiential wisdom that comes with formal initiation. Therefore, another key issue with DIY spirituality remains the potential loss of spiritual transmission (known as Parampara, Dharma Transmission, Taoist Lineages, Silsila, etc.).

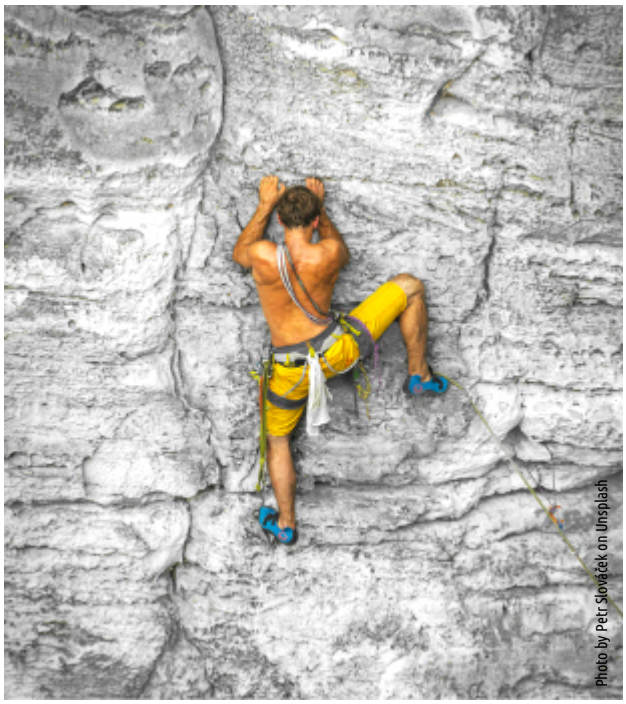
Photo by Petr Slovůček on Unsplash

In conclusion, DIY spirituality is really a double-edged sword. While it grants freedom and personal empowerment, it also carries the risk of fostering spiritual arrogance if not anchored in ethical principles. Without guidance, it is easy for spirituality to become a means of self-enhancement rather than self-transcendence. This raises my final question: is individual experimentation and research worth the effort? Yes indeed, and the DIY method is more than welcome if it can take you up to the base camp, but think twice before attempting the solo climb!

Agostino Dominici

Non-Toxic Masculinity

Many metaphysical systems of knowledge are based on the idea that everything begins with a non-manifested, eternal living principle, which has often been referred to simply as 'the One'. Sometimes this is also symbolized by a dual principle which is referred to in H.P. Blavatsky's *Cosmogenesis* as 'Father-Mother' – 'father' referring to the principle of spirit or consciousness, and 'mother' to the principle of substance, the root of matter.

In this way, everything that exists descends from this primordial duality, which was originally a unity. We can see this clearly expressed in the Yin-Yang symbol from ancient China. Yin is symbolically referred to as the feminine, while Yang is referred to as the masculine. Some characteristics of Yin are earth, femaleness, darkness, receptivity; while Yang would be heaven, maleness, light, activity. Both proceed from the Great Ultimate, *Taiji*.

In this symbol we do not see a rigid division between Yin and Yang, male and female, but a flowing nature in which each quality contains the seed of the other within it, symbolized by a black dot within the whiteness and a white dot within the blackness. These dots will grow until the white becomes the black and the black becomes white. This process is documented in the *Yijing* or 'Book of Changes', which shows how each situation of life changes into another until returning to its starting point.

Image from Wikimedia

In Jungian psychology, every man is said to have an 'anima', an inner archetype of the feminine; while every woman is said to have an 'animus', an inner image of the masculine. In this way, none of us are exclusively male or female: every man has a feminine side and every woman has a masculine side. This does not mean that in the end we are all the same; rather, there is a preponderant tendency and a balancing tendency.

Problems tend to arise when the inner feminine in the case of men, or the inner masculine in the case of women, is suppressed, usually due to socio-cultural pressures and influences. Then, what has been called 'toxic masculinity' can arise, i.e. an exaltation of supposed masculine qualities to the

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detriment of the feminine. According to Michael Flood, writing in *The Conversation*[1], "the phrase emphasizes the worst aspects of stereotypically masculine attributes. Toxic masculinity is represented by qualities such as violence, dominance, emotional illiteracy, sexual entitlement, and hostility to femininity." I guess there must also be a kind of 'toxic femininity', although this is not so much talked about at the moment.

1. https://theconversation.com/toxic-masculinity-what-does-it-mean-where-did-it-come-from-and-is-the-term-useful-or-harmful-189298

There is also an inverse process where, instead of suppressing one's inner masculinity or femininity (*animus* or *anima*), a man suppresses his outer masculinity, whether because of socio-cultural pressures or because he is afraid that his natural male aggression may burst out in expressions of violence and cause harm to those around him. Analogously, a woman could suppress her outward femininity, again due to socio-cultural pressures (as in the 'ladette' culture of the 1990s) or due to some other often unconscious fears, such as becoming prey to male desire if too feminine.

