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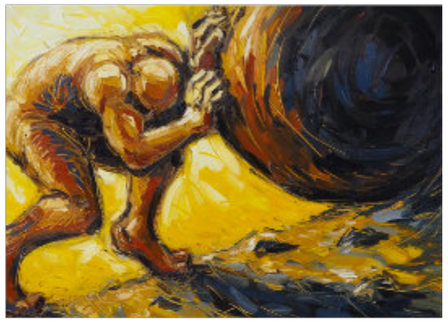
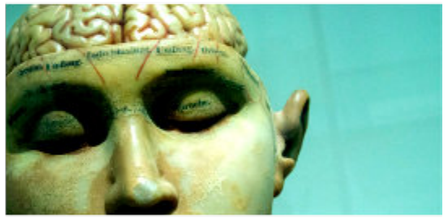




EDITORIAL

BY
SABINE LEITNER

Why Beauty Matters More Than We Think

"The most repressed of all phenomena in today's world is beauty", wrote the American psychologist James Hillman (1926-2011) in City & Soul. For him, beauty is not a luxury but a psychological necessity: "The soul yearns for it". As a classically trained musician I have always had the conviction that beauty has the power to awaken something good within us. And beauty not only matters on a personal level; James Hillman explains that it is also of great relevance for ethics, politics and even the climate crisis.

When we are born, before we can think or rationalize, our first experience of the world is through our senses. In Ancient Greek, perception by the senses was called *aisthésis (αἴσθησις)* and this gave rise to our word aesthetics. Interestingly, *aisthésis* can also mean discernment, judgement and insight. This range of meanings somehow implies that we also have inner senses through which we can understand and make sense of the world.

Because our first experience of the world is not through the mind but through our senses, Hillman says that our first experience of this world is an 'aesthetic' one. And because we humans have the ability to distinguish between beauty and ugliness, we are constantly responding *aesthetically* to our environment. Beauty opens us up, makes us want to go out, evokes love – and love inspires us to take care and to participate. Whereas "the ugly makes us withdraw, shrink into ourselves, turn away."

And because most of us live in cities with "ill-designed buildings, are served and accept poorly prepared food, put on our body a badly cut and badly sewn jacket, to say nothing of not hearing the birds, not noticing the twilight", we repress our aesthetic response to the world and become anaesthetized to it, according to Hillman. Interestingly, the words *anaesthesia* and *aesthetics* both derive from the same Greek verb.

There is no doubt that much of our modern world is ugly and that our senses are constantly assailed by noise and pollution. No wonder then that so many people run around with headphones, shut out the world and withdraw into a virtual world. "By repressing our reactions to the basic ugliness of simple details, [...] by denying our annoyance and outrage, we actually encourage an unconsciousness that estranges and disorients the interior soul." (Hillman)

As a consequence, people do not want to participate actively in the world any more. In this way, the aesthetic crisis also becomes a cause for the climate crisis. Hillman thinks that an environmentalism that relies too much on data, fear, guilt and moral obligation will not succeed. He writes in *Aesthetics and Politics*: "Ethics alone is not enough to make a change in the world. [...] Take for instance the environment. We're not motivated to fight for it simply because we ought to, because we should, because we must do the right thing." From his perspective, ecological destruction continues because the soul-relationship to Nature has collapsed and not because there is a lack of information.

Since the aesthetic impact of our environment on us is so significant for how we relate to the world, beauty becomes something political. Streets, schools, prisons, hospitals, public transport – all have aesthetic dimensions. They embody certain values in visible and tangible form. When a society is solely driven by efficiency and economic thinking, when buildings are designed for utility, work shaped by profit and language becomes bureaucratic, then the soul is starved. This starvation leads to numbness, apathy and cynicism – states that make ethical action and active participation unlikely. People who are cut off from beauty are less able to feel compassion or responsibility or the need for action.

Hillman's views also remind me of Plotinus, who said that the soul is always an Aphrodite. It means that the soul has a fundamental connection to beauty and an innate capacity for love. And that, like Aphrodite, our soul is accompanied by Eros, the personified striving by which we can return to our divine origin.

Beauty opens our heart, and our heart will motivate us to act. Aesthetics, ethics and politics are not separate domains but different expressions of the same soulful engagement with the world. By restoring beauty to its rightful place, we might be able to re-enchant ethics and politics and recover a way of life that expresses a deep and meaningful connection with our world.

Maybe Dostoevsky was right when he wrote that "beauty will save the world".

Sabine Leitner is the Director of New Acropolis UK.

ETHICS AND MORAL CONDUCT

PHILOSOPHY

BY
JULIAN SCOTT

Photo by Alexey Chudin: https://www.pexels.com

Ethics is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the science of morals in human conduct, moral principles, rules of conduct". So we can say that ethics sets out the principles, while moral conduct is the application of those principles. But I would add to this definition that while ethics is the *science* of morals in human conduct, moral conduct is an *art*: the art of applying the principles in practice.

If we look at history, we can see that moral rules often change with time. In the warrior culture of ancient Sparta, for example, it was the custom to expose infants on the mountainside if they were born with some deformity; whereas today the aim is to keep patients alive at all costs and physical life is regarded as sacred. In ancient Greece in general homosexuality was seen as acceptable, whereas it was illegal in Victorian England. Assisted suicide was acceptable in Rome (falling on one's sword, assisted by a friend or slave), whereas it is illegal in Britain today, though not in Switzerland. There are thousands of examples of the relativity of moral rules, but are there any moral and ethical values that can be considered universally valid, independently of time and place?

"...moral conduct is an art: the art of applying the principles in practice."

We could start with the *Ten Commandments* from the Bible, such as "Thou shalt not kill" – but there are many exceptions to this rule: it is often considered acceptable to kill animals for food, people of enemy nations in war, to defend oneself with force, and to abort unborn children. What about that other *Commandment:* "Thou shalt not steal"? Was Robin Hood being unethical in stealing from the rich to give to the poor? From a 'rules-based' perspective, he was in the wrong, even if there were mitigating circumstances; from a 'results-based' point of view we could say he was right, because the poor, who greatly outnumbered the rich, benefited.

Image by Tumisu from Pixabay

Many grey areas can be found in the field of ethics, where there is no absolute answer. A typical medical ethics dilemma, for example, is whether or not to turn off a life-support machine, if the person's life quality is nil, but the person might possibly recover. In this case a decision has to be made by doctors and relatives, or by the courts. Is physical life an absolute value? Probably not if there is no life quality, but who decides and how is it decided?

The following, however, have a good claim to be universally valid from a philosophical point of view. Which does not mean that everyone necessarily agrees with them, but simply that they are philosophically valid and consistent:

Kant: "Never treat people merely as means, but always as ends in themselves."

Buddha: "Hate is not conquered by hate, hate is conquered by love."

Confucius: "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you."

Ptahhotep (an ancient Egyptian sage): "Your whole life long, let your expression be one of shining generosity."

What are the sources of morality?

How can we know what is right or wrong? Many philosophers have considered reason to be the source of ethics and moral conduct. For example:

For Aristotle, the best life for a human being is to live their life in accordance with what reason dictates, which is a life of virtuous action.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant said that a universal principle of morality is that we should act as if our maxim were to become a universal law for all reasonable beings.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume, however, said that reason's task is to distinguish between true and false, not between right and wrong. For him, moral judgement (the sense of what is right or wrong) comes from the heart; it is a feeling. Along similar lines, the French philosopher Rousseau said: "With all their morality, men would be nothing but monsters, if nature did not give them pity as a support for reason." In other words, morality also comes from feelings of sympathy with other human beings and all beings in nature, not just from the reason.

Buddha said that one should only accept something if it is admitted as good by both the heart and the mind.

When ancient philosophers speak of the heart, they are generally not referring to the emotions only, because there can be emotions such as fear and anger that make us act immorally. What they are referring to is an 'inner knowing', a knowing that knows without reasoning. But sometimes lower feelings can dress themselves up as coming from the heart, like the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing.

In order to understand better what is meant by the 'heart', we need to distinguish between different types of feelings: there are self-centred and selfish feelings, where we put ourselves first and see others as means to satisfy our desires and achieve our ends. But there are also higher feelings (noble sentiments such as the sense of responsibility) where we open ourselves to life and to others, and sympathize with the joys and sorrows of others.