So it is important to learn to channel these natural forces we have within us due to being born in a male or female body, with its concomitant male or female psyche.

A number of mainly Jungian psychologists, such as Robert Moore, have dealt with this at length. In his book, co-authored with Doug Gilette, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*, first published in 1990, he analyzes these four archetypes in relation to the male psyche.

The archetype of the lover is particularly interesting for the topic of non-toxic masculinity, because it goes against the old-fashioned myth that the expression of emotion belongs exclusively to the realm of women. In fact, the expression of strong emotions and passions is a characteristic of the archetypal hero (and often of the anti-hero as well), who in this way stands out above others as an exceptional being. Although emotions and passions are often associated with a loss of control and selfishness, there are also higher passions such as long-lasting love, loyalty and deeply felt friendship. The 'lover' archetype is also associated with the ability to enjoy life, to live in the moment, to laugh and cry – not hysterically, but freely and spontaneously.

The warrior is the archetype perhaps most immediately associated with the masculine, although history has seen its fair share of female warriors, such as the 'Amazons' of ancient Greek times, or Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni, who led a major revolt against the Romans in Britain. This

Olympian gods by Anton Kirchmayer (1806), Wikimedia

shows us that the archetypes are not rigid and fixed, but express general principles, to which there are always natural exceptions.

The warrior is characterized by courage, which is a virtue of the heart, from the French word for heart, '*coeur*'. The ideal warrior is not a mercenary, but someone who fights for a just and noble cause. He has love and devotion for an ideal or a person higher than himself. In Plato's *Republic*, the warriors serve and support the philosopher-kings. In the same book Plato defines courage as the ability to persevere in what is right, whether through the endurance of pain or when tempted by pleasure. Although courage is not by any means exclusive to men – with many examples of feminine courage in history, nature and everyday life – it is a particularly important quality for men to develop in order to earn and maintain their self-respect and sense of dignity. And as several philosophers have pointed out, courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to 'feel the fear and do it anyway'.

The king is one who establishes order and discipline, and is characterized by benevolent justice. In other words, he not only rules, but rules well and thinks more of the good of others than his own interest. It is not about wanting to become a literal king or ruler, but about being 'king of one's own realm', ordering one's own life and acting with benevolence and justice towards oneself and others. An example could be that if one day we are in a bad mood, the king in us would prevent us from taking it out on others, understanding that our mood is not the fault of others and it would therefore be an injustice to make others suffer for what is not their fault.

The magician is one who masters a skill, and even more importantly, someone who investigates himself and the laws of life and learns how to live in accordance with them. So this archetype has two sides: on the one hand to become the master of some art or craft, some particular skill, and on the other to become the master of oneself. Perhaps the archetypal magician in the Western tradition is Merlin, the mentor of King Arthur.

Thus we see that all these archetypes are interrelated: the warrior serves the king, the king serves the people, the magician teaches the king, and the lover knows how to live with joy. To combine all these facets within oneself would lead to a fulfilled and 'non-toxic' life. Rather than reverting to old stereotypes, how much better it would be to rediscover and to live these eternal archetypes!

Julian Scott

In Search of Lost Time with Marcel Proust

"The bonds between ourselves and another person exist only in our minds. (...) Man is the creature who cannot escape from himself, who knows other people only in himself, and when he asserts the contrary, he is lying" – says Marcel Proust (1871-1922), whose famous work *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu in French*) was written a century ago. This book inspired generations of writers, and there are still ongoing debates about it, although not so many people actually read it, as it is a long and difficult novel.

Proust was born and grew up at the end of the 19th century ('*fin de siècle*'), during the French Third Republic. This period was economically prosperous after years of war and disruptions, and brought many changes in French society: public health was developed, towns and cities were modernized, there was great scientific and technological progress, and new inventions became generally common, like the telephone, electric light and the automobile. It was also called *The Beautiful Era* (*La Belle Epoque*) as people were optimistic about the future and the arts flourished. Paris became the artistic capital of Europe. In literature, the symbolist and decadent movements appeared, especially in poetry, while the rise of realism and naturalism could be seen in the novels of authors like Guy de Maupassant and Émile Zola. And this realism developed into modernism in the early 20th century thanks to Proust.