Thus, in addition to reason, there are 'moral sentiments'. Reason can be a guide to what is right and wrong, but it lacks power if it is not accompanied by feeling. It is only when we love the ideals that reason and intuition show us (ideals of the good, the beautiful, the just, etc.), that we can be motivated to put them into practice in our moral conduct.

It could be helpful to imagine a 'heart-mind axis', where there is an invisible line connecting our heart with our mind, giving rise to altruistic love and mental clarity simultaneously.

Why don't we always do what is good or right?

Sometimes we may doubt about what is the right course of action; it is not totally clear to us. There are some situations that are quite complex, where there are so many factors involved that it is 'difficult to see the wood for the trees.'

In most situations, however, we probably do know what is the right thing to do, but we don't always do it. Or we feel confused and torn between different possible courses

Photo by Joshua Earle on Unsplash

In most situations, however, we probably do know what is the right thing to do, but we don't always do it.

of action. Why is that? At first sight, it seems to be because our mind interferes and complicates things. But in fact it is not so much our mind that is obscuring our understanding. It is more to do with our desires and our fears, which then confuse the mind and use it to seek justifications for its immoral action or inaction, because no one likes to admit that they are immoral.

Returning again to Kant, he said that man is noble in his intentions, but weak when it comes to putting them into practice.

Plato, however, stated that it is not a matter of weakness of will, but a lack of real knowledge. If you truly know something, you will do it. If we really 'knew' that there is life after death, for example, we would not be afraid of death. If we truly know that moral conduct is something beautiful and noble, we will act morally.

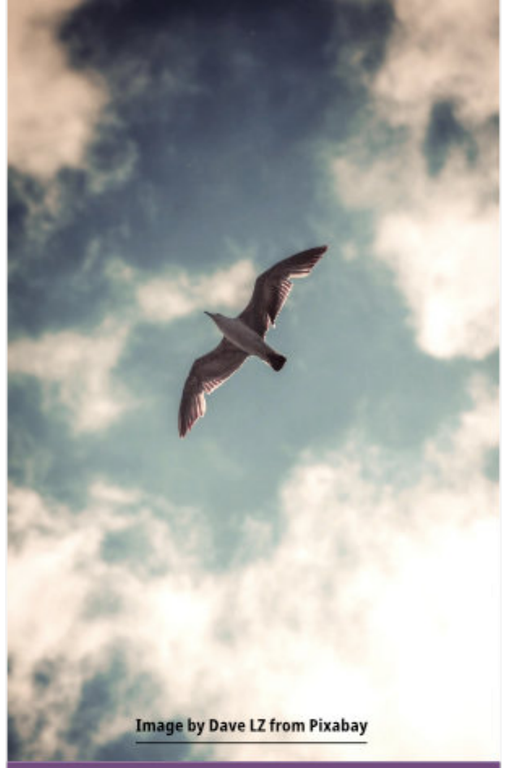
What do we mean by 'moral conduct'?

As Kant pointed out, moral conduct is not just a matter of following social rules. If you act 'morally' because you are afraid of being caught, or in order to be seen as a good person, this is not moral action. For Kant, moral action is a free decision to do what you believe to be right. It is to act out of love and respect for the moral law. A moral action is one that we freely decide to do without any external or internal pressure, without fear or favour.

Finally, what if we fail to live up to our ethical principles and moral ideals, whether from time to time or even persistently? The timeless message of so many philosophers is "never give up". As Aristotle said, virtue is a matter of practice: the more we practise it, the easier and more natural it becomes. But we must accept that there will always be a struggle, that we cannot achieve anything in life without effort.

I would like to end with a quote from the former International President of New Acropolis, Delia Steinberg Guzmán, which nicely sums up the essence of morality: "Morality means living a noble and just life, paying attention to one's mistakes in order to correct them immediately." In this way, it is not about being morally perfect, but striving to improve all the time, because, as Ptahhotep pointed out, "Art has no limits and no artist ever reaches perfection.".

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Source Wikimedia



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DIGNITY AND INNER FREEDOM

PHILOSOPHY

BY
Sofia Venuti

Dignity is often spoken of as a social status – something granted, recognized or bestowed by others. Yet it also has a deeper interpretation: we can see dignity as an inner orientation, a way of living our life with clarity and freedom. For the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, inner dignity is about the control we can exercise over our own judgments, intentions and actions. Everything else – reputation, fortune, even health – lies outside the sphere of moral choice, where we choose how we judge or are affected by things.

Through the concepts of *ataraxia* and *apatheia*, the Stoics saw freedom as an inner state of equanimity in the face of pain and pleasure. *Ataraxia*, a state of tranquil composure, is not the ultimate goal in Stoicism, but rather a byproduct of living a virtuous life in accordance with Nature. By focusing on virtues like wisdom, justice, courage and temperance, Stoics cultivate a state of inner peace that is free from distress, yet without distancing themselves from the world around them. A key part of achieving this state is understanding what is within our control (our

Inner freedom arises when we cultivate mindfulness, compassion and equanimity.

judgements and actions) and accepting what is not, so that we develop a growing sense of freedom from worry about external events.

Epictetus (55-135 CE), himself born enslaved, asserted that no external force could imprison a mind that has mastered its own desires and aversions. He said, "no man (human being) is free who is not a master of himself". In this view, dignity is not contingent on societal standing, but is rooted in the integrity of one's inner life. When we align ourselves with reason and virtue, we free ourselves from emotional captivity. The Stoic sage doesn't reject feeling; rather, he or she refuses to be ruled by fear, anger or craving. Freedom is found not in the outer world, but in mastering the self that encounters it. This allows us to live with dignity – our authentic choice to align ourselves with the Good, the Just, the Beautiful and the True.

Buddhism arrives at inner freedom from a similar angle, emphasizing insight into the impermanent, interdependent nature of all things. Where Stoicism speaks of rational control, Buddhism speaks of *seeing clearly*. The root of suffering, according to Buddhist teaching, is clinging – our habitual attachment to desires, identities and expectations. These attachments give rise to agitation and insecurity, eroding our sense of dignity by tying it to unstable grounds. Inner freedom arises when we cultivate mindfulness, compassion and equanimity.

From my own perspective as a student and teacher at New Acropolis, there is another essential element which provides a key to inner freedom and living with dignity: having ideals. Having an ideal means orienting our life towards a value, vision or something that transcends our immediate experience. Ideals are not only intellectual, but very importantly they are what our soul connects to. Ideals enable us to walk consciously on the bridge between what life is and what it ought to be. Having ideals means existing in a tension between our present reality and our potential, and moving steadily towards the latter.

Without ideals, life can become a repetition of habits, a monotony. This comfortable routine can no doubt provide fun and happy moments, but it doesn't necessarily allow us to grow and become better versions of ourselves, nor does it allow us to move forward in our evolution as human beings – individually, collectively and interconnected with Nature and our Universe. Having an ideal makes us less dependent on environmental pressures, less dependent on the physical senses, emotions and thoughts which grapple our consciousness and dominate our day – we've all had those days, which can turn into months, years, a whole lifetime. To become less dependent, we have to work on the metaphysical things we consciously choose and strive to work on: our values, our virtues, our character, raising our consciousness from the mundane. And the less dependent on those external pressures and circumstances we become, the more free we become. This is dignity not as appearance, but as inner sovereignty.

In a world saturated with materialism and external pressures, these philosophical perspectives invite us to return to what cannot be taken from us: the freedom to choose our stance towards life, to meet our experience with clarity, to act from our deepest values and to walk with dignity, with spiritual and moral conviction.

Photo by Olaf on Unsplash

ILLUMINATING THE SPHINX OF DELFT

- JOHANNES VERMEER -

ART

BY
JULIAN POWE

Follow the notary's clerk one spring morning in 1683 walking through the hustle and bustle of the Great Market Square in the thriving Dutch town of Delft to the house of Jacob Dissius, modest printer and publisher. His wife, Magdalena Pieters van Ruijven, had died the previous year aged 27. The clerk's mission was to record all of Magdalena's possessions. In his inventory, he records the following amongst several other items:

***View of Delft* by Johannes Vermeer. Wikimedia**

In the front room – 8 paintings by Vermeer, 3 ditto by the same, in boxes
In the back room – 4 paintings by Vermeer
In the kitchen - a painting by Vermeer
In the basement room – 2 paintings by Vermeer
Elsewhere in the house – 2 paintings by Vermeer

Some twenty Vermeer paintings hanging in one house! Two decades later, the work of Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) had all but disappeared, sold and dispersed through auction, his name forgotten. He was rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century by the French art critic and connoisseur Théophile Thoré, who became fascinated and mystified by *View of Delft* and *The Milkmaid* and sought out several other Vermeer paintings. Noting that "[Vermeer's] name was missing from the biographies and histories of painting; his works were missing from the museums and private collections", Thoré described Vermeer as "a man risen without trace" and called him "The Sphinx of Delft".

The Milkmaid **by Johannes Vermeer. Wikimedia**

Join the 650,000 people who flocked to the Vermeer exhibition in Amsterdam in 2023. The Rijksmuseum gathered 28 of his paintings together from around the world – most of the 36 or so that survive and are attributed to him (we know that he painted only a handful more). Vermeer painted 1-2 pictures a year, often adjusting them by removing or adding an object or figure, and experimenting throughout his life with light, composition and colour. In his exhibition video, Stephen Fry declares, "His qualities raise him above all other artists in my opinion." As we contemplate a series of ordinary, commonplace scenes in paintings such as *The Lacemaker, Woman with a Balance, The Little Street* and *Officer with a Laughing Girl* – more often than not the painted figures are women – we behold a profound sense of stillness, the intimacy of a fleeting moment, some mystery hovering before us. Above all, our consciousness is filled with the translucent quality of Vermeer's light. As Laura Cumming wrote in her Guardian review of "one of the most thrilling exhibitions ever conceived", Vermeer depicts "...Secular madonnas...(receiving) the extraordinary beneficence of his light, a light like no other, more than any real room could contain. For some it is supernatural, to others sacred; it feels the very essence of grace."

Accompany Magdalena Pieters van Ruijven as a young girl returning one morning in the 1660s from the Delft market and opening the door to the family home at 106, Oude Delft, The Golden Eagle. We are greeted by harmonious singing of Psalm 133, extolling the virtues of unity for all and closing one of the regular spiritual gatherings convened in her house by Magdalena's mother, Maria. Maria and her mainly female companions are Collegiants, a radical

Woman with a Balance **by Johannes Vermeer. Wikimedia**

" Above all, our consciousness is filled with the translucent quality of Vermeer's light."

protestant group reaching its zenith in the Netherlands at this time – a sub-set of the wider Remonstrant movement that has by now attracted leading scientists, philosophers and politicians across the Netherlands, as well as a strong core of working class men and women, drawn by the promise of a space for religious reflection in which their voices might be heard. Emphatically egalitarian, tolerant and pacifist, Collegiants rejected religious instruction by catechism in churches, preferring deeper engagement with the actual teachings of Christ in their own homes. For them, the heart was the true carrier of authentic faith, our conscience implanted in every human being by God. This morning's gathering will have included a reading and commentary on a section of the New Testament, and free-ranging conversation about its content, before concluding with music. And it will have been conducted under the gaze of Johannes Vermeer's paintings, displayed throughout the house to inspire the Collegiants' spiritual and devotional exercises.

Maria Simonsdr de Knuijt and her merchant husband Pieter Claesz van Ruijven – but predominantly Maria – were Vermeer's main patrons between 1657 and 1670, commissioning some 21 paintings, almost all his oeuvre during this highpoint of his career, and then leaving them to their daughter Magdalena on Maria's death in 1681 (Pieter died in 1674). We now have the gift of art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon's revelatory book *Vermeer: A Life Lost and Found* (published in 2025) to guide us through the intent behind these commissions, clarifying and elevating Vermeer's art still further. Painstaking historical research over many years allows Graham-Dixon to bring to life Vermeer's personal life, religious beliefs and social connections that have been shrouded in mystery since his death in 1675. In particular, he illuminates who Vermeer's patrons were and what

they believed; why they commissioned such a large body of work from him; and what Vermeer was seeking to communicate as he transmuted his thought into artistic expression on the canvas. Graham-Dixon argues that Vermeer's paintings "...depict the world but seem as though they are not entirely of this world. They are representations but have the power of revelation. Many people have fallen under their spell and wonder what secrets that might hold." Let us return to the Rijksmuseum exhibition and consider what this lens might help us uncover in our contemplation of four pairings of Vermeer's great paintings.

Stand first before *The Milkmaid* and *Woman with a Balance,* conceived, painted and then hung as a pair in Maria de Knuijt's house in c. 1659. Each painting is the mirror image of the other in terms of light, composition and bodily form. *The Milkmaid* is preparing a meal of bread crumbled into milk, a traditional serving for the poor. Having placed her jewellery on the table in front of her, the *Woman with a Balance* holds a small set of scales, waiting for the weighing pans to settle; there is nothing in them, however, for what she is measuring (her conscience) is invisible and weightless. Whilst the two paintings show real people living real lives, they depict elevated companion role models of Collegiant faith – *The Milkmaid* models 'doing', active, evangelical life; the *Woman with a Balance* models 'contemplating', praying and reflecting on one's conduct and conscience.

Come next to the *Girl with a Peal Earring* and *Study of a Young Woman,* each showing a young girl turning towards the viewer, paintings produced to the same scale in c 1667-68. Does not the former convey a sense of wondrous, divine love and the latter a less dramatic sense of mortal love, full of contrast and similarity? The *Girl with a Peal Earring* turns towards us with an expression of divine wonder, her limpid brown eyes suggesting tears, her outsized pearl earring emblematic of the joy and divine light emanating through her gaze from her soul – Graham-Dixon suggests that this is Magdalena Pieters van Ruijven modelling Mary Magdalene in dawning recognition that she is encountering the resurrected Jesus. By contrast, there is less momentousness in the girl's expression in *Study of a Young Woman,* more a sense of peace and wellbeing, a young girl luxuriating in the unconditional love of father for daughter – Graham-Dixon suggests that the model is one of Vermeer's own daughters, either Maria or Elisabeth.

Move away from the stream of works painted for Maria de Knuijt in the 1660's and stand before *The Astronomer* (1668) and *The Geographer* (1669) – both commissioned by Adrian Paets, a prime mover of the Collegiants in Rotterdam and Delft. He is likely to have done so having seen Vermeer's work on the walls of The Golden Eagle. As well as Vermeer, Paets was the patron of John Locke, Pierre Bayle, the French Encyclopaedist, and Baruch Spinoza (Spinoza was an active member of the Collegiant study group in Leiden in the early 1660s when working on his *Ethics*: he was almost certainly an acquaintance of Vermeer) – all of whom were profoundly committed to notions of toleration and freedom of expression. Paets was also a director of the Dutch East India Company and these personifications of two sciences of vital importance to the company were presumably displayed together in the entrance to its headquarters. *The Astronomer* half rises to rotate his celestial globe, reaching upwards as if to the stars, whilst *The Geographer* presses firmly downwards on the documents on his desk, bearing the globe turned to reveal the Indian ocean, the key area for the Dutch East India Company. Might Vermeer be channelling here the different stances of Plato and Aristotle in Raphael's *School of Athens*?

And rest finally before *The Little Street (*c.1660*)* and *View of Delft* (c.1665), exquisite paintings paired by virtue of being Vermeer's only surviving outdoor scenes. Both convey the artist's ineffable sense of stillness; compositions held in wondrous light. Look closely and we sense that this is the light of benediction, of grace, rendering the ordinary extraordinary. In *The Little Street* we see women working, children at play; to the left, part of The Golden Eagle, house of Maria de Knuijt, bearing Vermeer's signature in bright red paint and sprouting a large vine symbolic of a place inhabited by the faithful; and peaking above, the hidden place of worship for the Remonstrants. Marcel Proust declared *View of Delft* to be the most beautiful painting in the world. As our gaze rises though the four bands of riverbank, river, city and sky, we realise that we are in the aftermath of a storm, the roofs are wet, clouds are moving quickly across the blue sky and the last cloud is grey, having shed its rainfall on the town. Graham-Dixon posits that this is a dream, a vision of a time when the dark clouds of recent terrible war have passed to enable an ordinary day in an ordinary town, such as we witness in *The Little Street* – ordinary, blessed, full of love and contentment, war just a memory, a representation of heaven on earth.