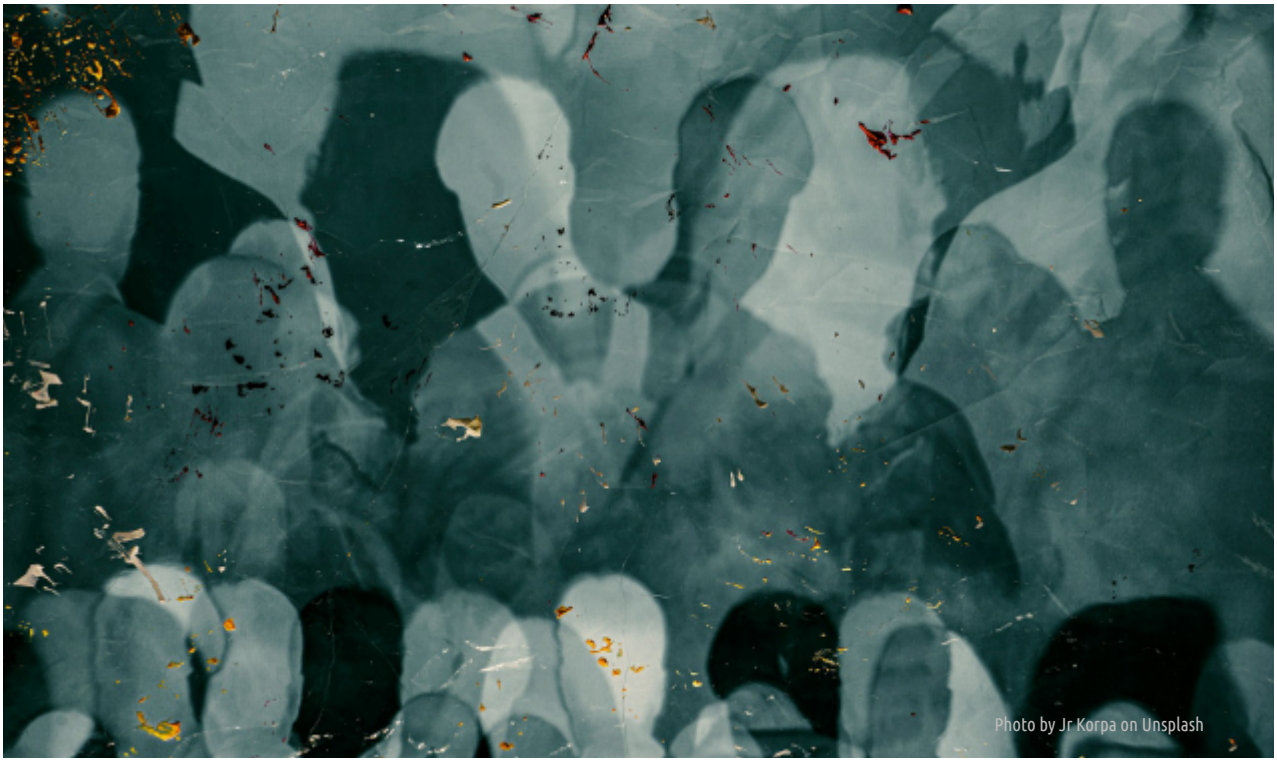
Marcel Proust. Image by Wikimedia

Proust started to write his seven-volume-book at the age of 38 and worked on it until his death. The first volume was published in 1913 and was paid for by the author after many publishers had turned it down. The last volumes were published in 1927, some time after his death, having been edited by his brother, Robert. What makes this novel very different from others of its time is its approach to time and memories. The plot itself is not very important, unlike in most novels of the 19th century, but it is the sentiments, the feelings, the thoughts and memories that stand out. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze said that this book is about the search for truth and truth has a connection with time. Understanding the past and remembering is a very Platonic way of learning, as Plato taught the importance of reminiscence, claiming that knowledge was acquired before birth and learning involves the act of rediscovering

knowledge from within oneself. Proust's novel basically describes the experiences of an unnamed narrator, while he is growing up in Combray, learning, participating in society life in Paris, and falling in love.

One of the famous scenes in the novel is when the protagonist tastes the madeleine cake dipped in tea, which takes him back to his childhood, remembering a time when he ate a similar cake with his aunt. This kind of involuntary memory is a key element in Proust's work and there are other scenes when a smell, sight or sound triggers memories of the past and forms the mindset of the present. According to Deleuze, Proust's focus was not memory or the past, but how the narrator learns to read and use the signs of life to understand the reality around and within him. Time is destructive as everything is changed and destroyed by it, from relationships to places. Proust is aware of this, but he thinks that art can survive time and triumph over it, because the aim of art is not material and the sign it uses provides immaterial experience by touching the soul. Art can grasp what is substantive and transform the material into immaterial.

The narrator goes through a learning process, he falls into illusions, then he understands he was in an illusion, which can be a sad, but necessary process. "Happiness is salutary for the body but sorrow develops the powers of the spirit" – says Proust, who thinks that the voluntary memory is unable to see what is important, while involuntary memory can. Proust did not read Freud, and Freud did not know Proust's work, but they both speak about the importance of the unconscious level of the human mind that affects our way of thinking. There are also several connections between Proust's work and the philosophy of Bergson, who said in his work *Matter and Memory* that the past is not something that was, but something that still exists together with itself as the present. Also, the technique of how we remember is the same in both authors. But while Bergson does not care about saving the past, as he thinks it is preserved within itself, Proust does care about it. Bergson thinks about the growing past of the person as a growing snowball, which has continuity within the person, whereas Proust does not believe in this continuity; the memories exist separately, and we must put them together, as there is no transition between memory and forgetting.



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