At a time of peace after decades of horrific sectarian war across Europe, and at a time of great economic, scientific and philosophical flowering, Vermeer developed his unmatched craft in service of a small community in Delft, sharing their ideals, practices and commitment to make a better world. His paintings are infinitely more beautiful than the actual scenes they depict. He elevates the ordinary and the intimate, clothing them in a profound sense of stillness and timelessness. To this end he puts the light of nature to extraordinary use but, as Andrew Graham-Dixon concludes, it is really "...another kind of light, the indwelling light of the soul, the light of hope and love."

His paintings are infinitely more beautiful than the actual scenes they depict.

The Little Street by Johannes Vermeer. Wikimedia

THE HUMAN CONDITION

PHILOSOPHY

BY
Nataliya Petlevych

We live in a time of remarkable technological and scientific achievements, and yet individuals are increasingly seen through dehumanizing lenses: as biological organisms to optimize, as economic producers and consumers, as data points in vast systems... We have gained efficiency, but often at the cost of the time and attention needed for deeper thought. In that hurry we risk forgetting or quietly avoiding to reflect on what makes us human: our freedom, dignity, understanding and inner life, to name but a few elements that cannot be captured by algorithms or spreadsheets.

Yet the human being resists reduction. Each of us contains a world within; together we shape, for better or worse, the human world we inhabit. And the human condition is marked by paradox. Our life is finite, yet we can experience something like infinity; we suffer and we rejoice; we fail and we strive; we are capable of reason and of self-deception; we envisage plans for better ways and struggle to embody them... Is it just this breadth of experiences that makes us human, or is there an inner path of unfoldment towards greater authenticity and wholeness, that includes all these experiences?

Graphite drawing of the charioteer from Plato's "Phaedrus". Wikimedia

“ To be human is to feel pulled in opposing directions – yet also to possess the capacity to aspire beyond them.“

Plato’s myth of the winged horses

The complexity of our inner life was recognized long ago. One of philosophy’s most vivid depictions of the psyche comes from Plato’s dialogue, *Phaedrus*. In it, Socrates likens the human soul to a chariot pulled by two winged horses – one noble, the other unruly – with a charioteer struggling to steer them upwards toward reality. The charioteer represents intelligence, the power in us that seeks truth. The white horse is spirited, drawn to honour and responsive to the directions of reason. The black, however, is ill-behaved, impulsive, and described as “the friend of insolence and pride” (253e), tugging toward immediate gratification. This horse symbolizes our unquenchable appetites; if left unchecked, it drags the chariot downward, away from reality toward confusion.

To be human is to feel pulled in opposing directions – yet also to possess the capacity to aspire beyond them. The charioteer’s task is one of self-mastery: to rein in and harmonize these conflicting drives so that the whole soul can ascend toward the Just, the Good and the Beautiful – the forms at the heart of reality. Plato taught that achieving this inner harmony – what the Greeks called *eudaimonia* or flourishing – requires the cultivation of *arete* (excellence/virtue). To navigate a life path, the charioteer must develop wisdom. Courage would steady the spirited white horse, aligning its strength with the discernment of the charioteer. Meanwhile, moderation would discipline the unruly black horse, transforming its chaotic tyrannical impulses into channelled energy. When each part fulfils its task, a state of inner justice emerges. It is in this state of internal harmony that the soul’s wings are nourished, gaining the

strength to soar upward, towards the path meant for it.
Plato's image is both sober and hopeful. The ascent is difficult: the soul can lose control, get dragged down by appetite, or become confused by appearances, mistaking the flickering shadows of sensory experience for the light of reality. Yet the possibility of rising remains real, because the charioteer is not powerless and is endowed with intelligence.
Through education and the steady cultivation of virtue, reason learns to govern justly and is enlightened by wisdom, courage strengthens its resolve and moderation naturally directs energy resources. In that gradual re-ordering or formation of the character a human being becomes more whole and more free – no longer a slave to shifting impulses or illusions, turning toward what is truly good.

The image of the human soul in Plato's Republic

Plato offers another powerful metaphor for the human condition at the end of his *Republic*. He paints the image of the sea-god Glaucus – a creature so battered by the waves and encrusted with shells, rocks and seaweed that one cannot see his original divine form. In Plato's analogy, the human soul is like Glaucus – disfigured by the 'waters' of matter, worldly hardships and attachments that entrap us. Our original nature, our true self, becomes buried beneath these external accretions – habits, fears, roles and the constant pressure to react rather than to choose the best appropriate action. Yet crucially, Plato implies that beneath the encrustation, the soul retains its

Statue of Cupid and Psyche. Wikimedia

In that gradual re-ordering or formation of the character a human being becomes more whole and more free...

Photo by Duy Pham on Unsplash

divine potential, thus being whole, free, wise, good, just and beautiful. Through education and self-mastery one chips away debris, restores the authentic self and rediscovers the hidden beauty and truth of reality both within and without.

The relational nature of the human being

Yet the self we recover must be lived – tested, refined and expressed – in relationship. Our human condition has another feature: we are inescapably relational. However deep our inner work goes, it is in the interaction with others that we discover whether we have truly become freer, wiser and more just. Another great philosopher of antiquity, Aristotle, captures this with the famous thought that man is a 'political animal' (*zoon politikon*); the human being is by nature a creature of the *polis* (city-state). We do not fully flourish in isolation, because our distinctively human capacities, such as speech, moral judgement and justice, take shape in a shared life. The point is not simply that we need other people to survive, but that we need a common world in order to live well. Outside it, Aristotle says, the solitary person would be 'either a beast or a god' – not a human life in the proper sense (*The Politics*, 1253a). Hence, e*udaimonia* or flourishing includes a civic duty, active participation in a life of a community, friendship, sharing common values and contributing to the common good.
Our relational life is also where inner work becomes concrete, because the character is shaped in daily reality: how we act and interact, how we listen, how we argue, how we forgive, how we keep promises, and in so many other examples. The *polis*, our shared world, rests on these daily moral fibres.
The 20th century philosopher Hannah Arendt helps us see why this relational dimension is so fragile in modern conditions (*The Human Condition*). What holds human life together is not only the biological cycle of labour, or even the productivity of work, but the space where persons appear to one another as persons: through speech, initiative and shared responsibility. When we are reduced to functions – jobholders, users, consumers, data points – our 'between' is eroded. We may be surrounded by people and yet deprived of genuine human presence, because the shared world becomes merely a system of needs

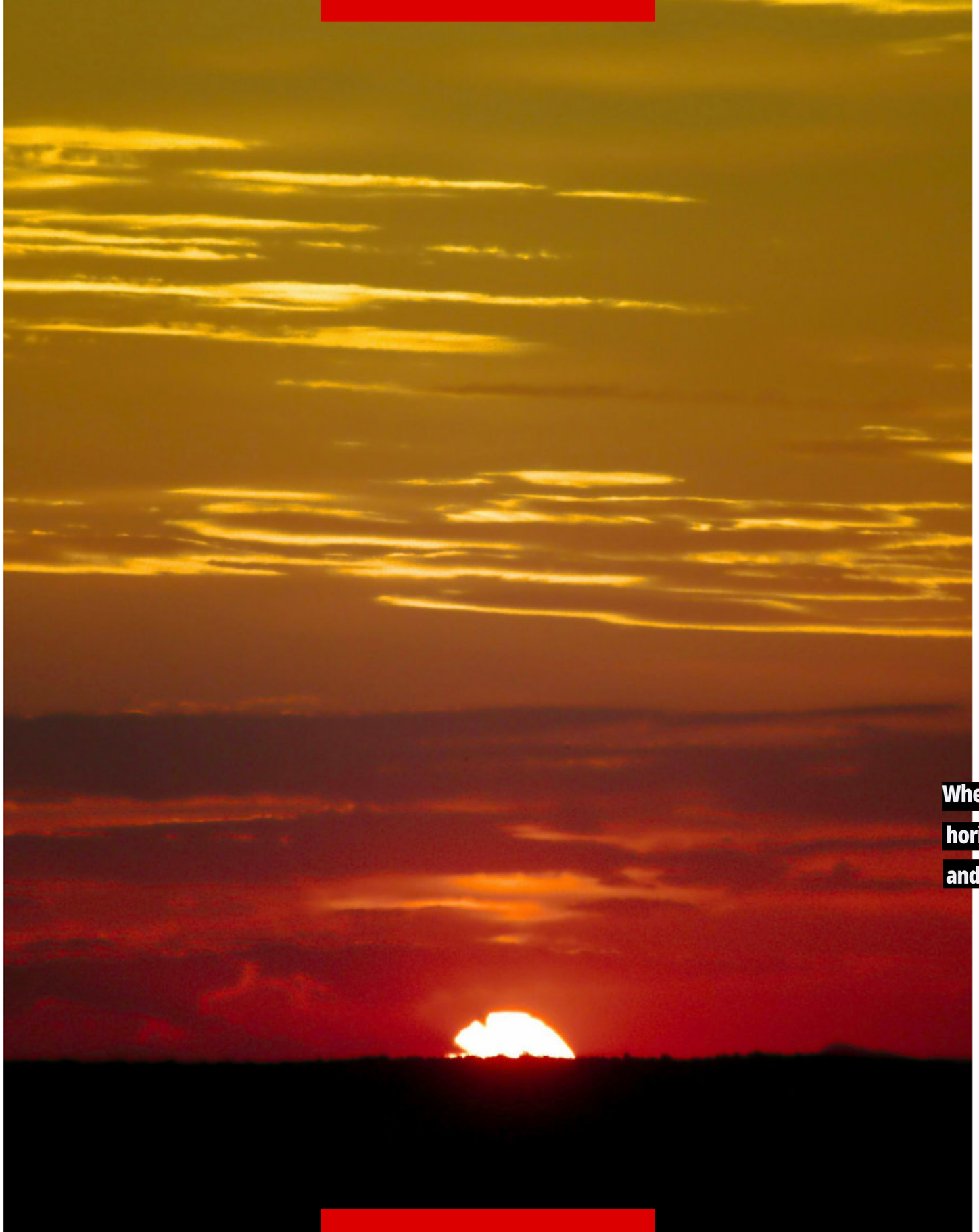
and utilities, in which we are busy, but do not genuinely interact. Another 20th century philosopher sharpens the point further. Martin Buber's famous line "All real living is meeting" names what dehumanization tries to erase (*I and Thou*). When we adopt an 'I - It' stance, we treat others as objects to manage, categorize or use. In an 'I - Thou' encounter, the other is met as a presence: not a function, not a data point, but a person. Such interrelation restores the reality of the human being at the level of how we see and treat one another.

The vertical and horizontal dimensions of human life

To conclude these reflections on the human condition, it might be helpful to envision human life as spanning two dimensions – a horizontal and a vertical dimension – and human flourishing as a matter of developing and harmonizing both. The horizontal dimension is existence - our day-to-day activities, our physical needs, our work, our relationships and communities, etc. On the horizontal axis, we are finite creatures among other creatures, bound by time, space and social context. If we lived only on this plane, we might be perfectly industrious and social, yet we might lose any deeper sense of purpose. Life could become busy but ultimately shallow, a race with no finish line of meaning.

The vertical dimension restores the measure: dignity, conscience, meaning. This is the dimension of our essence, purpose and values: what calls us to truth rather than mere erudition, to goodness rather than mere sliding through different life circumstances, to self-creation rather than passivity, to cooperation rather that utilitarian interaction. It is the dimension of Plato's forms – the Good, the Just and the Beautiful – that beckons the soul upward. The vertical is what makes us ask not just "How do I live?" but "What is worth living for?", "What is the direction of my life?" It is the axis along which we discover what does not perish with time, even as our understanding of it deepens.

When the vertical informs the horizontal, we resist dehumanization and recover the dignity of a human life. The human condition is precisely to stand at the meeting point of these two dimensions – to be at once earth-bound and sky-oriented, rooted in daily life and open to transcendence, finite and yet capable of asking infinite questions and living them in daily reality.



When the vertical informs the horizontal, we resist dehumanization and recover the dignity of a human life.

Photo by Christian Paul Stobbe on Unsplash

CULTURE

BY
LASZLO BALIZS

From Prometheus to Algorithms

Shelley's Frankenstein, AI and the Human Desire to Create

A long, long time ago, way before tech or gadgets, we shared tales of stealing flame from the heavens. Prometheus didn't just give us heat and light; he marked a turning point where humans took a big step, suddenly holding power they didn't fully understand. Today, fire is like that fire but in a different form. It's not in torches, but in servers. Instead of fire, it's code. We call it AI. Jorge Angel Livraga, the founder of New Acropolis, said that technology reveals something inside us: a desire to control things, too often by building external strength instead of internal growth. Maybe now, machines are responding, not with words, but like a mirror. They still don't fix our most basic worries, but they show us what we have been ignoring.

Mary Shelley captured this moment well. When Victor Frankenstein finally succeeds in creating life, he writes:

"I had worked hard for nearly two years... But now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart."
(Frankenstein, 1831, Vol. I, Ch. IV)

...progress cannot be measured by technology alone. And yet we have built a world that behaves as if it can.

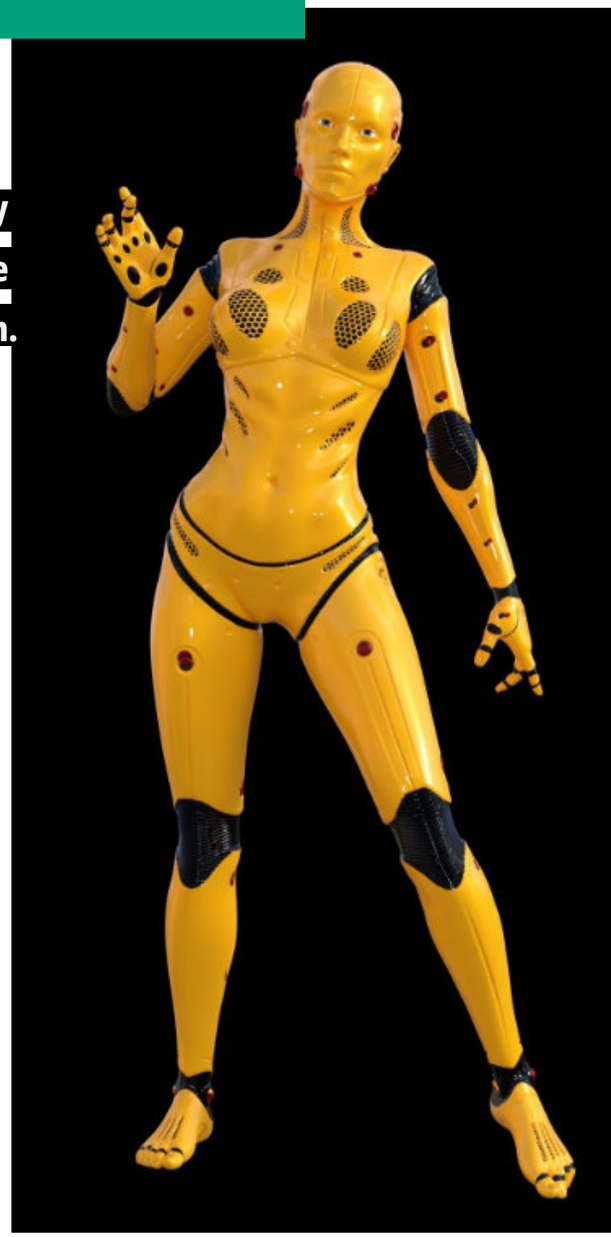


Image by Wikimedia

Victor is not terrified by failure, he is terrified by success, by the consequence, the responsibility. By the fact that reality does not feel like the dream.

For decades, we imagined intelligent machines with fascination in movies and science fiction. But when AI finally begins to influence our politics, our relationships, our choices and our inner world, I believe something inside us hesitates.

Technology cannot tell us what the meaning of Life is. It cannot give purpose or bring back the human touch we have lost.

As Jorge Livraga reminds us in his article *The Dawn and Decline of Technological Man*[1]: **progress cannot be measured by technology alone.** And yet we have built a world that behaves as if it can.

When the creature opens its eyes, Victor writes:

"Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room."
(Vol. I, Ch. IV)

Humanity has done something similar with its own inventions. We release systems into society (powerful ones) without the education, ethics or meaning to use them. Livraga writes about a *vicious circle* where man creates technology and technology remakes man. We are similar to Victor in that way: hooked from the start, then surprised by what we have unleashed.

As Shelley's creature grows in understanding, it reflects:

1. See issue No. 25 of New Acropolis Magazine. Also available at https://library.acropolis.org/

Frankenstein at work in his laboratory. Wikimedia

"I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend."
(Vol. II, Ch. VII)
This is one of the most philosophical lines in the novel. The creature was shaped not by its essence, but by the world's reaction to it. Technology mirrors this truth. AI does not invent cruelty or wisdom; it reflects the patterns it receives. Its distortions are our distortions. Its strengths are our strengths. We are living at a time when technology reflects more of our materialism than our idealism, more of our fragmentation than our unity. If our creations seem unbalanced, it is because *we* are unbalanced.
Despite its suffering, the creature does not ask for power. It asks for companionship:
"My companion must be of the same species and have the same defects."
(Vol. II, Ch. VIII)
These days, we have created technologies that connect millions of people, but it can still leave you feeling completely isolated. In his article, Jorge Livraga says that humanity is seeking to break free from massification, the sense of being processed, standardized and emptied of individuality.
Artificial intelligence sits right in the middle of this weird spot. It connect us, but it also shows how lonely we can be. It answers questions but cannot give us meaning. It speaks fluently but cannot offer us wisdom. What we really want is not to build better machines; we are seeking better relationships, with ourselves and with each other.
Victor later admits:
"I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest."
(Vol. III, Ch. III)
He senses something real: technology changes the future in ways that no one expects, beyond the intentions of its creators. Right now, we do not know what AI will become. But it is already changing how we talk, how we imagine things – our politics, our identity and even what is true.
The creature's most painful line comes when it faces its maker:
"I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel."
(Vol. II, Ch. II)
It is more than just a cry of feeling left behind. It is realizing that creating things needs a sense of right and wrong, not just the know-how.
Technology today has a similar problem. We have created extraordinary things but have not given it to a world grounded in meaning, ethics and vision. AI makes us think hard about what kind of civilization we are becoming. The real issue is not with the machine, it is with the human being.
Shelley closes her novel with a warning through Walton's final letter:

" The world is changing constantly and faster than we could ever have imagined."

Prometheus stealing fire. By Jan Cossiers (1600–1671) Source Wikimedia.

"Seek happiness in tranquillity and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries."
(Final Letter)
This is not a rejection of progress itself, but of progress without wisdom. Technology without soul. Power without identity.
Are we reaching the limits of what technology alone can offer? AI does not answer our questions, it returns them to us. It shows us that it is not machines that will make the next break-through, but humans beings.
There is a call for a new humanism. Not the humanism of ego or individualism, but of self-knowledge, meaning and conscious participation in the world. The fire of Prometheus is still in our hands, but maybe its purpose was to illuminate our inner world that we have ignored, rather than to rule over matter.
The world is changing constantly and faster than we could ever have imagined. A new age is approaching. Not the age of machines, but the age of the human being rediscovered.
And it is possible that AI, like Frankenstein's creature, is just asking us:
Will you abandon what you created?
Or will you finally rediscover yourselves?
Shelley reminds us that creation is an act of responsibility, not pride. We are not here to build perfect machines. We are here to build better human beings, starting with ourselves.
Artificial intelligence will not replace us. But it might help show us who we are, which is an invitation to be more conscious, more responsible, more human. And maybe in that discovery, the new fire we carry will finally illuminate the path home.

SCIENCE

BY
ADHIYAN JEEVATHOL

ON NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

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"Studies have shown 10-20% of people who survived after being declared dead have had NDEs. "

"Higher than the clouds – immeasurably higher – flocks of transparent, shimmering beings arced across the sky, leaving long, streamerlike lines behind them... Seeing and hearing were not separate in this place where I now was... For most of my journey, someone else was with me... She looked at me with a look that, if you saw it for five seconds, would make your whole life up to that point worth living, no matter what had happened in it so far. It was not a romantic look. It was not a look of friendship. It was a look that was somehow beyond all these, beyond all the different compartments of love we have down here on earth. It was something higher, holding all those other kinds of love within itself while at the same time being much bigger than all of them."

The above account is not from a myth, nor is it from a fictional story but from Dr Eben Alexander – a neurosurgeon and a former professor at Harvard School of Medicine – recounting his experience while being in a deep coma for 7 days after contracting bacterial meningitis. His body unresponsive and his higher order brain functions totally shut down, Dr Alexander was able to have an unfathomable journey to another reality. Yet, how could the doctor have such a vivid conscious experience while his brain was not functional? How valid was his experience? And what if anything does this say about who we are?

It is important to note that Dr Alexander's account is far from unique. Other examples of Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), where people experience being conscious while clinically dead, can be found across time and cultures. Studies have shown 10-20% of people who survived after being declared dead have had NDEs. 15% of patients in intensive care and 9% of cardiac arrest survivors have also reported NDEs. Curiously, many NDEs share similar features including: a feeling of being outside of time, a sense of unity, a feeling of separateness being replaced by a sense of being a part of a larger whole. On occasions subjects have even had an out-of-body experience recalling how they were able to see their own dead body and the conversations that were happening as they were dead. At first glance, this seems to be irrefutable proof of consciousness being outside the physical body – if people are able to have conscious experience without the functioning of the brain it cannot therefore be the origin of consciousness. Secondly, as these accounts are all similar, they seem to

point to another reality not usually amenable to our day-to-day perceptions.

What are the current scientific explanations of NDEs? The main scientific hypothesis is that NDEs are caused by the brain going through intense neurobiological changes just before or after death, effectively creating a hallucination or dream. The theory states that, as we all have similar brains, the death process and our subjective experience of it would also be similar, thus explaining why many NDEs have the same underlying features. There is some evidence to substantiate this as there is evidence to suggest the brain may still be active just before or after death. Studies on rats have shown a massive release in neurotransmitters just before death. Brain scans of mice 30 seconds after clinical death also measured greater activity than normal for a while. The neurotransmitters, released during these moments of high activity are the same neurotransmitters usually responsible for dreams or hallucinations. If the same is true in humans it would indicate NDEs are merely a dream concocted by the brain as it surges in activity for the brief moments before or after death trying to create an internally based model of the world while the external senses, that usually help inform it, collapse.

Yet this assumes that valid transcendental experiences cannot be produced by physical changes in the brain. After all, every brain state has a correlation with subjective experience but we do not therefore assume all our subjective experiences are mere illusions in the mind. We must ask rather whether the experience itself is valid. It might be said in response that as the proposed physical changes are the specific release of neurotransmitters that correspond with hallucinations and dreams, this makes NDEs invalid. However, critics of this hypothesis, such as the President of the International Association for Near-Death Studies, claim that brief surges of neurotransmitters cannot account for an experience that would ordinarily involve such complex cognition. Additionally, these neurotransmitters are not, for the moment, reliably associated with NDEs, so further evidence is still required.

Pursuing this line of critique, we might ask whether it is really possible that, as a brain functionally begins to decline during death, it would create a dream that is subjectively far more real, more life-changing and unfathomable compared to any dream produced when all our brain functions are working normally? Those who have previously experienced NDEs and hallucinations have also stated that their NDE was not a hallucination, suggesting that there was something different about their NDE. Furthermore, NDEs have been reliably shown to be so powerful to their subjects that they often change the way they live, becoming less materialistic, less self-orientated, more compassionate and more sensitive to everyday things. Furthermore, how can we explain the accounts of people who have had an out-of-body experience (OBE) and were able to recall what they heard and saw while they were clinically dead? As one critic put it, claiming that residual brain function can explain NDEs "is analogous to claiming that a car should drive better and faster when

Photo by David Matos on Unsplash

It seems that current science is unable, for the moment, to adequately explain the reality of NDEs...

Image by Wikimedia

everything in it is broken, except for the spark plugs." Put this way, ironically, even from a materialist point of view this hypothesis does not make sense either.

It seems that current science is unable, for the moment, to adequately explain the reality of NDEs and so we return to the hypothesis that claims that NDEs show that conscious experience is not limited to the physical brain. If NDEs truly do expand consciousness, then it follows that our physical brains limit consciousness. This would imply that brain damage might actually unlock spiritual and creative insight. As ridiculous as this may sound, there are numerous cases where, after suffering from brain damage, people have gained remarkable talents in intellectual, spiritual and artistic areas of their life. So numerous are such instances that they have been dubbed the 'acquired savant phenomenon'.

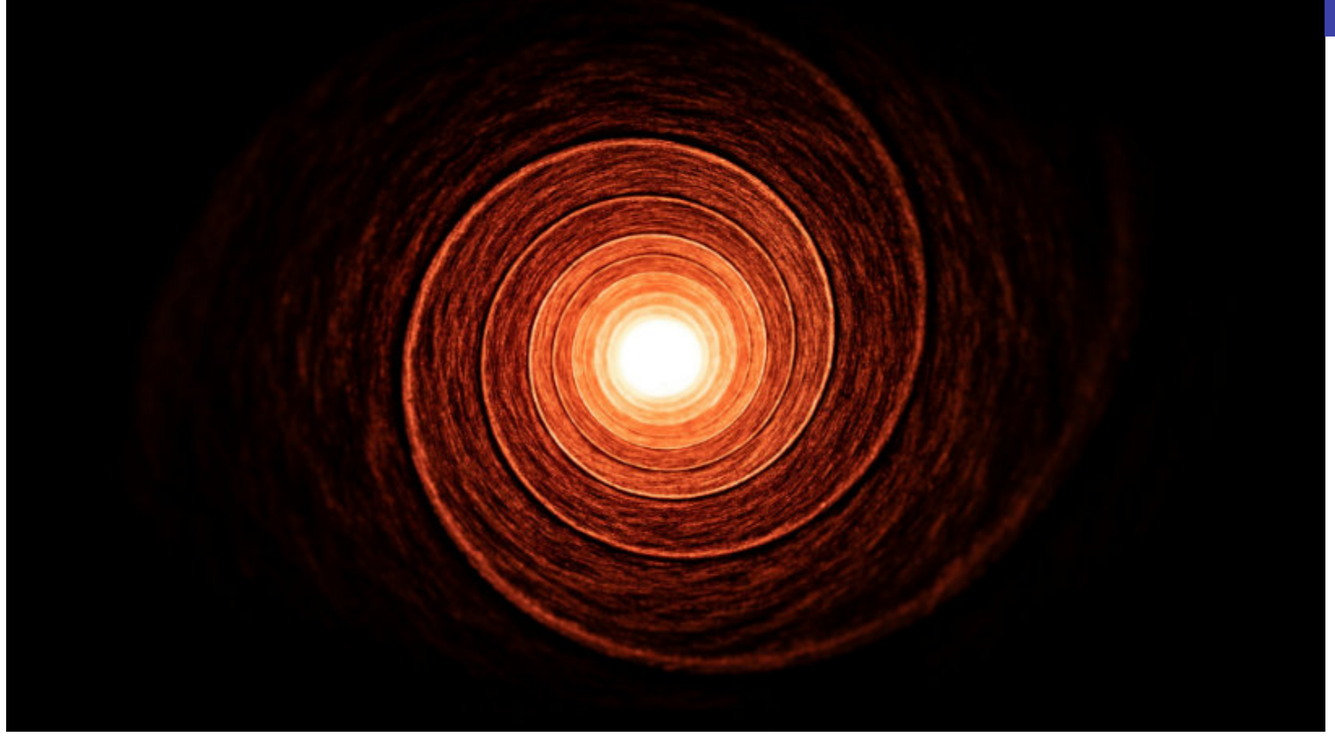
If therefore, reduction in brain functionality during NDEs expands consciousness to a new realm of reality then why, though the underlying themes are similar, are there differences in what people report of this reality? For example, some people recall their NDEs having displayed Christian characteristics, while people from different cultures recall the experience using the language and symbols of their own religion. However, even in our day-to-day lives people report the same experience differently, so there is no reason to expect anything different in the realm of the afterlife. A more likely hypothesis that has been put forward is that the similarities of NDEs (sense of unity, being outside time, unconditional love) express some core themes about the reality

of the afterlife, but our subjective experience of them covers this reality in a symbolic layer that is specific to the person's belief; for example, a Christian might see Christ as a symbolic representation of unconditional love during their NDE.

Does this mean, then, that NDEs prove that consciousness is not limited to our physical body? The above evidence suggests that the brain may be a place where consciousness is localized and that at the point of death of our physical bodies it is freed, expanding to connect with other realms of reality. Of course, this does not mean to say that a few well-placed blows to head will likely expand your consciousness and unlock hitherto unknown talents within you. We still do not understand enough about the acquired savant phenomenon, the brain and consciousness in general. Thus the suggestion is at the moment tentative.

NDEs are difficult to study for obvious reasons. For example, in 2004 and 2005 a study at the University of North Texas attempted to initiate an OBE from an NDE in patients fitted with a pacemaker. As part of this, the heart was shocked to rest to see if the device would kick in. In the few moments the heart stopped, the patients would be clinically dead. During this, a cartoon was played on the wall in a place that would only be visible to a being looking down from near the ceiling. Any patients who had an OBE while they were dead should have been able to recall the cartoon. However, only a few recalled having an NDE and no one reported an OBE. In another attempted study in 2014, data was culled from 15 hospitals reporting a total of 2,060 cardiac arrests. 142 out of the 330 survivors were interviewed. Only 9% met the bar for an NDE and out of them only 2 patients reported an OBE but these did not occur in controlled conditions. The dearth of such cases of OBE in controlled environments is a reason why there are doubts as to how conclusive these perceptions are. The above examples show the difficulty in conducting a large scale controlled scientific study of these phenomena and as a result there is still much speculation around this topic.

Nevertheless, on balance I think that the current materialistic explanations of NDEs are unsatisfactory and that the explanation that consciousness may be outside the brain is more persuasive in explaining NDEs as a phenomenon. If this is the case, then it would imply that consciousness is perhaps something more fundamental to our reality. The hard problem of consciousness has been a prickly thorn in the side of modern science which has not persuasively demonstrated how physical matter can give rise to it – proposing consciousness as something more essential to reality could help circumvent this problem. Furthermore, this would change our idea of who we are – not just a mechanical organism constructed by the physical processes of evolution but a being imbued with something immaterial and dare I say spiritual that emanates throughout the whole universe. Only time will tell – either modern science will progress enough to provide an answer or we will experience it first-hand when our time eventually comes to depart this world...



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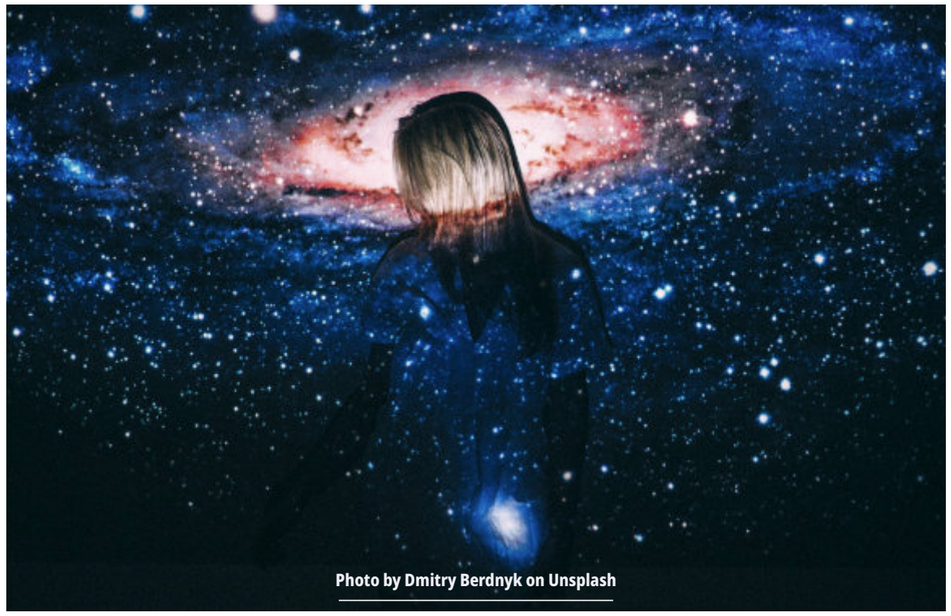

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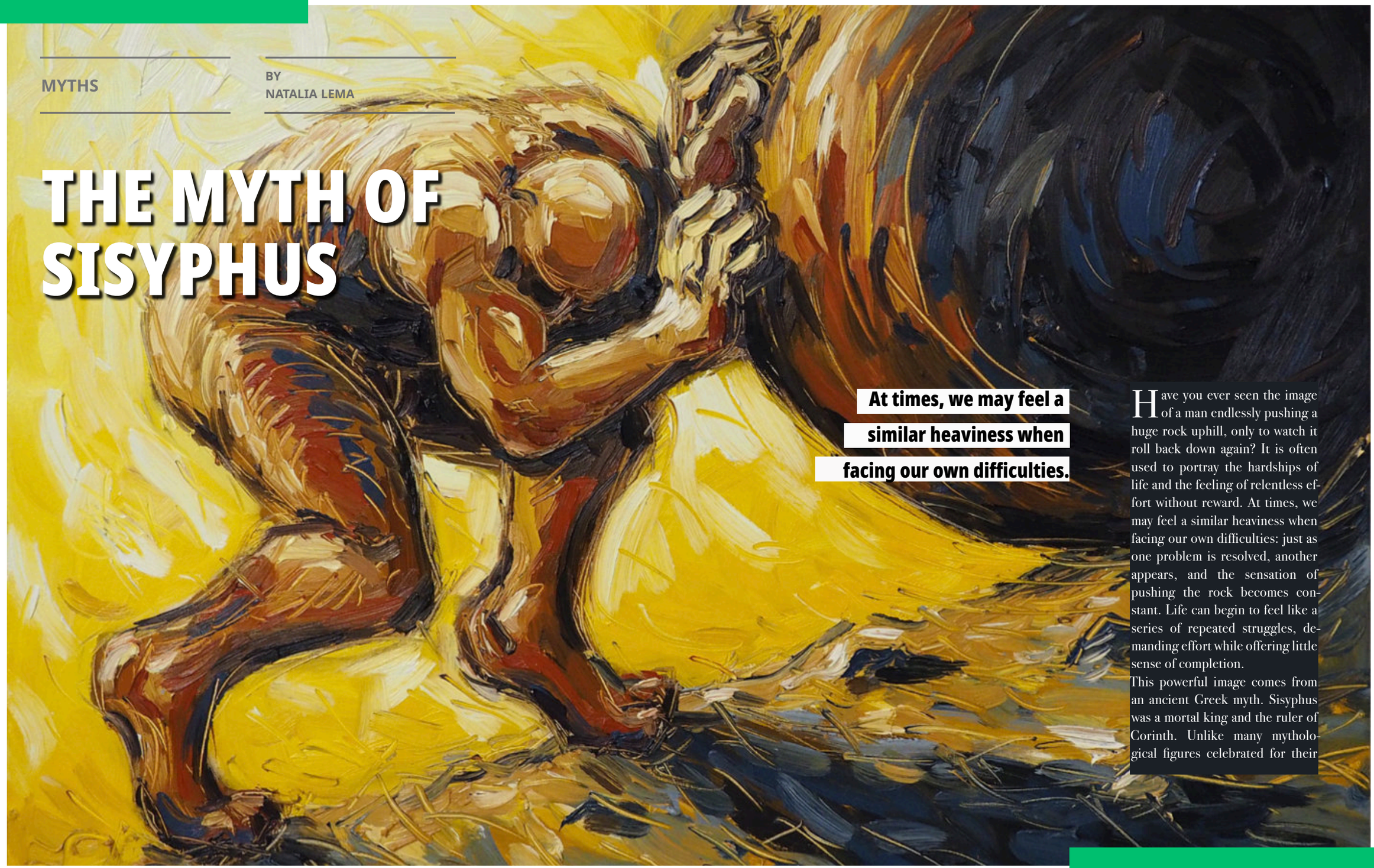
MYTHS

BY
NATALIA LEMA

THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS



At times, we may feel a similar heaviness when facing our own difficulties.

Have you ever seen the image of a man endlessly pushing a huge rock uphill, only to watch it roll back down again? It is often used to portray the hardships of life and the feeling of relentless effort without reward. At times, we may feel a similar heaviness when facing our own difficulties: just as one problem is resolved, another appears, and the sensation of pushing the rock becomes constant. Life can begin to feel like a series of repeated struggles, demanding effort while offering little sense of completion.

This powerful image comes from an ancient Greek myth. Sisyphus was a mortal king and the ruler of Corinth. Unlike many mythological figures celebrated for their

strength, courage or beauty, Sisyphus was known for his intelligence and cunning. He was clever and resourceful, capable of outwitting both humans and gods, but he was also manipulative and self-serving. While different versions of the myth exist, the essential point remains the same: Sisyphus repeatedly challenged the authority of the gods. And if we imagine what such defiance meant in ancient times, it is no wonder that his story ended in punishment.

This attitude of excessive pride towards the divine order was considered one of the gravest sins in Greek thought. Known as hubris, it served as a warning that mortals must recognize certain limits and resist the temptation to place themselves above the natural and divine laws of the universe. Greek myths often functioned as moral lessons, and Sisyphus's story is no exception.

Among Sisyphus's offenses was betraying Zeus by revealing the god's abduction of the nymph Aegina. In exchange for a favour, he told Aegina's father, the river god Asopus, where Zeus had taken her. This act deeply angered Zeus, who ordered Thanatos, the god of death, to chain Sisyphus in the underworld. Yet once again, Sisyphus relied on his cleverness and managed to trick Thanatos, chaining him instead. As a result, death itself ceased to function, and for a time no one could die. The natural order was disrupted, causing chaos among gods and mortals alike. Eventually, Ares, the god of war, intervened, freeing Thanatos and restoring balance.

Knowing that punishment was inevitable, Sisyphus devised one final plot. Before dying, he instructed his wife not to bury his body properly or perform the necessary funeral rites. Once in the underworld, he complained to Persephone that his wife had dishonoured him, persuading her to allow him to return briefly to the world of the living to correct this injustice. Permission was granted on the condition that he return afterwards. However, true to his nature, Sisyphus chose to remain alive, enjoying his freedom while ignoring the promise he had made. This second act of defiance ultimately sealed his fate.

As punishment, Zeus condemned Sisyphus to an eternity in the underworld. His task was deceptively simple: to push a massive boulder up a hill. Each time he reached the top, the stone would roll back down, forcing him to begin again. This endless, futile labour became his eternal destiny. The punishment is often interpreted as a symbol of the struggle between human effort and inevitable failure. No matter how hard Sisyphus tries, he can never complete his task.

At times, we may feel trapped in similar cycles of effort without reward: monotonous work, endless responsibilities, the pressure of modern life, existential uncertainty, or the search for meaning in a world that remains mysterious on many levels. The myth resonates because it reflects a universal human experience, a sort of feeling that progress is fragile and

Photo by Shlomo Shalev on Unsplash

"The natural order was disrupted, causing chaos among gods and mortals alike."

Jan Brueghel the Younger: *Juno in the Underworld.* Image by Wikimedia

Photo by Patrick Hendry on Unsplash

that satisfaction is always just out of reach.

This image became a powerful allegory of the human condition, especially through the work of Albert Camus. In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a foundational text of existentialist thought, Camus introduces the philosophy of Absurdism. He defines the Absurd as "the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent meaning in life and the inability to find it in a purposeless, irrational universe." Humans long for clarity, purpose and answers, yet the universe remains silent and mysterious in many ways.

Yet Camus reaches a surprising conclusion: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." By fully accepting the absurdity of his task and continuing despite its apparent meaninglessness, Sisyphus achieves a form of freedom and dignity. In acknowledging that there is no final victory, he is no longer deceived by hope or crushed by despair. The struggle itself becomes enough.

In recent months, I have found myself wondering whether meaning can be found not in the outcome, but in the struggle itself. The more I reflect on it, the more I see that we have a choice: to resist life's difficulties endlessly, or to meet them with greater acceptance. Perhaps meaning does not come from reaching the top of the hill, but from the act of pushing the stone day by day. Like Sisyphus, we may not control the outcome, but we can choose how we engage with the struggle.

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